xello

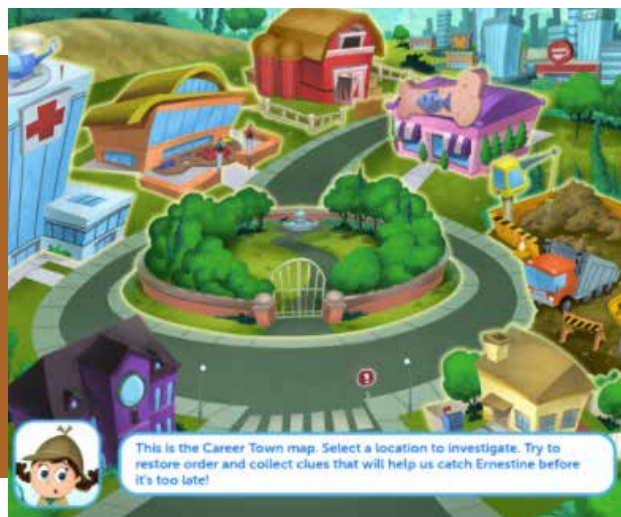# How Forest Hills School District is Introducing Career Exploration to Elementary Students Using a Full K-12 Solution

This is the Career Town map. Select a location to investigate. Try to restore order and collect clues that will help us catch Ernestine before it's too late!

Students of a Cincinnati school district are proving that they're not too young to think about careers.

When it comes to measuring the success of EdTech programs, it helps to go straight to the people who have the most to gain from it: Students.

When second graders in the Forest Hills School District hear that it's time to log in to the future readiness tool Xello, a cheer often goes up in the classroom.

The district's youngest students are some of the software's biggest fans, which delights school counselor Kate McKenzie.

She, along with five other counselors, helped introduce Xello to the roughly 7,300 students across six elementary, one middle and two high schools located in the Cincinnati tri-state area.

"We're so excited that there's a Grade 3, 4 and 5 component that is perfectly age appropriate. I also love the K-2 aspect of Xello known as 'Career Town.' It makes our youngest students excited to access the program. The program and narrative are so positive that kids want to jump on it," she says.

Xello and ASCA Go Hand in Hand

About 15 years ago, the Forest Hills district adopted the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) model of focus on academic, career and social/emotional development. McKenzie says the ASCA programs list goals in three sections:

- Learning strategies. "Anything from time management, organization to goal setting skills."

- Self-management. "Mental wellness but also perseverance, coping skills and being a flexible learner."

- Social skills. "How can you effectively communicate and listen, and create positive relationships with peers and adults?"

"These are the three areas that guide our work. We do everything from teaching whole class lessons to working with small groups, to seeing students one-on-one," says McKenzie.

"We really want to find programs that are proactive, not reactive, and that's where Xello has been really helpful. We might go in [to a classroom] and teach problem solving or active listening or setting goals and we blend Xello in as an addition."

Xello has been part of the ASCA programming for students as young as second grade at Forest Hills. They use Google single sign-on, eliminating the need for the frustrating task of asking 6-year-olds to type in an email address.

McKenzie says she thought the kids would like it, but she didn't imagine they'd take to it quite as enthusiastically as they have.

"They absolutely love it. I'm not joking that when the teachers say we're going to do 'Career Town' [a Xello feature for early elementary grades], they cheer. Even the 3rd, 4th and 5th graders like showcasing who they are and the 6th graders enjoy taking the learning style and personality quizzes and doing Matchmaker."

How 'Career Town' for Xello K-2 Captivates and Educates

Career Town is an adventure that students embark on in Xello K-2. It's a non-violent mystery that underlines the variety of work and workers in a community, and the importance of every worker within a community.

"Workers around Career Town have disappeared from their jobs, causing chaos. They are unharmed, but they have been lured away by Ernestine McNohire, who plans to build her own community on the moon. It's up to students to save the day," reads the official description.

"It's posed as a game, but it also teaches them the soft skill of problem solving, which is so great. The kids feel a sense of empowerment and the activity helps them gain empathy too," says McKenzie.

She also appreciates that students can read the screen themselves or choose to have a narrator read to them, in English or Spanish.

"This is fantastic for some of our population. It eliminates all barriers to learning and levels the playing field. It's not a problem for kids who have behavior issues or academic struggles because they're either being read to or are following along with highlighted words and doing the same thing as their peers.

