

Dorothy Rice wants to “keep it real” with her students.

As a College and Career Readiness teacher, Rice helps her students prepare for life after West Lowndes High School. To build that foundation, Rice teaches a one-semester course that examines multiple paths – from junior or senior college, to a trade or technical school, to the military or going right into the work force – and provides lessons and instruction so students are best prepared for whatever step they take.

“We try to make it as real as possible for them because although we are here in school, school is a really protected environment, and when you leave high school, you will see a lot of things that are different,” Rice said. “We want students to be as prepared as possible because we don’t want them to experience a huge shock. We want to familiarize you with how the real world works.”

The Mississippi Department of Education started piloting the College and Career Readiness (CCR) course in 2017-2018. The curriculum was approved in 2020. MDE recently revised the course with updates for 2023. The course became a graduation requirement for the Class of 2022.

The Lowndes County School District first offered the CCR course in the 2018-2019 school year. Rice joins Marcus Baldwin, Colleen Galvin and Logan Suggs at Caledonia High and Kali Harris and Juliana Miller at New Hope High in educating students about finding their best path and teaching the skills they need to get there.

The CCR teachers work with the Career Coaches at each school – Randy Conley at West Lowndes High, Knollie Edge at New Hope High and Carmen Machen at Caledonia High – as well as school counselors and other faculty members to pull everything together and expose students to as much as possible.

“I want this to be a great starting point for them to continue to build on and pursue the future they desire,” said Rice, who is in her fourth year teaching CCR. She also teaches Family and Consumer Science classes, ACT Prep and Contemporary Health.

Rice said CCR teachers use multiple virtual resources, like Get to College, Big Futures and Near Pod, an educational application. She said students also do college and career interest assessments to identify areas of interest.

Rice said most of her work is done in the classroom, while Conley will take students on field trips or invite speakers to the school. She said classwork involves preparation for college (transcripts, applications), job interviews, financial literacy (what it takes to buy a car, how to buy homes, what it takes to rent, credit scores) as well as job skills (resumes, reference letters, letters of recommendation), time management and work-life balance.

Galvin, who is from Chicago, taught CCR for one year at a previous school and for one year at Caledonia High. She said she didn’t have the program when she was in school and that she “can’t imagine not having that chance to explore things.”

“I know it is impacting them positively because I have had former students come back this year and tell me they got a job because of the resume we wrote,” Galvin said. “We have seen first-hand it is already impacting their part-time jobs, so I hope that continues for their careers.”

Suggs also didn’t have the class when he was a student at Caledonia High. He said it is “eye-opening” to introduce the lessons to his students because he said many don’t know the life skills they will need after graduation.

“I never had a lot of focus on college applications, admissions and scholarship opportunities, outside of the basic information counselors put out for everybody,” Suggs said. “We spend the whole unit learning how to fill out a college application, how to search and navigate a college website, how to email the people they need to contact in admissions. By the time the juniors get ready to do that their senior year, they at least have an idea how to do it, or they know how to get in contact with somebody if they change their mind.”

Miller is in her fourth year at New Hope High and her third year as a CCR teacher. She works closely with Harris and said all of their students apply to colleges so it remains an option in case plans change. After the college work, Miller said she and Harris move on to preparing students for careers.

Harris, who is in her 18th year at New Hope High, said she and Miller invite guest speakers from the community to give students a broader perspective. She said those encounters help ensure students will be employed, enrolled or enlisted when they leave the class.

“The community really wants to pour into these kids and help them get where they want to be,” Harris said.

Said Miller, “It’s stuff they’re going to use and you know you’re making a difference. I see my students out working in the community and there is such a sense of pride, and they will come to you and thank you or ask for help. I like that because I am connecting with them on a different level.”

Rice builds that connection with her students by stressing the importance of being on time and showing how it relates to life after high school. She said the class allows her to dig deeper on so many topics, like buying a car, saving money, purchasing insurance or establishing credit, so her students are prepared to keep it real, too.

“It is a rude awakening for a lot of them,” Rice said. “I try to make it real for them and relevant.”