

## A Semester of Success: Morven Park introduces new “Project-Based Learning” Initiatives

By Alecia Bryner

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The fall semester was particularly busy at Morven Park’s Center for Civic Impact. As colorful leaves fell around the park, we taught over 1,700 students in the K-12 grades, surpassing our numbers from the previous fall semester. It’s not just about the numbers in our education department though; we are also committed to strengthening the confidence of today’s youth in active citizenship.

To us, active citizenship has a lot of different meanings, whether it’s being stewards for your environment, practicing the necessary skills of collaboration and deliberation, or presenting and speaking to community stakeholders about solving issues. We continually foster these ideas with our multi-lesson projects and continued engagement with students.

This semester we launched two new Project-Based Learning (PBL) initiatives for elementary and high school students. Project-based learning is a model used by Loudoun County Public Schools, and schools across the country, that engages and challenges students to think beyond the test and apply the concepts learned in their lives. A lot of the projects are cross-curricular, meaning they involve more than one subject. They make the concepts students learn about in the classroom more authentic with hands-on activities and investigations of real-world problems.

Our newest elementary PBL program, *Soil Stewards*, combines all the essential concepts above, with our own civics curriculum. This five-lesson project takes place over the entire school year.

Just picture it – third grade students strapping on aprons to take on the role of scientists – as they investigate the different components of healthy soil by literally getting their hands dirty! They work



together to make their own soil recipes to take back to school and test their success. During the remainder of the project they investigate the state of the soil in their schoolyard, and report about their findings.

Eventually the soil scientists work together to develop a sales pitch about the importance of composting at school, and spearhead a poster campaign to launch a school-wide composting day to put their soil improvement solutions into effect.

Elementary students aren’t the only ones having fun, as Heritage High School helped us kick-off our multi-lesson government PBL program, *Agenda Setters*. This six-lesson project begins with a day-long visit to Morven Park where students practice lobbying, gaining media attention, and community support through a series of historic-based activities. It’s then that they start thinking about a modern campaign they would like to solve over the course of the school year. The twelfth graders are asked to identify an issue that impacts their

communities directly, construct ways to solve the problem, and present it to local officials to try to catapult their ideas to the top of the public agenda.

Issues they identified included the traffic in their high school parking lot, road restrictions that impact first responders, Loudoun housing costs, and even the opioid crisis. Their final lesson took place last month when they presented their ideas to their peers, administrators, and local officials over the course of two days. The Loudoun County officials that attended had great feedback and questions for the students!

Morven Park's education team is always working to expand our offerings. With these two new PBL initiatives, *Soil Stewards* and *Agenda Setters*, we hope students will develop and practice these important skills throughout their student careers, beyond the classroom, and into adulthood. We are excited to see even more classes participate in our new PBL initiatives, and to see familiar faces during the spring semester.



If you are interested in learning more about our K-12 programs, visit [www.MorvenPark.org](http://www.MorvenPark.org) or email us at [education@morvenpark.org](mailto:education@morvenpark.org). If you would like to help support our work, please consider donating at [www.MorvenPark.org/DonateNow](http://www.MorvenPark.org/DonateNow).