

Career Awareness: A New Fundamental for Elementary Education

By Phyllis Nichols, Boise Schools Counselor at Hillcrest Elementary

The value of teaching career awareness at the high school and middle school levels has long been known. Now, many school districts are beginning to realize the value of incorporating it into elementary curriculums as well. But with teachers' time already stretched to the limit, how can they possibly teach career awareness without sacrificing time spent on basic subjects?

The answer: Incorporate a Career Trek kit into the curriculum.

Career Trek is a multimedia career awareness program for grades four through six. It provides 190 occupation cards and 60 classroom activities that can be adapted to various teaching situations. The kit also comes with software that allows students to tour a 'neighborhood' and visit people in various occupations, or to solve 'Case Book' problems. Through their explorations of the cards and software, students not only learn about a multitude of occupations, they also learn self-awareness, problem solving, and listening and comprehension skills.

Phyllis Nichols, who's been an elementary school counselor the past 14 years, has used Career Trek since its first version was introduced in 1992. With the recent release of a completely redesigned Career Trek kit, she's even more enthusiastic about the program.

"The new version is miles ahead of the earlier one," she says. "Along with the occupation cards, the activities are fantastic. They are the most improved aspect from the original Career Trek. Whoever developed the activities put a tremendous amount of thought and fun into them. The kids really enjoy them."

Using Career Trek as part of her counseling program, Nichols spends four to six weeks teaching careers to her school's fourth and fifth graders, where she goes into each room once a week for 30 minutes. Because her school does not have a computer lab, "the cards are my main focus with Career Trek," she says. "Each of the 190 occupation cards has a picture, a description of the job, the education, wages, whether it requires a high, medium or low use of numbers or words, and then it gives a detailed paragraph with vocabulary that is included in the job."

"When I first introduce the cards to the students, I hand each kid two cards and we talk about them. I ask them if they had to choose between the two occupations on their cards, which one would they choose and would they be happy? Usually, only about one quarter of the kids say they'd be happy," she says. "It gets across the point that you are

the one who is responsible for choosing your job. No one should choose it for you. That kind of starts our exploration."

"Then I have students explore more of the cards, as a lot of the jobs on the cards are totally different than the jobs around our area," she adds. Using a key provided with the kit, Nichols says students are quick to pick up how the cards work and what the information means. "They love the cards. They love exploring and looking at the different jobs, at what the wages are, how much education is required, looking at the pictures and trying to find out what it means to do that job."

"One of their favorite activities is to sort the cards by occupation. When we do an evaluation of the cards, the kids see right away that there is a correlation between more education and higher wages," she says. "Each card also lists a job by its cluster and job symbol. So, if you want, you can sort the cards by selecting ones that fit in the same cluster."

"What's nice is that it's a program that, for a teacher who does a lot of group activities, it incorporates a lot of cooperative learning. If a teacher is into more individual learning, it also offers a lot of partner activities," she says.

"One of the things it does very well for me is integrate into the other subject matter that I teach. The Teacher's Guide is wonderful. It is set up such that with a little exploration, it's very easy to figure it out. It has a guidance area that offers activities that are specifically guidance-related. Then it has other curriculum activities that can be integrated into health and P.E., language arts, math and social studies."

"As a counselor, if I'm doing a presentation on stress, I can pull out a few Career Trek cards, hand them to students and then ask them to talk about what kind of stress these people face in their jobs. So, it's very easy to integrate the cards into different lessons. I've even used them for discussions on conflict management. "

The last thing Nichols has her students do is to create their own Career Trek card of their favorite job. She asks them to keep that card so that, when they are a few years older and in high school, they can look back to see if their interests are the same or whether they have changed.

In teaching, "individual things are good at times, group things are great at times," Nichols says. "What's wonderful is that every activity in [Career Trek] has an adaptation for that. Things are well laid out and well thought out. It's a curriculum that gets a lot of use around here." She also adds that, after her six-week career course, teachers will often continue to incorporate Career Trek components into extra-curricular activities for their students.

"Career Trek is something that is truly worth it. It extends across all curriculum areas and is a great value," Nichols adds. "I think this is really opening doors for kids to know that, if they put their mind to it, they can do anything they want."