

Spotlight:

Kathy D'Antoni Discusses West Virginia's Simulated Workplace

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We inaugurate our new Spotlight series with Dr. Kathy D'Antoni, West Virginia's Assistant State Superintendent of Schools, interviewed earlier this month by Dr. Kimberly Hambrick, the ARCC's Associate Director. The purpose of Spotlight is to explore innovative practices as seen through the eyes of state leaders. The topic of this first Spotlight is West Virginia's Simulated Workplace, which creates workplace environments in classrooms that operate like real companies in actual industries, run by students.

Beginning in 2016-2017, every career and technical education (CTE) classroom in West Virginia will operate as a simulated workplace. "Next year, it's the way CTE in West Virginia does business," Dr. Antoni emphasized. "We have the data now.... If you do this with fidelity, you see huge changes. And the main changes you see are in the actual behavior, actions, and engagement of students."

Born from the frustration of business and industry that CTE graduates were unprepared for real workplaces, Simulated Workplace began in 2013 at 35 schools, under Dr. Antoni's leadership at the West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE). Business leaders had asserted that CTE graduates, even those with sound technical skills, did not understand the impact that each employee has on a company's bottom line and routinely lacked a sound work ethic and commitment to come to work.

Asked to name key differences between simulated workplace and previous approaches to CTE in West Virginia, Dr. Antoni responded, "Number one, student empowerment. It totally flipped the classroom to where it's student-led, student-focused, student-empowered, student engagement, to the point that they feel they own and operate the business." She recalled one focus group where, asked for the simulated workplace's purpose, one student replied, "You're not educating us for the next four years—you're educating us for the next forty years."

When students serve as CEOs and managers of simulated workplace companies, they review business reports prepared by the WVDE that show whether their company has seen a decline or increase in earnings. At student meetings, they then consider the reasons for lost income. Was attendance down? Were projects not completed? "That teaches them very quickly," Dr. D'Antoni explained, "without any adult ever having to say, you need to come to work. They understand it."

Because the true simulated workplace is student-led, teachers are challenged to move from an instructor/trainer to a strong facilitator, mentor, and monitoring role, a shift that the state supports through professional development and technical support, understanding that this approach is

essentially “changing the way a teacher instructs in the classroom.” As Dr. D’Antoni observed, “I’ve said to my instructors, if you’re doing more work now under the simulated workplace environment than you were before, then you’re not doing it correctly—because these are student-run companies.”

In this third year of the initiative, teachers from the first year have become coaches to support teachers who are less sure how to initiate a simulated workplace in their classroom. There are also six model schools, which allow teachers and administrators to observe a successful simulated workplace in action.

Asked for guidance to other states considering the simulated workplace, Dr. D’Antoni offered three suggestions. First, go slow. Set a thoughtful pace that enables schools to see success emerging. Second, support teachers, especially by calling on creative teachers—for whom the change is not so difficult—to coach others. Third, ensure that school administrators fully commit to the approach as a school-wide vision, not simply another experiment.

For the June 25, 2015 webinar on "Simulated Workplace: Changing CTE in West Virginia," and related tools, go to [this link](#).