

Promising Practices Newsletter

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Spotlighting promising practices from the Making Schools Work Conference

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Is Your School an Asset for Students?

By Diane James

A positive learning environment is essential for student achievement and success. Creating that environment takes a village and is an indicator of whether your school is an asset for students.

Emily Meeks and Taneesha Thomas, co-founders of Focused Minds Education Group and former English teachers, are committed to raising student achievement through equitable instructional practices and strong school culture.



Left to right: Emily Meeks and Taneesha Thomas, co-founders, Focused Minds Education Group

They believe five components are needed to ensure your school is an asset for students: 1) a positive school climate and culture, 2) adult self-care, 3) student voice and agency, 4) equity and engagement, and 5) teaching and learning.

School culture generally refers to the beliefs, perceptions, relationships and attitudes that shape how the school functions. The school culture often begins with its mission statement. Climate, on the other hand, is more about perception, mood and how students feel in school. This is often shaped by how students are treated and whether they feel seen, valued and supported.

Creating a positive school climate begins with teachers' self-reflection, notes Meeks. "Teachers need to reflect on their own lived experiences before interacting with children" and understand how their values and emotions impact their teaching and how they create lessons.

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Registration Is Open for the 2023 Making Schools Work Conference

Students come to school with a lot “in their backpack,” says Thomas about the negative physical or emotional childhood experiences some students endure. If a teacher is aware of this and understands how to connect with students, “You my dear are an asset,” Thomas maintains.

Meeks contends teachers should be open to giving students voice by allowing them to express that they’re having a bad day and allowing them to self-regulate. That could mean talking with an adult they identify with, doing breathing exercises or spending time in a calming space. “They need compassion,” says Meeks. It’s equally important that teachers model appropriate behavior or interactions, she adds.

Asset vs. Deficit Approach to Teaching

Meeks and Thomas are strong advocates for an asset-based approach to teaching that focuses on students’ strengths and what they can do. For decades, and especially now in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools have focused on learning loss, what students can’t do — their weaknesses. “If we continue to focus on what we think they can’t do, then we will teach from a deficit model,” says Meeks, resulting in teaching lower-level skills.

An asset-based approach to teaching recognizes that each student comes to school with individual knowledge and experiences from their homes and communities. It’s important for teachers to get to know students personally, know where they are academically and meet them where they are, says Meeks.

Meeting Students Where They Are

One way this can be accomplished is through professional learning communities and teacher collaboration. Another is using students’ Lexile scores to gauge their reading level, differentiate instruction and monitor progress. Literacy can be the great equalizer, says Thomas. She shares how a Georgia school’s 11th grade writing scores climbed from a 71% to 93% pass rate in one year when it utilized Lexile scores as a resource. “It can literally unlock and unblock experiences for students. It shouldn’t be denied,” insists Thomas.



Meeks and Thomas are also proponents of having students write in a journal, noting that it can be reflective and therapeutic. And they encourage teachers to assign meaningful and relevant writing assignments as formative assessments to help build literacy skills. They steer teachers away from grading every assignment, maintaining that when teachers do so, they don’t get students’ best work.

They also promote the use of music to engage students in the classroom. Meeks says it’s calming, a mood regulator, and fun! Plus, it’s a way for teachers to establish relationships with their students. For example, ask them what’s their favorite song, then on their birthday or on a day they’re feeling down, play the song in the background during independent work time. “It says I see you and I’m celebrating you,” says Thomas.

It Takes a Village

Schools can’t become an asset to students on their own. Building parental and community support is key to having a positive learning environment. Meeks believes it’s essential for schools to provide opportunities for parents to gain knowledge and skills to support their children.

Considering a lot of learning goes on outside of the school walls, community support and partnerships are important, too, notes Thomas. She encourages schools to form partnerships with nonprofits or other groups that align with the school’s mission. They often provide free resources to enrich student growth.

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The Advanced Manufacturing Virtual Internship: A Gamechanger in Workforce Development

By Jon Schmidt-Davis and Jahana Martin, SREB

Internships provide valuable opportunities for students to gain work experience, explore career paths and make professional connections. Business and industry also benefit as they can develop talent, engage with their future workforce and build relationships within their community. Traditionally, students complete internships onsite in the workplace, but sometimes that option isn't available.

At the same time that schools began to pivot to virtual learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, two students were scheduled to begin internships at Win-Tech, Inc., a small Georgia manufacturer that supplies aircraft parts for Lockheed Martin and other major aerospace companies. Allison Giddens, president of Win-Tech, was committed to the program and began to think about how she could offer these internships virtually.

