



Education

Fun career software is 'Way to go'

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Today we meet the team of trainers implementing WaytogoRI's career-exploration software at Westerly Middle School. Anthony, Kyle, Taylor, Justin, Jana and other eighth graders join me in a conference room. Except for a couple of prim girls, the kids all but melt with nonchalance into the furniture, and squirm discreetly as we talk, per the habits of their age group.

However casual they seem, they LOVE Waytogo.

They tell stories about their e-wanderings in W2G's rich world of future possibilities. They report losing themselves in its hundreds of surveys, activities and avenues for career and college searches.

Kevin says, "If you don't know what you want to be when you grow up, it helps you figure that out. I said in surveys that I wanted to work outside and reduce pollution. Since I was little, I wanted to play baseball, but now I want to be an engineer. I'm 'hands-active,' " a term he presumably learned from W2G.

Mackenzie says, "Now I'm really into what I want to do in the future. I know exactly what's in front of me." OK, an eighth-grader might change her mind a hundred times before choosing a college major. But she and the group totally get that if they examine themselves and what they want, their odds of achieving big goals go way up.

Cultivating kids' dreams about what work they might want to do opens their eyes to the value and purpose of the schoolwork at hand. School is a platform for realizing ambitions, or should be. If a kid has any passion at all about becoming a doctor or a video-game programmer, she can't let herself dislike math and science. They matter. School matters. Not because parents and teachers say so. But because accomplishing most real-life dreams requires a lot of preparation by schools.

Every Westerly Middle School student is in a small-group advisory. These eighth-graders are the "Paws" group, named after the cartoon dog that guides the elementary-age kids through W2G's "Jobland."

Their adviser, Carolyn Rizzo, had been a guidance counselor at the high school last year, where W2G hosted a "soft" or pilot launch. The site's power quickly won her over because it helps students construct graduation portfolios, arrive at potential career and college decisions, fill out college applications, and more. It calms the nightmare of junior and senior years.

Also, W2G helps students think through and fill out the Individual Learning Plans that the Regents require of all students from 5th to 12th grade. The purpose of these plans is also to push kids to connect to their future by designing it on paper.

So when Rizzo moved to the middle school, she knew W2G would make the ILP an effective tool, a snap to accomplish, and fun.

Like all advisories at the middle school, Rizzo's group was selected alphabetically, not recruited as super-smarties or techies. Still, they became the school's W2G experts. Now, during advisory period, they split up to work with other kids in the four computer labs. They've finished training the seventh and eighth grades, and are just starting on sixth.

Rizzo says, "But I didn't anticipate that by training the kids, this initiative would go so much faster. They're training peers. And they're so tech savvy. Of course, it's all about YOUR interests," meaning the kids'. As a result, W2G has gone viral at the school.

And tech savvy is only part of the kids' powers. The Paws group has been thinking about future careers longer than the peers they're training. For example, Brien acknowledges, "I took a lot of surveys, but the jobs kept ending up with garbage man and stuff. So I kept taking surveys until I could see different jobs coming up." He's considering photography now. And he's talking to other kids about the changes in his thinking. Kids are powerful advocates for getting their peers to raise their expectations of themselves. More powerful than most adult authority figures.

Kathy Sissons, program director for W2G, is so thrilled with what's happening in Westerly, she holds up their youthful train-the-trainers program as a model when she's helping schools implement use of the site.

Granted, few schools have the luxury of four computer labs where a Paws group can work. Sisson and her colleagues know that the availability of technology is an issue, so all of the activities on the site can be done with paper and pencil. In affluent communities, teachers can assign W2G as homework and use class time just to talk about it. As usual, less well-to-do communities have to be more creative about getting kids access to computers. In some schools, W2G is part of business or computer classes.

But W2G is most appropriate for advisories, whose purpose is also to help kids connect to school and stay connected. The site allows advisers just to choose the activity and guide the discussion. It has a section where teachers can track the kids' work, who's finished what surveys, for example.

Not all schools are using W2G yet, but the site's use has been explosive, far beyond the expectations of the developers. If your kid isn't yet on it, go to www.WaytogoRI.org and become the child's adviser yourself.

Not that you have anywhere near the cool factor that a peer trainer has.

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