

# Breaking down barriers to make career and technical pathways accessible for everyone

Sheilamary Koch

Thursday, February 27, 2020



Breaking down barriers to make career and technical pathways accessible for everyone Students at Ignacio High School watch the Feb. 26 Careers in the Classroom event by Cue Career Young professionals shared their experience working in the woodworking and finishing industry and answered questions via livestream from students in their cabinetmaking I/II classes with wood manufacturing instructor Molly Turner at Ignacio High School in Ignacio, Colorado.

A similar scenario played out in Rolla, Missouri; Braidwood, Illinois; and Alhambra, California, where schools also tuned into the Feb. 26 Careers in the Classroom event by Cue Career. Teachers unable to join live plan to share the recorded event\* with students in upcoming weeks.

“It’s great having my students hear what’s going on in the industry from someone else they don’t see every day. It validates what I’m constantly telling them and why we’re learning what we’re learning,” says industrial technology teacher Mark Smith at Reed-Custer High School, who also participated in last year’s event.

“All the teachers I know need this kind of visual, video-focus content that piques kids’ interest,” says Adria Salvatore, assistant executive director of education for the Association of Woodworking and Furnishings Suppliers (AWFS), which organized and foot the bill for the event.

Striving for diversity, Salvatore intentionally invites younger people from the industry who students can relate to, like presenters Seth Nardo, general manager of Reborn Cabinets, and Hannah Khalaf from Dixon Enterprises. Khalaf’s ability to get young people interested in woodworking through social media and fun hashtags like #MakingSandingSexy and #SurfPrepSanding helped earn her a 40 under 40 woodworking industry award from Woodworking Network.



Reed Custer High School Industrial Technology Student

#### Expanding access with technology

Streaming industry into classrooms is an efficient way for high school students to get their career questions answered directly by people in the field who’ve recently completed their education and training.

“It’s so hard for teachers to get kids out of the classroom because of logistics, money and liability, so any opportunity to bring industry into the classroom is a win,” says Salvatore.

While students from any school certainly benefit, learners from rural, inner city or marginalized communities where opportunities to connect live with industry experts are often severely limited may gain considerably more from such virtual outreach.

In fact, Advance CTE, a national nonprofit representing state career and technical education (CTE) directors, recommends technology use to expand access and reach as one of five core strategies for states to expand high-quality CTE pathways in rural areas.

Arming states with tools to make equity a priority

Along with access, equity has historically been a major challenge in the realm of vocational education.

With the precise goal of arming states with tools to make their CTE programs more equitable, Advance CTE published “Making Good on the Promise,” a series enriched by case studies of how different states have worked to rebuild trust within underserved communities.

The series explores solutions to the historical problem of tracking, where learners of color, low-income learners, female learners, and learners with disabilities have been pushed into dead-end vocational programs such as those leading to jobs with uncertain economic growth or prosperity. The practice is becoming less common, but unfortunately continues in some districts.

Looking back on the legacy of today’s CTE, Steve DeWitt, deputy executive director of the Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE) says, “In theory, the landscape has changed dramatically and I think it's more than theory in a lot of places.”

Cases where practice hasn’t caught up with theory include programs with pathways that aren’t aligned with industry in the surrounding community or region. “It may be the economy has changed greatly in that urban area but the program hasn’t been upgraded significantly in 30 years.”

To change that, ACTE developed an evidence-based framework to guide educators and administrators in developing and improving the quality of their CTE programs. It outlines the 12 basic elements necessary for a high-quality CTE program — access and equity is the sixth element.

Measurable progress has been reported on the state level. The seventh annual report examining state CTE policies shows that four new states made career and technical education a priority in 2019 and an additional 60 policy actions related to CTE and career readiness were enacted.



## **Reinforcing equity at the school and classroom level**

Meanwhile, efforts to improve access and equity at the school and even classroom level are also critical.

Pamela Carr, assistant principal at Seacoast Technical School, is currently researching what barriers prevent students from enrolling in CTE when they're in high school. These can include scheduling, class load, graduation requirements along with perception.

“When looking at the decision-making process of a student, the three main influencers in my experience are school counselors, parents and friends,” explains Carr. “So along with understanding the perceptions of students themselves, I’m looking at how the perceptions of those other influencers play a factor in students’ decision.”

Based on conversations with educators, DeWitt verifies that parental desires, at times based on stigma, drive what students ultimately do. “If parents don’t want their daughter entering the automotive industry, for example, there’s not much schools can do to change that.”

On the other hand, he’s seen educators proactively make their classrooms accessible to students entering nontraditional fields. Equipping the welding program with gloves that fit the women’s hands or posting visual images up on the wall that reflect diversity give individuals from underrepresented groups reinforcement that they belong.

Shifts are happening slowly. Smith reports that he has more girls in his classes than ever before. Salvatore remarks that she sees parents more open to the trades than they were five years ago. Along with DeWitt, they agree that there's still a long way to go, especially in the area of racial equity.

#### About the Author



Sheilamary Koch has written professionally for over 20 years and is increasingly fascinated by the striving and accomplishment of people from diverse walks of life. Through her articles and blogs, she highlights their positive contributions with the intention of connecting and inspiring people from down the hall and around the world.

For nearly 15 years, she immersed herself in a hands-on learning experience as an English and art teacher in Mexico. Along with writing, she leads yoga classes and practices art. Connect with Sheilamary on Twitter [@sheilamary67](#).