

# The Mission-Based Learning



## School Guide

**How to implement student-led missions in your school**



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# 1. Introduction

## About this guide

This school guide has been prepared for *teachers* and *school leaders* to provide advice on how to support student-led change projects ('missions') in their schools without disrupting the entire school curriculum. This guidance material is supported by our project video in which the students themselves explain the impact on them of their 'mission-based learning'. This brief introduction is followed by five more sections:

- **Section 2: The benefits of student-led missions** (p.3)
- **Section 3: Implementing missions step-by-step** (p.6)
- **Section 4: Facilitating student-led missions: the teacher's role** (p.8)
- **Section 5: The international dimension** (p.10)
- **Section 6: Maintaining momentum over the long-term** (p.11)

## Why mission-based learning?

Economic and environmental challenges present young people with the prospect of huge yet unknowable change. This can lead to feelings of powerlessness and anxiety so it is not surprising that many young people are experiencing issues with their mental health. The lives of secondary school students are often dominated by their academic work and examinations and they have little opportunity to effect societal change themselves or develop their *agency*. Despite this, young people are suddenly expected to be ready to engage fully as citizens the moment they leave school.

It is this situation that prompted our project, 'Mission-based Learning' (MBL), to work with secondary school students in five countries to help them run their own change missions in their communities with the ultimate aim of enhancing their sense of agency.

The concept underpinning this project is 'action competence'. Having action competence means that we have the skills, knowledge, self-confidence and motivation to take action on a given issue. The term 'action' has a very specific meaning that lifts it above any other activity; there are two criteria that must be met:

- (1) the students decide for themselves what to do (*not* the teacher)
- (2) the activity should be aimed at bringing about change.

If either of these two criteria are not met, the activity may still have educational value but it is not an action.

Project partners are listed in Appendix 1. To find out more visit: <http://missions4change.org>

## 2. The benefits of student-led missions

*This is a sustainable method that will prove its long-term benefits in time. I strongly believe that missions will be a step in future learning.*  
(Teacher, Latvia)

Mission-based learning is still not commonplace in most schools; this section sets out why schools might want to do adopt this approach.

### Benefits for the school

It is not just the students who have much to gain from this approach. The school leaders and teachers who took part in the MBL project reported that:

- Working with others is something we need to do to support students plus our students make many contacts themselves - this generates new knowledge locally
- Leading or collaborating in local events and other activities expands the role of the school
- Our students find it motivating to have these external contacts

*Pupils are more active and willing to be involved – this extends to a willingness to learn in other lessons.*  
(Teacher, Spain)

- Our work in the community provides an example to other schools – it can also be a generator of change:

*changes in traditional school education are most likely to come from locally organized initiatives.*  
(Teacher, Romania)

- This all adds to a sense of belonging, or as this teacher put it:

*Pride and motivation to teach, learn and live in a place*  
(Teacher, Lithuania)

## Impacts on student learning

*Our school is based so much on the theoretical skills not on the practical ones and I think we developed the practical ones in this project.*

(Student, Romania)

We have discussed the concept of action competence in Section 1; from the evidence provided by the students on the MBL project, we have broken this down further into the following list of competences:

- Communication – spoken, written, in person and online; also selecting, interpreting, analysing and presenting data
- Confidence – becoming more self-directed and adaptable  
“Students find their voice and learn to take pride in their work.” (Lithuanian teacher)
- Empowerment – students take ownership over their missions, reflecting on and celebrating their progress and success
- Cooperation – working with others; teamwork

*We work in teams and we like it, because we share experiences with our classmates. We can help each other and develop our strong abilities as well as face challenges together.*

(Student, Spain)

- Collaboration – involving the local community, parents, sharing ideas
- Curiosity – learning to learn by themselves; students get to explore their curiosities, ask questions and form a new love for learning
- Contribution – able and willing to help their community
- Connections – systemic thinking; the curriculum becomes connected to the real world and its issues and requirements; it integrates project-based activities and entrepreneurial activities
- Criticality – and problem-solving; students learn to look at problems with a critical thinking lens, asking questions and coming up with possible solutions for their missions.
- Commitment – motivated to learn
- Project management – students learn how to manage their assignments more efficiently
- Students see the value of their formal learning in school, and apply that in the project (e.g. formal letter writing)

These students summarised the impact on them very well:

*Students learn to work more disciplined and systematically. It provides social benefits by meeting new people – that's what happened to me too.*  
(Student, Turkey)

*We work better and we learn more.*  
(Student, Spain)

### **Impacts on teachers**

With this approach, the learning is not restricted to the students. Among other things, teachers working on the MBL project reported the following benefits to themselves:

- Incentive for continuous professional development
- Learning from local and international encounters
- Development of new skills/competences – digital, communication, collaboration, etc.
- Re-orientation of teacher roles – this includes deepening relationships with students:

*It will also give teachers the opportunity to build stronger relationships with their students by acting as their hands-on learning facilitator.*  
(Teacher, Lithuania)

- Local recognition as change agents and educational leaders
- Disruptive practices, keeping work fresh and making us think
- Preventing burn-out

*It really provided the opportunity to work and to study in different ways. It was a game changer. It helps students to follow through with their goals and provide teachers with a choice to use methods to encourage their students to be more proactive and creative and help them to adapt and achieve if there are any challenges.*  
(Teacher, Latvia)

### 3. Implementing missions step-by-step

This section provides a step-by-step guide for those who wish to use this approach.

