

Promising Practices Newsletter

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Spotlighting promising practices from the Making Schools Work Conference

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Work-Based Learning in Action: Lessons From a Simulated Workplace

By Quinton Granville and David Raney, SREB

Literacy, math, science and social studies are all important subjects for students to master in school, but educators and employers realize that more is needed to prepare them for successful careers. Students need to be able to work in teams, problem-solve and get authentic, hands-on work experiences.

West Virginia's Simulated Workplace initiative provides work-based learning experiences for students. One participant, Stacey Yoho, incorporates a simulated workplace into her business education class at Paden City High School in Paden City, West Virginia, and is seeing positive outcomes in student engagement and learning.

Yoho remembers an “epiphany” one of her students had during a brainstorming session to name their class’s printing and screening business, in which students take on the roles of businesspeople: “I got it!” the student yelled. “The name should be Wildcat Prints because wildcats leave their print.”



Paden City High School students selling their T-shirts

For Yoho, this moment marked the transition from students passively completing assignments to owning their learning — “being hands-on, 100% engaged.”

Yoho and her PCHS colleagues have undertaken this Simulated Workplace approach to engage students in learning that prepares them to enter the workforce with the knowledge and confidence to perform a job well and to gain some insight into opportunities that lead to career growth.

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Lessons Come to Life

Students are motivated to learn, Yoho believes, by “authentic” assignments — when the classroom becomes truly theirs, “a student-centered environment,” and teachers release them to practice new skills. She has focused on learning goals that, as in the case of Wildcat Prints, both hone students’ ability to produce quality work and teach them about the fundamentals of operating a business.

“Students are in the driver’s seat,” Yoho said. For example, one student might serve as a project manager or a marketer who attracts business. Another might troubleshoot problems with a design, or prepare order forms, or speak to customers.

And it’s working. As “learning became more meaningful, we started noticing a major shift in students’ motivation and engagement — more enthusiasm, more taking initiative. The lessons came to life,” said Yoho.

A Real World Lesson

Wildcats Prints’ first opportunity to make t-shirts for a major community event turned into a lesson about listening to the customer. The event coordinator met with students to describe what he and his partners were looking for. Although students were paying attention, Yoho said, it was obvious they assumed that because they’re kids in the same community, getting the contract was a sure thing.

The students didn’t approach the project with any sense of urgency; they approached it like a homework assignment. And the simulation provided a real-world lesson when, after they created T-shirt samples and met with the event organizer, the students’ designs were rejected.

“This turned into a teachable moment,” said Yoho. “It laid the path for students to work on problem-solving, shifting their focus from making good grades to making a good product, from completing assignments to offering great customer service. It was a blow to them, but a good lesson in work ethic. It’s when learning became real.”



Wildcats Prints printing shop

Discovering Why Academic Skills Matter for Successful Careers

Priorities Yoho has established in her simulated workplace classes include a mindset of professionalism (teachers *and* students), authentic skill development, and a community-facing business, all to help graduates solve work-related problems.



Stacey Yoho, Business Education Teacher

Yoho, who was an entrepreneur before starting to teach, said that from an employer’s standpoint, students are often deficient in soft skills, which rely on students’ sense of what it takes to produce quality results that go beyond a report card. This may be attributable to what Jo Boaler in *What’s Math Got To Do With It?* calls “pseudo context,” textbook problems that don’t require students to “engage in the questions and use their real-world knowledge.”

That’s why Yoho said she teaches in a simulated workplace environment, a classroom that mimics a place of employment. “It lets them know the why of writing, math, critical thinking and public speaking, all the skills they need. They don’t just see them as boxes to check.”

Applying these workplace and academic principles has helped Wildcat Prints gain customers and a reputation for good service. It has also led to students serving a charitable role in their community. For example, the company created t-shirts to raise money for a local trust fund associated with children’s cancer. “In these situations, they have the chance to learn things that go beyond a traditional education experience,” said Yoho. “The lessons are in the work.”

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Supporting Every Student: Let's Make it Personal

By Cena Davis and Diane James, SREB

Educators and researchers agree that when students have a trusting and supportive relationship with at least one adult at school, they are more likely to succeed academically and emotionally. That's why having a strong advisory program is key to a successful high school or middle grades school experience.



Advisory programs consist of a small group of students meeting regularly with a teacher or other adult in the school building during a dedicated class period. To be most effective, the same group of students remain with that adult throughout all four years of high school or three years of middle school, maintains Carol Clemmons, school improvement coach with the Alabama State Department of Education, Office of School Improvement.

An advisory period is not a “free” or homeroom period, but it is less academic than a traditional class. It may cover the soft skills or social skills that students need while also providing students with a sense of belonging.

Clemmons, who is also a former high school principal and response to intervention specialist, advocates for a personalized approach to advisory: “I feel like we lose that personal touch with our students the older they get,” she said. She reflects that kindergarten teachers know their students’ moms and dads or guardians, and it should be that way in middle and high school. But at the secondary level, students can get lost in the shuffle.

“You can’t teach me if you don’t know me.”

Clemmons shares a **roadmap for the who, what, when, how and why** of a successful advisory program.



Carol Clemmons, School Improvement Coach

Who Benefits

Students benefit most when they are part of an advisory period because they form relationships with an adult who advocates for them and connect with their peers. Clemmons indicates the group should be small and diverse — comprised of 15 to 20 students per class, including students of different races and ethnicities, honors and struggling students, and athletes, for example. Students who may not have strong connections anywhere else in the school can find a place in their advisory group. “It’s kind of their home base,” said Clemmons.

What an Advisory Model Looks Like

Ideally, every adult in the building — teachers, administrators, media specialists and athletic coaches — would have an advisory class comprised of the same group of students throughout high school, who they meet with daily. Lessons are developed by teachers and tailored to fit the school.

