GUIDES & TOOLKITS

Project Planning 101

A practical guide to taking a student-led project from a promising idea to a clear, realistic action plan.

1	Define the problem, audience, and purpose before you rush into activities.
2	Turn your idea into a few concrete goals, milestones, and responsibilities.
3	Map the time, people, permissions, materials, and money you will actually need.
4	Launch small, track what happens, and improve as you go.

Use this guide as a working document. Write directly on a printed copy, or use the prompts to build your own project notes.

1. Start with the problem, not the activity

A strong project begins with a clear understanding of the issue you want to address. Instead of starting with "I want to run an event," start with "What needs to change, for whom, and why?"

Problem

What challenge, gap, or opportunity are you responding to? Be specific enough that someone outside your project can understand it.

People

Who is most affected? Who will participate, benefit, approve, advise, or help deliver the project?

Purpose

What do you hope will be different because your project exists? Focus on a meaningful change, not just an activity count.

Proof

What do you already know about the need? Use observations, conversations, school data, community input, or credible research where appropriate.

A simple impact statement

We want to help [who] address [problem] by [what we will do], so that [desired change].

Example: We want to help middle school students feel more confident in math by offering free peer-led problem-solving sessions, so that more students have regular access to challenging practice and support.

Quick test: is your idea focused enough?

- [ ] I can explain the problem in two sentences.
- [ ] I know who the project is for.
- [ ] I can describe the change I hope to create.
- [ ] My first version can be completed with the time and resources I realistically have.

2. Turn the idea into goals and milestones

Good planning separates the big goal from the steps that make it possible. Your project does not need dozens of goals. One clear outcome, supported by a few measurable milestones, is usually stronger.

Build your goal in three layers

Outcome goal

The meaningful change you hope to create. Example: increase access to free math enrichment for local students.

Output target

What you will actually deliver. Example: run 4 workshops for 60 students.

Milestones

The checkpoints that prove you are moving. Example: confirm venue, recruit volunteers, publish registration, deliver event.

Success measures

How you will know what happened. Example: attendance, participant feedback, repeat sign-ups, materials distributed.

Make goals useful, not impressive

A smaller goal you can complete and document is more valuable than a huge promise you cannot deliver. Start with a pilot, learn from it, and expand only when the project is working.

Example 8-week timeline

Week 1	Clarify idea, audience, and goal
Week 2	Confirm permissions, partners, and location/platform
Week 3	Build materials and recruit helpers
Week 4	Open registration / outreach
Weeks 5-6	Deliver the project or first pilot
Week 7	Collect feedback and measure results
Week 8	Reflect, improve, and share your impact

3. Build the team and map your resources

Some projects are solo; others need a team. Either way, write down who owns each major task. Clear responsibilities prevent the common problem of "everyone thought someone else was doing it."

Common student project roles

- Project lead: keeps the plan moving and makes final coordination decisions.
- Operations: handles schedules, rooms, registration, supplies, and logistics.
- Content/program: creates the workshop, event, service, product, or activity itself.
- Outreach: communicates with students, families, schools, partners, or community groups.
- Finance: tracks costs, fundraising, reimbursements, and receipts where relevant.
- Documentation: collects photos (with permission), attendance, feedback, and impact evidence.

Resource map

People

Teammates, teachers, family members, volunteers, school staff, community partners, subject-matter experts.

Places & platforms

Classroom, library, community center, Zoom, website, social media, school newsletter, registration tools.

Materials

Printing, supplies, equipment, food, transportation, software, prizes, signage, project-specific items.

Money

What truly requires cash? What can be borrowed, donated, sponsored, or provided in-kind instead?

Keep your first budget simple

List every expected expense, add a small buffer, and separate "must-have" items from "nice-to-have" items. A clear $150 plan is easier to support than a vague $1,000 request.

4. Permissions, risks, and launch readiness

Before launch, identify what could stop the project or create unnecessary risk. Student-led does not mean student-only: some activities require school, parent, venue, or adult approval.

Questions to answer before launch

- [ ] Do I need school, teacher, parent/guardian, venue, or organization approval?
- [ ] Am I collecting names, emails, photos, or other personal information? If so, do I have permission and a safe way to store it?
- [ ] Will money be collected? Who is authorized to receive and track it?
- [ ] Does the activity involve transportation, food, physical activity, minors, or other safety considerations?
- [ ] Do I have a backup plan if attendance is low, a speaker cancels, weather changes, or supplies are delayed?
- [ ] Who should be contacted if something unexpected happens?

Pilot first

Whenever possible, run a small version before a large launch. A pilot lets you test timing, instructions, logistics, and student interest with much lower risk.

Launch checklist

- [ ] Goal and audience are clear.
- [ ] Tasks have owners and deadlines.
- [ ] Permissions are confirmed.
- [ ] Budget and materials are ready.
- [ ] Participants know when, where, and what to expect.
- [ ] A backup plan exists.
- [ ] I know what data or feedback I will collect.

5. Measure, reflect, and improve

Impact is more than a big number. Good documentation shows what you did, who participated, what changed, and what you learned.

Participation

How many people registered, attended, volunteered, received materials, or engaged with the project?

Quality

What did participants say? What worked well? What was confusing, difficult, or especially useful?

Change

Did participants learn something, gain access to something, change a behavior, or take a next step?

Learning

What would you keep, change, stop, or expand if you ran the project again?

Simple post-project reflection

- The strongest part of the project was...
- The biggest challenge was...
- One thing we changed during the project was...
- The most important evidence of impact was...
- If we do this again, our next improvement will be...

Share the story, not just the result

A useful impact story includes the original need, your plan, what actually happened, evidence of results, and what you learned. Honest reflection makes the project more credible and helps the next student build on your work.

Project Planning Canvas

Use this one-page canvas before you launch. If you cannot answer a box yet, that is your next planning task.

Project name	Working title:
Problem / need	What are you trying to address?
Who it serves	Who is the primary audience or beneficiary?
Goal	What meaningful result do you want to create?
First pilot	What is the smallest useful version you can launch?
Top 3 milestones	1. 2. 3.
People / partners	Who can help, approve, advise, or participate?
Resources / budget	What do you need, and what will it cost?
Success measures	What will you count, observe, or ask?