#### Step 1: Designate the time

The support of school leadership is critical in order to ensure that adequate time is allocated for teachers and students.

Decide when students (and teachers) will work on the missions and whether this will be the same time every week or it should move around the timetable so that no single lesson is impacted.

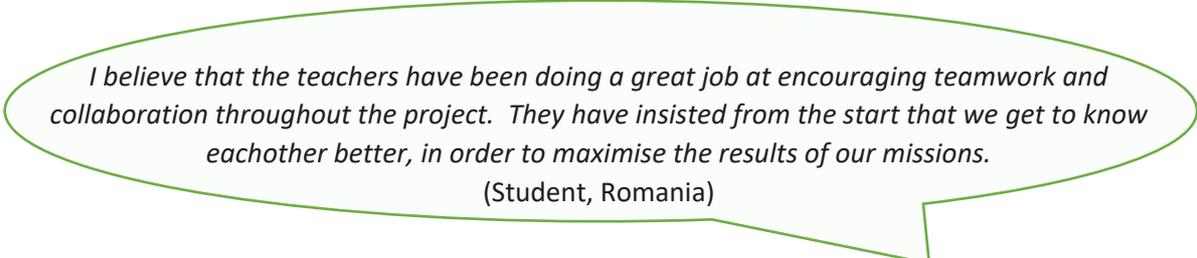
Agree the duration of the project. Students will organise themselves according to the time allowed but a minimum 10-12 weeks should be allowed in the first instance.

#### Step 2: Engage the teachers

Give teachers time to consider the implications for them of supporting student-led missions and allow them time to discuss and cooperate. Teachers also need to be prepared in terms of learning to be a guide or facilitator rather than a teacher (see Section 4 below).

#### Step 3: Invite students to dream

It is important to give students the time and space to work together. Step back – allow them to come up with their own ideas. Remember the two criteria for action competence (1) the idea should come from the students and (2) the project/mission should aim to bring about some sort of change.



*I believe that the teachers have been doing a great job at encouraging teamwork and collaboration throughout the project. They have insisted from the start that we get to know each other better, in order to maximise the results of our missions.*

(Student, Romania)

#### Step 4: Engage families

Students' families and carers also need to be supportive because (a) the students may start to work on their projects for periods of time well beyond the usual school day or time allocated for homework and (b) families are often a valuable resource in terms of contacts and practical help and advice.

#### Step 5: Involve the local community as appropriate

This can be done either face-to-face or via social media. Depending on the topic chosen by the students, they will need to collaborate with various individuals and organisations locally *before* they define their projects in detail. Teachers should be on hand to help – when asked – to establish links but also to encourage the development of relationships between school, family and the community.



*What I truly appreciate about the MBL project is the fact that during all of our team meetings we managed to get to know each other and we even broke the "student-teacher barrier" that prevented us to really say what we thought, so we collaborated with our teachers as friends and equals. Due to this fact, I think that us, the students, were able to express ourselves and our opinions more freely than we do in our regular classes.*

(Student, Romania)

### **Step 6: Investigate**

Identify the needs in the community and formulate the aims of the project.

Discuss next steps together but ensure that students' voices matter when it comes to decision-making; encourage them to share and co-operate.

To a large extent, the investigation is the mission; what the students find in relation to their chosen mission will determine exactly what it is they define as their goals.

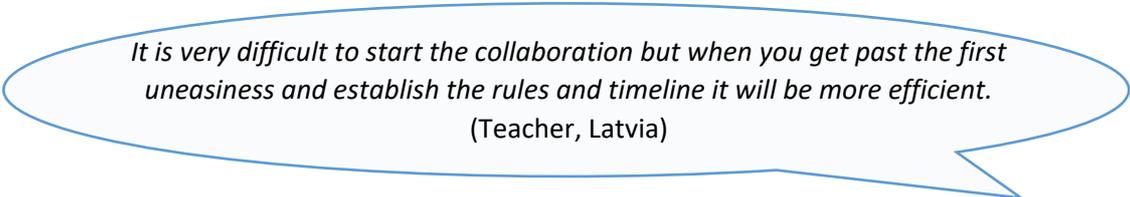
### **Step 7: Communicate**

As the students run the project there will need to be active collaboration involving the local community, parents and others.