“You can’t bring them in, sit them in rows and teach them,” said Clemmons. Advisers must establish a personal relationship with students — spend time with them, learn their interests and know their learning styles because “you can’t teach me if you don’t know me,” notes Clemmons.

When to Plan Advisory Program

According to Clemmons, a successful advisory program requires upfront planning. She recommends that volunteer grade-level and lead teachers meet over the summer to develop a calendar and lessons. The curriculum may include topics like organizational or personal interaction skills, study skills and academic support, or college and career preparation. Once the curriculum is in place, all advisers must be trained in the process and ready to implement it on day one of school.



Clemmons cautions that teachers must have time or money to take on this lead role and not have it be just another thing added to their plates. To facilitate this, some schools give stipends and schedule an advisory work period into teachers’ schedules. For example, instead of before- or after-school duty, teachers have an advisory period.

How to Structure Advisory

There’s no one-size-fits-all approach to an advisory program. Educators must tailor their programs to meet the specific needs of their students. Clemmons’ model emphasizes a personalized approach in which teachers advise the same students all four years, have daily interactions through an advisory group and time to get to know not only the students but their families, too.

She suggests that advisers make their first positive connection with their students’ families in the first month of school. For parents, “That makes an impact immediately to know there is somebody in the school that I can call,” said Clemmons. Dynamic advisory activities can be added, such as individual student conferences with families and special graduation recognitions with advisers.

Know Your Why

The sense of belonging that students get from developing a positive relationship with a trusted adult is immeasurable. Research shows it increases student motivation, engagement and academic success.

Having one class period every day with the same group of students over four years also fosters close bonds and friendships with peers.

Tangible Results

Clemmons notes in large and small diverse schools in which she has worked, 98% of parents attend school conferences when they know their child’s adviser will be with them. Plus, parent surveys about advisers are enthusiastically positive.

Another important data point: Clemmons cites a large high school that had a ninth-grade retention rate of 12%, which declined to 2% after implementing a strong advisory program.

“Kids won’t slip by because we have our eyes on them and hearts with them every day,” said Clemmons.

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Math Students See Growth in Gradeless System

By Rodriguez Leonard and Jahana Martin, SREB



Students go to school and earn grades that are supposed to reflect their understanding and mastery of a subject. But what if there is a way to accurately assess student growth without applying standardized measurements for student performance?

Deemphasizing grades allows students to focus on learning and affords teachers more time for instruction. A team of math teachers at Tug Valley High School in Mingo County, West Virginia, sought a system to more accurately measure what students know and need to know to measure their mastery of the standards.

“We wanted grades to truly reflect students’ learning,” said Steven Alley, a 10th grade Math/Advanced Placement Statistics teacher at TVHS. “Students learned just enough to get the knowledge to pass the assessment. There was never a true mastery or application of the standard, just ‘pass the test.’”



The Power of Mistakes

Alley and Amy Salmons, an 11th grade Math/Advanced Placement Calculus teacher at TVHS, initiated a gradeless system before the COVID pandemic. They later found it was beneficial in sustaining remote learning, as well.

The new system encourages productive struggle. “Math has such a negative connotation. The fear of failure paralyzes performance and growth. We needed to build a culture that fosters the value of mistakes,” said Alley.

The team used *Mathematical Mistakes: The Power of Mistakes and Struggle* by Jo Boaler to help learn the science behind making mistakes and how the brain processes mistakes to create new learning.

“Every time we make a mistake our brain sends a message by growing a synapse,” said Alley. “When students productively struggle the brain fires neurons that cause it to grow, and this happens even when we are completely unaware if we are making a mistake. Knowing and understanding the science of making mistakes allows the students to grow,” he said.

Growth is stifled when teachers give students the answers, instead of allowing them to make mistakes and grow their brains. “We shorten the learning span and students never truly master the standards,” Alley said. He notes that teachers must know the difference between a growth mindset and a fixed mindset and understand what happens neurologically in each mindset.

Buy-In

When Salmons and Alley saw how students and teachers could benefit from a gradeless system, they sought support from their administrators to make this transition. Initially, their principal was skeptical. And they had to change teachers’ mindsets about grading. They also needed support from parents. They did this, in part, by creating a transparent system where parents, students, and teachers could all access and monitor the student’s progress through an online system.

Even though it was hard work, taking the time to get this buy-in was vital to the success of the program because once they had it, students were better able to visualize their work and parents had access to their child’s progress and how it relates to the standards.

Going Gradeless

The math department piloted this system for one year. When they were ready to launch, they notified parents and uploaded student profiles onto the online platform. “We explained in depth to the parents that there are no grades for the first four and a half weeks. This is the largest part of the process. Once parents change their thinking about grades and look at the growth of their students, they then see the value of our approach with this tool,” said Salmons.

Students immediately had access to their digital portfolios — a record of their work easily accessed by an authentic audience (teachers, parents, etc.). This approach to recordkeeping allows the teachers to truly measure growth and identify where students are according to the standards. Parents also had easy access to their child’s work.

Alley explains that this new process allows teachers to change the students’ perception of math and build their confidence in their ability to master the standards — while building relationships with students. Teachers can focus less on students’ grades and focus more on learning from mistakes, creating a more positive environment and changing the view of math.

“Once students, parents and teachers get accustomed to the process of not receiving a letter grade, immediately, they adjust and school continues normally,” Salmons said.

“Student learning is measured by standard performance, not by compliance. In this system, students can access and be accountable for their learning through their mastery of the standards,” said Alley. Students meet with teachers weekly and discuss their progress and how they perceive their performance. This gives the students voice and ownership of their work.

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