A New Look for Internships

Giddens created the **Advanced Manufacturing Virtual Internship**. The goal of AMVI is to give students a CEO's view of manufacturing, to understand the big picture in a way that high school interns rarely can. And she discovered the virtual internship increased Win-Tech's capacity for interns. Instead of offering a three-month in-person internship for two students, her team was able to extend the internship to 12 students from four high schools in Cobb County, Georgia.

Win-Tech staff and Giddens's extensive network of "rock star" subject matter experts engage students in Zoom sessions that cover key areas in manufacturing and industry. Giddens ensures presenters keep the students engaged by talking to them, not at them. She opts not to record the sessions — in part because they have had some high-profile subject matter experts willing to present on their own time, and willing to engage in very open conversations with high school students about their industry experience. The "off-the-record" nature of a class discussion makes the conversations authentic, and some of that might be lost if the classes were recorded.

The Virtual Internship Schedule

Students meet on Zoom for one hour, four days a week for roughly four weeks. The program kicks off with an orientation day that includes introductions, the program layout, class expectations and norms, and exploring the program's project which spans the length of the internship.



The project's focus is on **problem-solving** using manufacturing, technology or another specified concept. "I encourage them to take some concepts or ideas they learn over the next few weeks to explore how they may weave them into their project," Giddens says.

The next day, students explore what it means to be an aerospace manufacturer. They take a virtual tour of Win-Tech's machine shop and learn what skills are required to manufacture its products.

On day three, interns begin their journey through the core of the curriculum separated into four parts — **engineering, business, manufacturing and quality** — each divided into smaller segments. Each section is led by a subject matter expert researched and identified by Giddens. By using LinkedIn,

Chamber of Commerce and other similar networking connections, Giddens assembled a faculty that represented international expertise, Fortune 500 companies and people in leadership roles with recognizable brands — all of whom agreed to participate as volunteers. Delivering the internship virtually made it possible to bring together global talent. "People want to help — they just want to be told how to do it," Giddens shares.

The goal of AMVI is to give students a CEO's view of manufacturing, to understand the big picture in a way that high school interns rarely can.

The Advanced Manufacturing Virtual Internship: A Gamechanger
in Workforce Development (continued)

VIRTUAL INTERNSHIP SCHEDULE

Intro & Overview: Day 1 & 2

Engineering

Day 3 & 4

Business

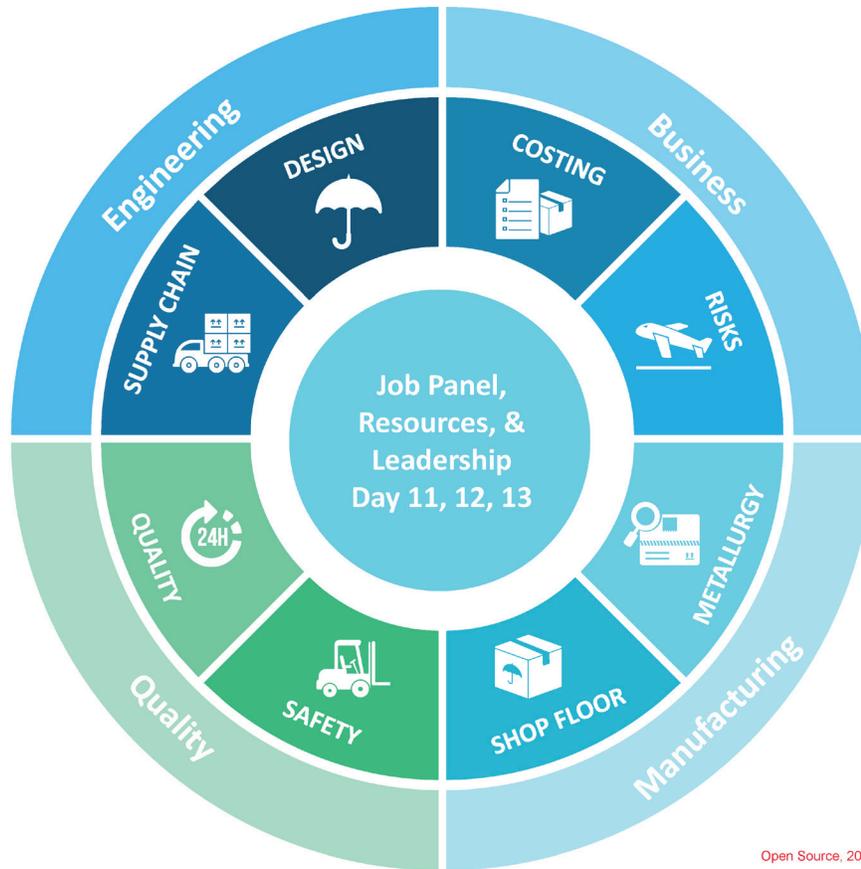
Day 5 & 6

Quality

Days 9 & 10

Manufacturing

Days 7 & 8



Open Source, 2020, Allison Giddens, Win-Tech and AMVI

Each day, students engage in a different topic ranging from supply and logistics to quality control, leadership and marketing. On the last two days of the AMVI, students use PowerPoint, Prezi or another platform to give 10-minute presentations to experts who return to help judge the presentation and provide **authentic feedback**.