Keep the conversation going among teachers, with families and with local institutions – students are usually prove to be the experts when it comes to social media.

### **Step 8: Celebrate results**

Hold an event. Publicise the project and what was learned; thank everyone who was involved, even those who weren't particularly helpful – but you would like to involve them next time!



*It is very difficult to start the collaboration but when you get past the first uneasiness and establish the rules and timeline it will be more efficient.*

(Teacher, Latvia)

## 4. Facilitating student-led missions: the teacher's role

*Our teacher did not pressure us on any task during the project process, and did not restrict our ideas. Therefore, every task we did during the project turned into a pleasant, productive process in which we learned from our own mistakes.*

(Student, Turkey)

### First principle: Stand back!

This is one of the most critical skills and thus an important focus for capacity-building among staff; that said, much of this will be learned through experience.

There cannot be a fixed rule about the right time to provide clear instructions and when to leave students to work things out for themselves. This will vary depending on the point that the students have reached in their project, the individual students themselves, the culture within the school and the wider expectations of the education system in your country.

In general, teachers noted how students can produce ideas spontaneously but when they are given too many instructions they may become passive. In order to avoid this, be sure to:

- take care to allow students time and space to work together
- step back – allow them to develop their own ideas/solutions
- see 'mistakes' as learning opportunities.

As a rule, once a project has begun, wait to be asked for additional support – be *on tap*, not *on top*.

*It is a different way from usual teaching, because in this project I think it's more fun.*

(Student, Latvia)

### But not too far back...

**Set ground rules:** This list was suggested by our MBL partner in Lithuania:

- Set High Expectations
- Establish a project routine
- Continually grow, gaining knowledge as the missions progress
- Show that you care about every participant
- Be ready to help and support

*The teacher needs to find a way to implement small missions within the 'big' mission so that students keep motivated and feel they are reaching small goals. Students need to see results to be motivated and have small rewards (knowledge, activities) they feel as interesting or fun.*

(Student, Spain)

**Facilitate:** As discussed in Section 3, it is important to keep the conversation going among teachers and discuss next steps together. Remember to keep a watch on community contacts and family relationships to ensure these continue to develop in a positive manner

*They were dynamic classes and we could participate more than normal ... We sit in a circle and we could also say what we think ... We felt important because we could make decisions.*

(Student, Spain)

**Make links:** Students can think and work outside of the curriculum when doing their projects but they should be encouraged to make links between their own emotional involvement in the mission the wider school curriculum.

*With this project, we are breaking the barriers of the school and the students are seeing how useful what they are learning in the formal classes is ... because they have, for example, to write formal letters to the town halls or to the stakeholders ... so this is very important for us.*

(Teacher, Spain)

All of the teachers on the MBL project learned a great deal and also reaped huge rewards in terms of their relationships with their students. Reflecting on the whole process, this teacher listed what they would advise any colleague attempting to support student-led missions:

*Be understanding, flexible, positive, hardworking, creative, nice, easy going, talkative, open minded...*

(Teacher, Poland)

## 5. The international dimension

This is important for several reasons, not least in helping students recognise the similarities between their own lives and those of students living elsewhere. It can demonstrate how we all face common issues while at the same time enabling us to build sources of hope such as sharing solutions or finding solidarity across borders.

At the practical/academic level, international collaboration provides an authentic motivation for improving a foreign language, usually English, where students do not share other languages.

*This project makes it easier to create a meaningful connection with different schools in our country and other countries.*

(Teacher, Latvia)

### The 2-4-8s approach

This is an approach developed by the project to overcome the difficulties that students had in meeting each other due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is also a helpful way to get started internationally.

The process starts with pairs of students working together in their own school; this is because together, they are far more likely to have the courage and motivation to maintain contact with students from another country.

The pairs then connect to a pair in a partner school in another country. An account of how to develop this further (up to teams of eight students working together) is provided under Appendix 2.

It is worth noting that when this was put into practice the approach worked very well until the students started working in eights. This became difficult to manage in some cases, especially where younger students of 12-14 years old were involved.

*If the project is successful, it will create a domino effect and other people will be affected by our success and take us as an example, ensuring that the project continues better.*

Student, Turkey

## 6. Maintaining the approach over the long-term

This section deals with maintaining momentum once the first missions have been completed. As with the rest of this guide, it draws on the experience and testimonies of the project partners.

### Recommendation 1: Showcase the students' missions

This is a continuation of Step 8 (see Section 3). By holding public events and publishing in hard copy and online, the school can demonstrate their students' successes – and their learning. In this way, all those involved will gain recognition from across the wider school community, parents, local authorities and other organisations. School management may also wish to share learning around the project approach to a range of other subject leaders in the school.

