

## A Three-Way Winner: Career Guidance, Vocational Training, and Community Support

Thirty-year-old Plantation High School in Broward County, Florida, is in the midst of a \$12 million structural renovation, but what is going on inside the classroom is likely to be much farther reaching, and a lot more valuable. Students here get a triangle of benefits that is unique in high schools today: extensive technical and vocational training opportunities, comprehensive career guidance in the classroom, and support from a community that wants to see them succeed.

The school, which is one of 23 in the county, is located just north of Miami, and has a population of 2532 students. With a nearly fully operational Tech Prep/School-To-Work program in place, Plantation High currently offers students magnets in business, finance, and travel and tourism, horticulture, auto mechanics, with more to come.

English teacher Mary Ellen Fowler works closely with coordinators from the county and state as they develop and implement the model program. She has been teaching a class called Career Decision-Making and Critical Thinking Skills for three years, and while she welcomes the expansion of vocational and technical classes for students, she sees them as one part of a bigger picture.

"Life isn't so simple anymore, that you can train for one profession, and that's it for the rest of your life," she told us. "Today, we have to teach students how to think and how to make decisions on their own, because the world they are entering will require this of them."

The first half of her class focuses on personal and career exploration, and career research, while the second teaches comprehension, analysis and organization skills to benefit students both academically and vocationally. While ninth graders are encouraged to take the class, which fulfills an elective credit in the language arts department, it's open to all students at any time in the four years.

"I don't think it's a matter of becoming a doctor, lawyer, or Indian chief," Mary Ellen told us, when asked about her philosophy of career education. "My first goal is to see that students learn to make the right decisions to become functional, responsible adults." Technical and vocational courses then begin to come into focus, she believes, and students are able to utilize them to fit their goals. "Students can take advantage of these opportunities to do what they have discovered they want to do," she said.

Rounding out the picture, Mary Ellen invites guest speakers from community businesses to address the class, and works closely with business teachers to prepare students for placement in summer internships many of these businesses offer students.

### Career Guidance the Foundation

The foundation, Mary Ellen believes, of a successful program is in allowing students to explore the central developmental questions of Who am I? Where am I going? And how do I get there? In her Career Decision-making class, students do this with the help of the *Career Choices* curriculum, including Possibilities, the supplemental literary anthology.

Mary Ellen found *Career Choices* at the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) conference when she stopped by the publisher's booth. She brought the materials back to her school, where it has been used ever since. "The administration has been very supportive in providing funds for the books, she told us. "Next year they're making sure every student gets a copy of the student Workbook and Portfolio to go with the text."

Students explore their individual work behavior styles, talents, skills and personality through activities in Chapter 2: "Your Personal Profile," to which she adds a learning styles inventory. Students then develop an in-depth profile of themselves on the Bull's Eye Chart provided in the text.

With profiles in hand, students visit the computer lab where they learn to use the college, career and job search programs. Their assignment is to narrow down their career options to fit what they have written on their profiles. Selecting one career, they develop a "job profile," which includes the requirements for skills and education they will need to fulfill.

Using the outlines from Chapter 11 of the *Career Choices* text, Mary Ellen has her students prepare their own resumes and fill out mock job applications. They then report for a practice interview, dressed appropriately. If they pass all the requirements and are "hired," they set up a budget and prove that they can live on the

income from that particular job. (Chapter 4 in *Career Choices* can be used as a guideline for a budgeting activity.) "I want them to walk out of this class confident enough to apply and interview for any job," Mary Ellen told us.

Literary selections from Possibilities complement these activities. "They will never forget the Lego story," Mary Ellen told us. "They loved it because it was about somebody doing exactly what they really wanted to do, and making a living at it." Another favorite was a quote from Mark Twain about making choices that allow you to do what you want in life. The students requested it be written on poster board and displayed as a constant reminder.

Students have responded so positively to the class that recently, when the air conditioning went out due to the renovation, they came to class even though they didn't have to. "It was amazing - there were no absences!" Mary Ellen told us. "Students actually like coming to school because they find the material relevant and are doing something they really want to do: discovering themselves and exploring their opportunities."

### **Speakers Program a Big Hit**

When asked which part of the class was most beneficial, students responded unanimously: meeting real people who were doing jobs and having careers they were interested in. Using the *Career Choices* Instructor's and Counselor's Guide to set up a Speaker's Bank, Mary Ellen invited over 30 people from the community to address the class.

"I tried to show that people come from all walks of life, and that race, color, sex are not necessarily limiting factors." The guest list included a professional soccer player, a 28-year-old journalist who had traveled all over the world, a woman mortician, a goalie on the Women's National Water Polo Team, a Navy Seal, and a lawyer, among others.

"What the students get from this experience is the honest story," Mary Ellen told us. "They ask the speakers how much money they make and how long it took to prepare for their career. They even ask for advice about how to enter the same career."

One of her students, an unusually tall 11th grade boy, had expressed a desire to become a pilot. When Mary Ellen brought a pilot into the class, he listened carefully and asked a lot of questions. As gently as possible, the speaker informed the boy that his height would be a limiting factor and he was best to explore another career. "The students thanked me for having the chance to hear about things they don't normally get to hear," Mary Ellen said.

Wanting to show her class that most jobs aren't about performing just one task, but usually encompass many different responsibilities, Mary Ellen brought in a panel of speakers from the Sawgrass Mills Mall, one of the four largest shopping malls in the country. Students got to see the many sides of the retail business when the panel told them about the mall's self-contained TV studio, and the elaborate promotion and special events activities that went on there.

"The speakers exposed students to a real world where people often have more than one career in their lifetime," Mary Ellen reported. "They saw how unrealistic it is to expect to have one career or job for an entire life, and never have to change."

### **Bringing in Parents**

A part of the community that often gets overlooked is the parents of the students. With the support of her administration, Mary Ellen was able to offer parents a one-night session in decision-making so they could experience exactly what their children were learning..

"I wanted parents to see that they didn't need to make decisions for their children, that he or she could make those decisions on their own," she said. "Parents have got to understand that it's okay for their children not to know what they're going to do for the rest of their lives by age 15."

"When a parent calls you thrilled about a student's grades, because he or she is learning how to make choices and how to think, you know it's all worthwhile, and so do they," she affirmed.

Exploring another link to the community, Mary Ellen helps second language students to see their bilingual skills in a positive light. "In Southern Florida, having a second language is a real benefit in the business community,

and so we help students to explore how they can use this to their advantage," she told us. In an experiment to demonstrate understanding differences in the workplace, she taught an entire day in Spanish without using any English. This gave English speakers the experience of having a language that's not the one used most often.

### **Working Together**

Mary Ellen believes that real benefits result for students when the entire school works together to provide a full range of support and opportunity. One of her students who was in the travel and tourism magnet, took a computer class at the same time he was in her class. "He worked very hard in both classes, and got a lot of support," she told us, "which landed him an interview for a summer internship with a local American Express office.

Mary Ellen has also built strong ties to the school's guidance department, inviting counselors into the class periodically to answer questions about classes and opportunities in the different pathways. "When a school is this large, we have to help each other, because no one can do it all for the kids," she said.

Last spring, Mary Ellen attended a *Career Choices* curriculum training in Miami and, as a result of the networking she did there, nearby schools have requested to visit Plantation High and see how the triangle approach of technical classes, career guidance and community support all come together under one roof. She is inspired by the possibility of joining together with other schools to make more plans for the future.

"We all have great ideas," she said. "Schools have been too isolated in the past, but now we're realizing that we don't have to reinvent the wheel. We can work together, and that is a very exciting prospect."