Examples of past presentations include:

- The development of a keyboard for people with disabilities
- Ethical concerns with using artificial intelligence
- Production of environmentally friendly batteries
- Cost savings in the production of rocket boosters

Students win awards for the top-rated projects. One student presentation has already resulted in an internship with a major manufacturing company.

AMVI as developed and implemented by Win-Tech is an opportunity for high school students to better understand advanced manufacturing. The process and framework for running the AMVI are open source and can be replicated. The first expansion was to provide internship opportunities for neurodiverse people, among whom unemployment is extremely high.

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Elementary Grades Framework for Success

By Carita Venable and David Raney, SREB

Think about three students: one who excels in mastery of standards, one who is proficient and one who needs intervention. In your mind, could all three improve if they put forth more effort? The newest addition to SREB's Making Schools Work school improvement process operates on this premise. The **elementary grades** framework offers key practices to provide students with the increased purpose that can lead to that extra effort and on to success.

The framework is centered on four bold goals. Elementary grade students should enter middle school:

- Ready to succeed in **rigorous academic courses**
- With the **literacy skills** needed to read, analyze and comprehend a broad range of grade-level texts in all subject areas
- Ready to apply **math concepts and skills** with fluency, precision and accuracy to solve real-world problems
- With the **knowledge, skills and perseverance** needed to engage in a productive struggle and persist in solving real-world problems

SREB piloted this process in 2019, using its approach to school improvement to help teachers and school leaders identify problems of practice, implement research-based solutions and learn within a collaborative network. That learning happens when improvement efforts link to a broader vision, and the solutions are sustainable when ongoing support builds capacity within the school and district.

Among the lessons learned? Most students can master complex academic and technical concepts if school leaders and teachers:

- create meaningful learning experiences;
- provide personalized supports; and
- encourage students to make the effort needed to succeed.

These lessons align with **Key Practices** for elementary grades and connect to the focus areas of the **Making Schools Work process**: Engaging Instruction, Aligned Curriculum, Leadership for Continuous Improvement, Systems of Support and Career Pathways. Educators can use the following questions to reflect on their practices and gain valuable insights for increasing success in elementary grades.

Aligned Curriculum and Engaging Instruction

How does the school ensure that students are engaged in all classrooms through quality instruction aligned with grade-level or higher standards?

How does the school ensure that each student has access to a curriculum aligned with state standards?

Leadership for Continuous Improvement

How has leadership established systems and processes to support a culture of continuous improvement?

Career Pathways and Systems of Support

How does the school ensure that every student has both the opportunities and the necessary support — curricular, instructional and social skills — to thrive and achieve success?

How does the school provide students with career awareness opportunities throughout the school year?

School improvement happens when these efforts are linked to a broader vision in which all teachers and leaders — and all students — own their efforts.

The elementary grades framework offers key practices to provide students with the increased purpose that can lead to that extra effort and on to success.



Coaching for Change Conference

Registration is open for the SREB's [Coaching for Change Conference](#), May 16-17, 2023, in Atlanta. It's the nation's only professional learning event designed exclusively for instructional and leadership coaches regardless of grade level.



Get in the game and join us for powerful presentations, breakout sessions and networking. You'll have an opportunity to share your experiences and gain strategies for enhancing the impact of your coaching.

Attendees will explore how to build strong teams, plan for success, trust the process, overcome adversity and sustain change.

Cost: \$395

Registration Deadline: March 15, 2023.

Space is limited!

Hotel Accommodations: [Reserve a room](#) at the Georgia Tech Hotel & Conference Center. The SREB conference rate is available for May 15-17, 2023.

Registration Is Open for the 2023 Making Schools Work Conference

Secure your spot today for the [Making Schools Work Conference](#). Join us in Orlando, Florida, July 18-21, 2023, for four days of hands-on professional learning and networking.

The conference offers hundreds of sessions for K-12 educators on topics like quality instruction in English, math, social studies, special education, and career and technical education. We'll also tackle issues such as teacher retention, student and faculty mental wellness, classroom management, trauma and so much more.

Bring a team and take away classroom-tested tools and strategies that can be used right away to transform your pedagogy and increase student success.





Making Schools Work Conference

*Orlando, Florida
July 18-21, 2023*

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