This is an important way of saying 'thank you' to all those who have helped and will likely ensure that they will want to assist again. It is also a good idea to target those who you would like to be involved in supporting student-led missions in the future. In this way, the school can build up a growing database of contacts and support networks.

### Recommendation 2: Review and plan ahead

Review the locally initiated actions and strategies with a view of identifying successful, effective educational practices that can be applied to subsequent projects. Often projects will start out with a baseline that shows the situation at the start of the project, e.g. amount of waste, nature-rich habitat around the school, availability of funds, number of people engaged. Any change in these data can provide a useful measure of impact.

Be sure to stress ways in which missions can support and complement existing school and national curricula rather than act as burdensome add-ons.

*The project team will be a part of this process, offering their observations and feedback, which has been collected in lesson's learned documents. This will also provide guidance for future projects. It is very important to document every activity. The connections you make during the project might lead to new collaborations.*

(Teacher, Lithuania)

### Recommendation 3: Build pathways to future projects

The most impressive – and unforeseen – outcome of the MBL project was the way in which students were ready to pass on their learning to the upcoming generation of students in the years below them. Passing project skills and learning down to the next class can be done by teachers but is so much more impressive when done by the students themselves. As well as sharing their stories and enthusiasm it is an excellent way of cementing their learning. More formally, experienced students could be mentors of the next generation while teachers work with younger students to develop their communication and digital skills in readiness for future mission-based learning.

*Sharing the project with younger students in the school helps missions to keep going in the future. Sharing the results of the projects in the local community also helps a lot to disseminate the projects and to show other students and teachers different ways to approach teaching and learning.*

(Teacher, Spain)

## **Appendix 1: The Mission-based Learning project Partners**

### **Practice Partners**

Bauskas Pilsetas Pamatskola, Latvia  
Colegiul National Fratii Buzesti, Romania  
Elazig Doga Anadolu Lisesi, Turkey  
Institut de Vilafant, Spain  
Pasvalio Levens pagrindine mokykla, Lithuania  
St.Pallotti Primary School, Cracow, Poland  
Sue Ryder School, Poland, Niepolomice, Poland

### **Knowledge Partners**

Jagiellonian University, Cracow, Poland  
University of Eastern Finland, Joensuu  
University of Gloucestershire, Cheltenham, UK (Project Coordinator)  
Working with Europe, Barcelona, Spain

## Appendix 2: Building student momentum and motivation remotely (the 2-4-8 approach)

Here is an approach based on small teams working together in a type of pen-pal relationship building up to a series of project presentations.

1. Two students from the same school/class form a small team, we might call this a 'T2'. Ideally a T2 comprises two students but may be three if numbers require this. The members of each T1 should feel familiar and comfortable with each other so that the unit is effective.
2. Each T2 will team up with another T2 from a different country. Two T2s form a 'T4' (these are working titles – you can give these teams your own names). Teachers will need to be involved in selecting T2s and helping them to set up initial online meetings with T2s from other countries. They do not need to use video calls at first if they are not comfortable with this.
3. Each T4 holds an online meeting guided by some instructions. The instructions ask the T4 to choose a theme that they care about and that is important to them. They can be given some example themes (e.g. homelessness, loneliness, refugees, mental health, family histories, climate change). They can use one of these suggestions but they are encouraged to generate their own theme.
4. The T4's task is to investigate their chosen theme. If they wish, they can use the standard questions: *Who? What? When? Where? How? & Why?* They have a period of one month to complete this task (one month is only a suggestion, the period can be negotiated). The T2s can communicate as often as they wish during this time.
5. After one month, the T4 members meet online to share what they have learned. They then:
  - Discuss what they would like to change about the situation
  - Consider what they think they could bring about change, i.e. their 'Next Steps'
  - Prepare a brief presentation to share with another T4.
6. The T4 then links with another T4 in another country. This larger team (with least eight members) is now a 'T8'. Teachers will need to communicate with each other to select which T4s to put together in this way.
7. The T8s meet online. One of the T4s presents their research and their proposed Next Steps. The other T4 should:
  - a. Listen
  - b. Ask questions
  - c. Challenge the presenters to put their Next Steps into action; this is an opportunity to re-think the Next Steps.

All eight students will need to agree on some realistic objectives (with deadlines) for the first T4 to achieve.

8. The T4s then swap roles; again, after being challenged, the other T4 agrees on their Next Steps.
9. The two T4s then work to put their ideas into action.
10. After an agreed period (one month?), the T8 meets online again, each of the T4s presents what they did. After watching each other present they then discuss their experiences and prepare a brief presentation on:
  - The themes they chose to investigate (only in outline)
  - The objectives that they all agreed (and whether they achieved them)
  - The challenges they encountered in creating change
  - The things – and/or people – that helped them to make change happen.
11. Each T8 then prepares to share their presentation at the next whole project meeting.