West Virginia's Simulated Workplace (SW) Initiative:
Q and A with Kathy D'Antoni, Chief Career and
Technical Education Officer

Through the leadership of Dr. Kathy D'Antoni, the West Virginia Department of Education has launched a Simulated Workplace program in high schools around the state. Instead of a traditional classroom, through the Simulated Workplace initiative, students will be immersed within an engaging work place environment which offers support in addition to rigorous training while developing the necessary skill sets to be a next generation work ready employee. Within four years, 167 Simulated Workplace sites have been established in West Virginia. By the 2016/17 school year, SW will have replaced every traditional career and technical education program in West Virginia.

CNA Education had the opportunity to talk with D'Antoni to gain insight on West Virginia's SW initiative, its challenges, its successes, and its future, as well as about the Simulated Workplace model's national impact on how we educate students.

Q: What was the spark for Simulated Workplace in West Virginia?

A: I had met with business and industry over the past 15 years. Over the years, we went from a conversation where they would describe the skill sets they would need from emerging employees/future employees. We went from that conversation to where business and industry was screaming to just give them somebody to show up for work, be drug free, and give them a full day of quality work.

I knew the skill sets we were graduating students with were the proper skill sets. What was missing was the work ethic, team building, problem solving, and critical thinking.

Basically, the thought came to mind that we would put [students] in a real-life environment and let them experience and learn from actual hands-on in environments that replicate a real, true life experience. So we flipped the classroom from an educational traditional classroom into a simulated company or business where the students organize the business or the company: they run it, they do the policies and procedures for their companies, they have uniforms, they have time clocks or some type of formal attendance measure, based on what was happening in the real world in that company.

One student said to me, who went from a 70 percent attendance rate to a 95 percent attendance rate, "Dr. D'Antoni, if I have to get up and call and say I am not coming in, I might as well just come on in."

I asked four different students, at four different locations in West Virginia, why they liked Simulated Workplace. Each student without hesitation said, "Because we are respected." To me that was a very loud and important statement.

What I am seeing with SW is [students] feel they have ownership of their educational process. In turn, it turns their personality (the way they act) and changes the entire school environment for a positive outcome.

Q: What were some of the challenges along the way? Lessons learned?

A: A couple of things. I wanted to go at a much faster speed. I wanted to see it happen, and I wanted it right now. I have learned over the past four years that you take small baby steps because you are transforming the culture of a classroom.

The second was the resistance of teachers to move from having total control of the class to a flipped classroom where the students control and lead. That is the toughest part of the whole Simulated Workplace initiative. It is not that teachers don't want to do that; it is not the way they have been trained.

The neat thing about SW is that once the teacher gets a glimpse of what happens in his or her classroom, the change in students, it becomes energizing to the instructor. A number of teachers have said they were holding [students] back without even realizing it.

Q: Why do you think Simulated Workplace has been such a success?

A: I think the number one reason is because of student engagement. I have never walked into a classroom that I have seen this level of excitement, engagement, and participation by all students.

If you walk into a fully operational SW site that is running at high speed, every single student in that classroom, regardless of levels of abilities, is engaged and excited about being there. I think that is the one element that I would never go back to a traditional classroom. Every time I walk into a new SW in West Virginia, I get excited.

Q: Can Simulated Workplace be replicated in other states?

A: It is easily replicated. It is not a curriculum. It is an environment. The environment for business and industry is the same nationwide. So there is not anything that is peculiar to West Virginia that couldn't be replicated in New Jersey.

The teacher is still in charge of the content and what is delivered in that class. The only thing that changes is the environment in which that [curriculum] is placed.

Q: Is SW something that is sustainable?

A: Yes, because it does not require more money. To change an environment does not require dollars. It requires buy-in and the teacher embracing it and the students participating. You could do this on no dollars.

Q: Talk a little about business partners and how you got them on board.

A: There are two levels to this. In the beginning we had a few businesses that were willing to spend time with us to develop the processes. They helped us develop a template. The students take those templates and develop policy and procedure for their companies. Then they helped us develop the scorecard on how to determine the effectiveness of the company.

Once SW was in place, we are using business inspectors for our companies. And we ask them to give us their expertise, and they go in and inspect a company just like a health department would go in and inspect a restaurant. Right now we have over 175 different employers working with us, and they will go in one day out of the school year.

[A business partnership] is a win-win. It tells education if we are on the right track. It gives business and industry a close-up look at future employees or the emerging workforce, and they have an opportunity to tweak it to meet their demands.

Out of this we have had students hired for summer internships. We have had students walk right out of high school into jobs because employers want their skill sets. We have had a number of success stories by using businesses in this role. Never before have they had a chance to impact education in this way.

Q: What kind of advice would you give people trying to set up a similar program?

A: I would go see one in action. One of the lessons learned is that a lot of people hear "Simulated Workplace" and they have their own idea of what that is. That happens with teachers, too. So if you can take somebody to one that is working, a high functioning model, and let them see it, then it is easily replicated.

Q: What keeps you up at night related to SW?

A: Excitement. It keeps me from retiring. Every time I go to see one, I walk away on cloud nine. I have never, never in the history of my education experience seen a level of energy, enthusiasm, and student engagement that I have seen here. All I have to do is walk in one and it inspires me.

Q: What would you want other educational leaders to know about SW?

A: I would want them to know that we have not even scratched the surface of the potential of our students sitting in our classrooms. And until we allow these students to take responsibility for their education, expose them to educational environments that create self-interest and self-engagement and creativity and the ability to advance ideas whether they are good or bad ... until we do that, we are holding down the potential of the U.S. and its future economy.

Why couldn't your English classes become newspapers or research firms? Why can't your math class become an accounting company? Or a backbone for other companies.

We are starting to see now how various companies are working with each other within a school. So you have a marketing company that is going over to the welding folks and they are doing marketing pieces for the products being produced by the welding shops.

It is beautiful to watch it.

● ● ●