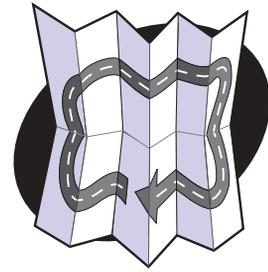


# Combine event prep with leadership training for a winning combination



In the last issue, we introduced you to two advisors who work in a large chapter in a large school with multiple advisors in the chapter. This month, we are introducing you to a single advisor who operates a DECA chapter in a school whose population in grades 7 through 12 is only 500. In most years, however, the DECA chapter numbers around 100 members, one of the largest chapters in the state.

Meet **Laura Benincasa**, DECA advisor in her fourth year of teaching at **Manchester-Essex Regional H.S.** in **Massachusetts**. Laura was mentioned to us as an advisor who had devised an imaginative **mock competition** combining event competition with leadership training. Here is what we learned in a recent interview.

Laura says she was frustrated during her first three years of teaching when seniors come back from district competition saying, “Oh, now I get it.” Because it was their last chance at competition, there was no opportunity to make a second try. “This blows their self-esteem, then I lose them for the rest of the year.” So she pondered a way to give a more realistic competition initiation before the district qualifier.

Her motivation? “I was trying to decide what would eliminate the pressure. I felt the kids weren’t prepared well, since they only had me to go to.” She had thought about this idea for a few years, but finally made it happen. “I like the mock competition because it is a no-stakes situation.” This year the seniors reported back after district competition that the night of mock competition really helped.

So how does it work? Laura added a masterful touch to the idea of a chapter event practice. She took her chapter officers to the North Atlantic Regional Leadership Conference with an assignment: they were each to bring back an idea for a workshop they could develop and run on the night of the competition. This gave the students positive activities to do during the time they were not competing. Officers developed the workshops and then peer edited them among the group of officers. She also connected them to the experiential education specialist at the school who worked to polish their ideas. Officers had to consider safety issues throughout their workshop development and the actual activity/presentation. Then each officer worked with a group to get the workshop in order.

For the night of the competition, Laura asked the computer teacher to come in. That teacher worked on formatting and constructing charts and graphs with the members who were doing written events. By the way, attendance at the mock competition was mandatory for everyone in the program.

Each student was given a “huge” packet of materials explaining what was happening and where everyone should be. The evening event was three hours long. Members competed for 20 to 30 minutes. When they were not competing, they were attending one of the four workshops—each workshop ran five times. Workshops were offered on leadership, teamwork and communication skills.

Parent volunteers were a big part of the event. Laura notes that this event also shows parents what competition is like and enlists their support. A parent volunteer was posted at each workshop site to make sure things went smoothly and safely. To give parents a better idea of the whole setup, they rotated through each of the workshop sessions.

Although Laura ran this project by herself, as you can see, she had a lot of help from both the school and the community. She sees the mock competition event as one way to build support for her program.

At the competition itself, the object was to give appropriate feedback to the students that would help them improve without discouraging them. To make that happen, Laura gave judges a list of items they might choose to comment on. They were instructed to start with the positive points first and then move on to suggestions.

This year, Laura was working so hard getting the event to happen that she forgot to think about prizes. (Only one student was acknowledged as the winner of each event.) When students asked what they were going to receive, she extemporized that their chapter t-shirts would be free. Next year, she will probably have certificates on hand for the winners.

In the supportive atmosphere of this ambitious mock event, every DECA member was a winner, and the DECA chapter was operating across the full range of DECA activities. Congratulations, Laura, on a truly commendable activity.