

# The Path Forward

*A revamped Career and Technical Education program at Dinwiddie Public Schools is empowering students to take ownership of their futures.*



Students spend “A Day in the Life of an Electric Lineman” with Southside Electric Cooperative employees.

*Photos courtesy of Dinwiddie Public Schools*

On the first day of school, Carly Woolfolk always dreaded asking her students one question: “Why are you taking this class?”

“For elective classes like CTE, most students will say something like: ‘my friend told me she was taking this class,’ or ‘you’re my favorite teacher,’” says Woolfolk, now the Director of Secondary Education and CTE at Dinwiddie Public Schools in Virginia. “Even worse: ‘I didn’t know what else to take, and my counselor put me in here.’”

Woolfolk found those answers frustrating. They showed that the students didn't understand how each class fit into a plan to meet their career goals—and they certainly didn't feel in charge of their own academic and career development.

### 3 proven techniques for better CTE results

#### **Exploration**

Administer assessments so students can understand themselves, then link their strengths to careers

#### **Personalization**

Customize career paths to make sure CTE programs are relevant for students and schools

#### **Adaptation**

Use data to understand and respond to student needs

In Virginia, as in most states, the Department of Education requires that each student “have a personal learning plan and course of study that aligns with the student’s academic and career goals.” Woolfolk believed that it wasn’t enough to just create a generic plan and check the necessary box—each student’s academic career plan (ACP) needed to matter.

In 2017, she set out to create an ACP program that would have real impact. She called it the #CTE4ALL initiative. The ACPs she envisioned would actually be used as real, living tools. Classes would match up with student interests,

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and if a class was added to their plan, then they would take that class. Above all, they would encourage students to take active ownership over their futures.

In 2019, after two years, Woolfolk’s plan is getting results—and recognition. The Virginia School Boards Association recently named Dinwiddie County Public Schools the winner of the Excellence in Workforce Readiness Award, specifically calling out the #CTE4ALL program. Here’s how Woolfolk and her team made it happen.

#### **Define Interests**

The first step in getting students to create an ACP was to help them understand the range of possibilities. The challenge was twofold: get students to understand their own personal character traits, then get them to explore a variety of careers. Only then could students choose careers that matched with their strengths and interests.

“The truth is,” says Woolfolk, “most students choose a job they’re interested in based on either a ‘dream job’ (like professional sports or movie star) or something they have experience with—often what their mom or dad does for a living. Few students, even the older ones, know their own strengths and personality traits—much less how those traits might align with various career pathways.”

Dinwiddie chose the MajorClarity platform to help ensure that all its student would be career- or college-ready when they graduated. Self-assessment and career explorations are two of the great strengths of MajorClarity. When students first log on, they are prompted to complete a self-assessment that determines their personality type and learning style. Then, it nudges them to begin exploring career clusters.

Woolfolk began to see students delve into career simulations and activities on the platform. They marked their favorite career areas at first, then later began to choose specific goals to pursue. The results revealed true student interests—miles beyond the simple “what do you want to be when you grow up?” approach.

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Critically, student engagement didn't end with exploration. Based on the choices that students have made, the MajorClarity platform lays out the skills and certifications that students will need to achieve their goals. Soon, Dinwiddie students started to create their own ACPs inside the platform.

#### **Create a custom process**

As students began to create their own ACPs, Woolfolk set out to match

those ACPs up to school offerings. She uploaded all their academic planning functions and course records into the MajorClarity platform. Now, students didn't just see the skills they'd need for their goals, they saw the specific classes offered at their school that matched those goals.



Dinwiddie High School students shadowing animal control officers on the job.

Woolfolk created a “core template” in MajorClarity: an ACP with grade level guides for a student to meet basic graduation requirements. Then, she adapted that template to create ACPs for every career pathway in which Dinwiddie offered classes. As each student completed their ACP, it was reviewed by a counselor and marked as approved in the platform.

#### ***She set a schedule with milestones in MajorClarity:***

- **Grade 7:** Students take a Career Investigations course—by the end of the course they have selected a pathway of interest to pursue.
- **Grade 8:** Students review their pathway and select the specific courses that follow their career goals for grades 9-12.

- **Grades 9-12:** Advisors and counselors use the information in MajorClarity as the basis for their discussion of career paths and college interest with each individual student.

### Get parents involved

Dinwiddie was intentional about getting all teachers and counselors on board with MajorClarity—providing trainings and creating clear expectations of how staff would use the platform. Equally important, however, was reaching out to parents.



Dinwiddie's career exploration programs bring together students and local industry professionals.

Woolfolk knew that it would be powerful to have parents involved as part of the process. “Unfortunately,” she says, “the majority of parents had no clue that there was a plan of study for their child.” She wanted to change that.

While MajorClarity will automatically send student ACPs to their guardian email on file, Woolfolk wanted to go further. She organized a series of

MajorClarity parent sessions, where she and her team walked through the platform and encouraged parents to log-on with their children. At one event, “Parents were texting their kids about the platform while we were still in the session,” says Woolfolk. “They were saying ‘wow! I wish I had this when I was a kid!’”

### Refine

As more students used the MajorClarity platform, there was more data available to Woolfolk. Looking at student interests and activity, she could better guide instruction, allocate resources, and organize events.

Woolfolk set up an annual course audit to make sure that everything Dinwiddie CTE offered matched up with the needs expressed by students in the MajorClarity platform. Each year, she could add or drop courses according to what mattered to students.

***She even used the data to help convince administration to fund the teacher as he earned a new endorsement.***

Woolfolk began to use the MajorClarity data as evidence to earn funding for new teacher certifications. When she saw an increased interest in the building trades, she secured money for one teacher's OSHA certification that allowed him to teach additional

construction classes. She helped a chemistry teacher add an endorsement to expand the school's range of health and medical sciences offerings. She discovered that many students wanted to pursue early childhood education, so she set up a bus service to transport them to the appropriate course at the local community college.

***After two years of adaptations drawn from data in the MajorClarity platform, enrollment in Dinwiddie's CTE courses, regional CTE center, and community college partnership classes is at an all-time high.***

Woolfolk sends out a student survey inside the platform in the fall to help drive decisions for the next year. By winter break she has the CTE schedule for the following year completed, and counselors can meet with students early to get numbers for Dinwiddie's master schedule. After two years of adaptations drawn from

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#### **What's next**

In 2022, Dinwiddie will graduate its first class of seniors who have used the MajorClarity platform for all four years of high school, and expects to see rising numbers of completed CTE diplomas. The district continues to refine its CTE offerings.

Woolfolk has started to see the changes on a personal level as well. "It's very rewarding to look into a student's schedule and see a career goal, an ACP, and classes that lead up to that goal," she says. "It's refreshing—and exciting—to know that these students have a plan that aligns with their future careers. They have a path forward." ↗

Interested in what MajorClarity can do for your school? **Get in touch.**