It’s never too early to start thinking careers—and the kindergarten students at Herndon Elementary, in Herndon, Va., are a great example of how to educate our youngest students about careers. After reading “Walter the Baker,” by Eric Carle, the students answered the question, “How can we, as kindergarten entrepreneurs, create a working bakery inspired by our author study of Eric Carle?”

This was our driving question as we embarked upon project-based learning in our Herndon Elementary School Spanish immersion kindergarten class. Project-based learning is an in-depth investigation designed to give students the opportunity to use critical-thinking skills to solve real-world problems in an engaging and meaningful way. With a goal of fostering early career awareness in students, kindergartners researched bakeries and safe food-handling skills, created a menu based on the work of Eric Carle, set bakery item prices and selected a business name—The Sweet Treat Bakery.

Students decided how to advertise and determined who their customers would be. They then chose appropriate jobs (manager, dishwashers, servers, bankers and host) and determined the job description for each. Students interviewed for their desired position, and although some were disappointed not to get their preferred job, all of them got a real-life experience in the process. Everyone helped make the baked goods, and students offered a wide variety of items to meet a wide range of dietary needs.

And, of course, a working bakery needs customers, a role filled by parents, grandparents, teachers, administrators, school staff and students who all visited The Sweet Treat Bakery.

Research has shown students feel more engaged in school when they are able to see the connection between their studies and real-world applications. A key component of project-based learning is that it’s focused on finding answers to questions about a topic posed either by the children, the teacher or the teachers working with the children. The goal of project-based learning is to learn more about the topic rather than to seek right answers to questions the teacher asks. With that in mind, the project’s purpose was to foster thinking about how jobs and shared work contribute to interdependence and interconnectedness and to instill curiosity about the jobs people do each day. The kindergarten students planned and carried out every part of the project, with some assistance from the teacher.

The Sweet Treat Bakery not only helped the kindergarten students with early job and career awareness but it was also an opportunity to practice social skills and manners as well as self-discipline as they experienced the satisfaction of a job well done.

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