

On September 28, 2011, Maryland ASCD had the great pleasure of hosting Michelle Shearer, 2011 National Teacher of the Year, to speak to Maryland ASCD members during the Fall Dinner at Snyder's Willow Grove Restaurant in Linthicum, Maryland. Ms. Shearer shared her poignant journey as an educator, spanning the past 15 years, highlighting pivotal moments in her career that has shaped her vision and teaching philosophy over the years. In addition, Ms. Shearer addressed the type of skills students will need to succeed in the 21st century.

When approached to describe her success as a classroom teacher, Ms. Shearer is often asked the question, "What is your secret?" By displaying a collection of photographs from her AP chemistry classes at Urbana High School in Frederick, Maryland, the secret to Ms. Shearer's success is clearly revealed. Pictures show students actively collaborating with others, executing a variety of hands-on chemical experiments, and engaging in active learning processes. Not only do students look like chemists, wearing protective goggles and handling chemistry apparatus, but it's obvious students feel and act like chemists too. The photographs alone expose a compelling truth: the secret to successful teaching means empowering and engaging students in the learning process. Ultimately, unlocking the unlimited potential in every student, helping them to become independent learners and thinkers, regardless of obstacles that may stand in their way.

In Ms. Shearer's chemistry classes, she strives to make chemistry relevant to students' lives. Lined up, atop of cabinets inside her classroom, students can find an array of commercial products ranging from hand soap, laundry detergent, and household cleaners. These examples are simple reminders to students that chemistry is a part of their daily lives. Furthermore, Ms. Shearer encourages chemical experiments that students are interested in and want to perform most. This includes explosive experiments, which fascinate many students. During one demonstration in her class, Ms. Shearer used hydrogen gas to re-create the effects of the catastrophic Hindenburg disaster, but on a much smaller scale. Students were able to observe and grasp the magnitude of how chemical disasters can change the world. Essentially, the successful educator makes learning relevant, dynamic, and meaningful.

As National Teacher of the Year, Ms. Shearer has had numerous opportunities to meet teachers from all over the world. Traveling overseas, Ms. Shearer encountered educators who shared the same sentiments and intentions as American educators. In particular, during her recent visit to China, Ms. Shearer explained how China's educational leaders desire to raise a generation of innovators. Instead of bearing the ubiquitous label of being "Made in China," China aspires to be known for things that are "Created in China." Ms. Shearer expressed how China looks toward the U.S. as a model for helping students learn in a more collaborative, cooperative, and interactive manner.

As far as 21st century skills are concerned, there are crucial skills that all students must become proficient in. Ms. Shearer emphasized the importance of teaching content that require students to become adept in the 4 C's: critical thinking, creative problem solving, collaboration, and communication. All students must be given ample opportunities to practice these skills on a daily basis in order to keep up with the growing demands of the 21st century.

Without exception, Ms. Shearer is an inspiring role model for all educators. After 15 years in the teaching profession, Ms. Shearer embodies a zeal and passion for teaching, reminiscent of a first year teacher; ready to make a difference, one student at a time. Above all, she upholds a level of academic rigor and excellence in her classroom, benefiting and challenging all students who cross her path. Ms. Shearer acknowledged the importance in remembering that each student, placed in the care of any educator, deserves to be taught the way we would teach our own children. In other words, we must not only believe that all students can learn, but prepare ourselves to deliver enriching learning experiences to students daily, fostering curiosity, and equipping students with skills that will enable them to carve their own unique path in life.