Xello is a powerful tool for all learners because it's pretty differentiated and kid-driven.

McKenzie notes that after they rolled out Career Town, they noticed a shift in the careers that students chose in a second grade autobiography project. Typically, kids would pick historical figures like George Washington. After spending time with Xello, they were choosing non-traditional career paths they really liked, such as ballerinas, soccer players, or anthropologists.

"It was really neat to see that expansion of what they were thinking about and interested in."

A Full K-12 Solution: How Xello is Used By Every Age Group in Forest Hills School District

McKenzie has students in Grades 3-5 log their interests and achievements in Xello. "I want to get them thinking about, 'What am I good at?', 'What do I like to do?'

Xello lends itself beautifully to goal setting and expanding their hobbies. They can start expanding their experiences which will help them craft a better story of themselves as they grow up."

In 6th grade, students explore the Matchmaker feature and assess whether certain careers suit their personality or learning style.

"I like that there are similar careers listed at the bottom of every career page. Eighty-five percent of boys want to be professional athletes so I ask them to look at what else they can do that involves sports or movement. They can learn everything else that's out there," says McKenzie.

The Forest Hills middle school is a Tier 2 school. In addition to regular classroom sessions with Xello, counselors conduct small group sessions a few times a week with students who are at risk of falling through the cracks.

"Maybe 15 percent of kids have no drive or motivation. We're using Xello as a driving force to find out what is so 'meh' about their lives right now… It's a great way for these kids to come to the forefront of the counselors' minds. We don't want anyone to fly under the radar."

In high school, students start to play around with the transcript and class scheduling that Xello offers. Counselors can use the interests they've logged to make sure they're taking classes that make sense for each individual. It's driving some discussions about class choice and future choices, including jobs, type of post-secondary pathway and college majors.

"It helps too with kids who don't know what they want to be when they grow up. We can say, 'Let's look at your Xello profile and see what popped up for you. Then we can see if we can research anything that interests you.'"

Best Practices For Other Districts: Getting Teachers & Parents Involved

When implementing Xello, McKenzie didn't want it to be one more thing for teachers to

have to do.

"I wanted them to see it as a great way to check off social emotional learning, as a station they can put things in and something they don't have to plan. It's kid-driven and they appreciate that."

To make the transition to using Xello easy, she created five-minute screencast videos for teachers to play for their kids—one for each grade group from 3-6 (2nd graders didn't need them because Xello provides an introductory video). Each of McKenzie's videos walk students and teachers through the login process and explain the learning expectations.

Another key area for McKenzie was ensuring parents were involved to foster a strong home-school connection.

"We made sure to send a letter home with every kid describing Xello. We shared that this program is one of the ways we can build strong resiliency skills," she says.

And one of the most important ways to ensure teachers are enthusiastic about using Xello is to allow them time to spend in Xello before they're asked to teach using the program.

"We just need 30 minutes for teachers to play around with it to help make it a teacher-driven program and not necessarily a counselor-driven program because we want this to live in classrooms," says McKenzie.

She's looking to create time during the professional development days, that happen at the beginning of every school year, to allow teachers to review Xello and explore the lessons that are available.

"With that knowledge, they'll be able to implement them easily and more proactively throughout the school year."

Xello is an Important Resource During This Uncertain Time

McKenzie says that Xello has helped the district maintain continuity while teachers and students are out of the classroom for an undetermined amount of time.

"It's one of the programs that we are continuing to use. It's simple to use and the kids already know how, so there's no training barrier, or onboarding process required. We don't even have to give anyone passwords to log in; they know it all."

> *Xello has been really helpful with keeping our ASCA work going, even from home. It's great to use during this time of remote learning.*

In the early weeks of the "at home learning" process, McKenzie says she's seen a surprising number of kids logging in. "I saw that 21 kids logged on to Career Town from home on their first day off. They clearly love it and think it's fun. It's such a reassuring tool

to have during this time."

No matter what the future holds, Forest Hills will be using Xello to help their students become future ready.

ABOUT HEATHER

Heather Hudson is a Toronto-based freelance writer and journalist. She specializes in content marketing, corporate storytelling and good old-fashioned journalism. You can read some of her work in The Toronto Star and learn more about her at heatherhudson.ca.