

MCS to use technology to address soft skills gap

MARION - Funding from an innovative state grant will enable Marion City Schools to harness technology to teach students soft skills.

The Straight A Fund Governing Board recommended awarding a \$623,605 Straight A Innovation Fund Grant to partners Rushmore Academy, Harding High School and the Mahoning County Educational Service Center. The grant will cover costs of working with the Kent State University Research Center for Educational Technology to create an educational simulated workplace model.

Simulated Workplace: Closing the Soft Skills Gap for Generation Z is based upon West Virginia Department of Education's simulated workplace model. It will turn the classroom into a student-led company that mimics the actual workplace. Students will learn industry best practices as well as additional in-demand soft skills.

"This opportunity is a direct response to what our industry and business partners and agencies like Marion County Job and Family Services and Marion CAN DO! have asked us to do," Marion City Schools Superintendent Gary Barber said. "This grant allows us to address the soft skills gap within the school curriculum."

Barber said the grant enables the high school and Rushmore Academy, a community school sponsored by Marion City Schools, to "really change some lives." A lack of soft skills like how to think critically, solve problems and work as part of a team have been noted by area employers for several years and is a reason why many people fail to find adequate employment.

Something unique about the project is the partnership with the Kent State research center. It will allow the center to train local teachers to build game-based soft skills modules. These virtual reality modules will immerse students in digital workplace simulations that will develop their soft skills in a risk-free environment.

The project will be the first in Ohio to eliminate the soft skills gap by flipping the traditional classroom set-up to put career tech students and industry experts in charge. This will help deliver comprehensive soft skills training and an assessment program that can be replicated across the state.

"We learned that large corporations were using immersive media to train millennial employees," Amy Wood, director of educational programs and grants, said. "Given the research on educational uses of virtual reality, we believed integrating this technology into our classrooms, as employers have done in the workplace, would be a powerful strategy to more deeply engage students in their career technical experience. With this innovation, combined with the student-led companies that comprise Simulated Workplace, we expect to create a replicable model for schools that will aid in closing the soft skills gap in Ohio."

The project will also include web-based career readiness modules and an evidence-based drug prevention curriculum. The Ohio State University will provide web-based workplace leadership modules.

The Straight A Fund Governing Board recommended 23 grants representing 90 schools for \$14.8 million in Straight A funding. The recommendations go to the Ohio Controlling Board for final approval on Aug. 8.

“The Straight A Fund encourages students to get creative in the ways they prepare Ohio’s students for the global workplace,” interim superintendent of public instruction Dr. Lonny J. Rivera said. “These grants jumpstart sustainable programs to transform our classrooms and meet the unique needs of all students.”

Ohio Gov. John Kasich created the Straight A Fund in 2013. The 2015 state budget included \$30 million to continue the program another two years.

Barber complimented Wood for her efforts to work with business groups, social agencies, law enforcement and educators to develop the Simulated Workplace model. Her work on this and other grant applications has enabled Marion City Schools to take innovative approaches to help students achieve success in academics and in life.