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Why One Innovative Gifted & Talented Teacher is Using Reality TV to Teach Kids Finance

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Talking Points

Innovative teacher uses the spark of reality TV to teach money to 4th-graders

“Project Runway,” “Shark Tank,” “Top Chef” full of economics lessons for engaged students

Earlier this year, the Council for Economic Education released the latest results of its bi-annual [state-by-state survey](#) of how well American schools are teaching economics and personal finance. The bottom line was not good. The U.S. continues to lag behind many developed nations in financial literacy, ranking 14th behind Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany, and others. Even more troubling: The council’s 2016 [Survey of the States](#) reveals little to no growth in K-12 personal finance or economic education. Only 20 states require high school students to take a course in economics — less than half the country, and two fewer than in 2014. Only five states require a standalone semester course in personal finance.

Teaching these subjects is a worthwhile investment. Research shows that students from states with required financial education courses have higher credit scores and lower delinquency rates as young adults, CEE says. The 74 profiles one Arkansas teacher who is making financial literacy lessons come alive:

“This destination can be found on one of the largest continents, is located south of the tropic of Capricorn, has 11 official languages and is known as the rainbow nation,” reads the clue.

Stumped? Research ensues, an answer is produced: South Africa. Destination located on the map, coordinates determined, and the team is off to South Africa, where they learn about the currency, the death rates, the birth rates, the culture. Knowledge accomplished.

Off to the next place. But wait! A detour: One team member must perform 50 jumping jacks. Challenge completed, a new clue is given, a new exotic location to visit... if they can figure out the clue in time: "This destination..."

For the 24 students in Shelina Warren's two fourth-grade classes at Scoggins-May-Hall Gifted & Talented Center in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, this is just another class period that looks and feels like "The Amazing Race." Next week, they might find themselves competing on "Project Runway." The week after, "Shark Tank" or "Top Chef."

Money, economics and personal finance are a mystery to many adults but 13-year classroom veteran Warren hit on the reality TV show model as the perfect platform to teach her 9- and 10-year-old these topics.

"I was listening to my students," Warren told The 74, "and I would hear them talking about different shows. I heard them talking about "Project Runway" and some of the dresses, and we've talked about "Shark Tank" in class. So I tried to use their interests and cater to their interests."

Her innovative approach to an intimidating subject won her the John Morton Excellence in the Teaching of Economics award in October 2015. The honor is one of the Visionary Awards given out annually by the [Council for Economic Education](#), the leading organization in the U.S. dedicated to providing economic and financial education to K-12 students.

As the world gets more complex and technological, the council sees a troubling trend of financial illiteracy. The knowledge gap about matters of money and personal finance is worsened by race and income and is particularly prevalent among younger people. It cites a Wells Fargo's 2014 Millennial Study that found 56 percent of U.S. adults ages 22 to 33 are "living paycheck to paycheck" and 40 percent say their debt is "overwhelming"

"We know that financial education has a profound impact on our kids," CEO and CEE President Nan J. Morrison said in a statement. "In order to close the opportunity gap, we need to teach economics and personal finance in schools and equip our teachers with the tools they need to help students develop these essential real-world skills."

That's where Warren, a ninth-grade physics and economics teacher for 10 years, comes in.

"When students hear they will be focusing on economics, they automatically get frustrated and feel like they will be a failure," Warren wrote in her curriculum proposal. Instead of finding themselves stressed over fractions, for example, she aims to get them so busy having fun while cooking for a "Top Chef" curriculum, or measuring fabric for "Project Runway," that they don't realize they are mastering previously confusing concepts.

She might use "The Amazing Race" to teach students about currency in other nations and exchange rates, along with international economics and cultural history so they understand the context for what they are learning.

For "Shark Tank," it's investing. Students make product prototypes, and "pitch" marketing plan to potential backers.

During the "Project Runway" piece, her fourth-graders learn opportunity cost and capital. They design and create an outfit for a certain event (think graduation, job interview etc.), using measurements and patterns and then create a description choosing appropriate adjectives for their narration when their "model" walks the runway.

“Top Chef” utilizes math as the students measure and mix ingredients to bake treats like cookies — that they then get to enjoy.

Each unit, regardless of which reality show it’s modeled after, is accompanied by a pre- and post-tests to measure learning and knowledge. Students are also required to submit evaluations where they give suggestions on how the units can be tweaked to improve future outcomes.

Warren regularly presents at conferences and sessions where she encourages other teachers to implement similar curriculums in their classrooms, but only if it’s right for their students. (The Council for Economic Education says it reaches some 55,000 teachers each year with in-person instruction, who, in turn, teach some 5 million students in all 50 states.)

“I think that responding to students’ needs is the only way to go,” Warren said. “Students are all different and they have different interests and personalities. Having that one-size-fits-all curriculum will not suffice for our students today because they are so inquisitive. You have to be specific when it comes to finding what they are interested in so you can move forward in their learning. You’re setting the stage for future growth.”