

[Home](#) > [Local News](#) > [Shenandoah County](#)

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Faith Gansor, a seventh grade student at Frederick County Middle, prods a pig's heart at Valley Health's respiratory therapy booth at the Worlds of Work Career Expo in Winchester. Rachel Mahoney/Daily

WINCHESTER – Rather than just sitting and listening to a career day representative ramble on about a typical day at work, seventh graders from across the region were able to really sink their hands into activities fostered by local businesses at the first-ever Worlds of Work Career Expo.

Lord Fairfax Community College Career Pathways Consortium managed the event at the Body Renew Fitness & Family Sports Center on Tuesday and today in collaboration with almost 100 other partners.

Seventh grade classes from Clarke, Frederick, Page, Rappahannock, Shenandoah, Warren counties and Winchester filled out an expo passport that showed they had explored exhibitors specializing in various fields. The center was divided into eight sections focusing on job opportunities within each “world of work.”

Each student received a backpack from the expo to hold all sorts of goodies from more than 50 booths and had a chance not only to pick up pamphlets and talk with representatives, but also get a little taste of on-the-job activities.

Sadie Kerns, a student at Frederick County Middle School, said she walked into the fair thinking she would be interested in the medical portion of the expo. But after some down-and-dirty hands on time in that world of work – including a close encounter with a pig's heart – she said she was having second thoughts. Luckily, she was able to explore plenty of other booths with engaging activities that didn't involve animal guts.

“I was expecting it to be like, people just talking and lecturing, but then when we came here it's hands-on and it's really cool,” she said.

Parents and families could refer to the fields explored as part of the expo in a pamphlet, which also referenced the education and training needed for certain positions as well as salary expectations.

Coordinator Katie Rice, Shenandoah County Public Schools' supervisor of career and technical education, said the idea came about more than two years ago after Winchester coordinator Todd Lynn observed a similar event in Mobile, Alabama, and wanted to emulate that level of direct student involvement in a job fair.

“The piece that was very different to us is that the students were doing instead of having somebody talk at them,” she said. “They were actually getting their hands dirty, and we all know that we internalize things better by doing something.”

Rice said the expo will help to paint a clearer picture of the jobs in students' minds and facilitate productive conversations with a better understanding of what the careers require and offer.

With the continued participation and cooperation of area schools and businesses, the Worlds of Work Career Expo will continue as an annual event that helps guide and motivate students toward a career-minded future early on in their education.

"All of our seventh grade students, according to the Department of Education, have to create a six-year academic and career plan," she said. "So it's helping them learn about themselves, set goals ... even though it's not about setting their career path in concrete, but helping them to do the process of self-discovery and make better informed decisions."

Contact staff writer Rachel Mahoney at 540-465-5137 ext. 164, or rmahoney@nvdaily.com

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