



How Tennessee's Alcoa City Schools Uses Technology to Transcend the Classroom Walls

Video collaboration technology is opening the door to an endless array of learning opportunities. Students can now explore museums, science and cultural centers, and art galleries around the globe.

One elementary school in the Alcoa City Schools (Alcoa) system worked with ENA to purchase and implement Video Collaboration Powered by Zoom (VCPZ), the preeminent collaborative learning video tool in the market today. Teachers and students are now leveraging the tool to create versatile, interactive, and impactful learning opportunities.

Alcoa's Director of Career and Technical Education Patty Thomas shared some of the creative ways teachers are enhancing their curriculum through video collaboration.

Q&A With Patty Thomas

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What drew you to the idea of virtual field trips?

“We want to provide more career exploration opportunities to our students at an earlier age, before middle and high school. We think it’s critically important for students to get real world exposure to different professions and hear firsthand about the career possibilities available to them. We’re not simply taking field trips—we’re empowering our students with learning experiences that will influence the next stages of their lives. It’s not feasible financially or logistically to take our students on the types of field trips we embark on virtually. VCPZ is the next best thing.”



Why did you decide to work with ENA to bring VCPZ into your schools?

“We looked at larger, more expensive video conferencing systems, but we couldn’t find anything that matched what we needed in terms of features and cost. ENA’s offering met our needs. It’s a secure platform, and it’s simple to use and has a low learning curve! Teachers can schedule events and do things on their own with minimal training.”

How have the students reacted to these virtual learning experiences?

“They love it. No matter the grade, the students exude a vibrancy when engaging with these experts, whether it’s a candy maker, a zoologist, or an apple farmer. To enhance the learning experience, we often have students write thank you notes to our field trip ‘tour guides.’ While this practice develops our students’ writing skills and teaches good manners, it also demonstrates retention. I often read through these notes myself and am amazed at how much they comprehended and retained from our trips. The whole experience aligns with our units and standards quite well.”

What would you say to teachers who feel like they don’t have time for these experiences?

“The thing that makes VCPZ great is ease of use. Honestly, just give VCPZ an opportunity. Experience it at least once—and then you’ll be hooked.”

“Also, while pre-taped video is a useful tool, many students get antsy or distracted after about 15 minutes. A live person on the screen, often combined with tactile accessories in the classroom for use during the virtual trip, keeps them locked in, engaged, and learning.”

How important is it to have robust infrastructure to support this technology?

“Certainly, it’s important, but so far, we haven’t encountered any real connectivity issues. ENA’s service and VCPZ have been foolproof.”

Lastly, what are some other ways you’re using VCPZ?

“We use it for department meetings. Our CTE staff is spread out and often cannot always be in the same place at the same time. VCPZ is an easy way to connect six school district CTE directors. Again, the user-friendly nature of this tool makes it simple for us to get together.

“We are also considering purchasing some GoPro cameras to use with engineers or manufacturing professionals to take our students on live learning expeditions. In many manufacturing environments, you must be at least 18 years old to take a tour, but with VCPZ we can give our students an inside look at these work places.”

Oh, the Places Alcoa Went!

Alcoa’s students have been busy traversing the country. From visiting farms and zoos to taking a tour of the Mayflower, the district is leveraging video technology and virtual field trips to expand the scope of interactive learning. Check out some of their adventures below!

Harvesting Apples and Knowledge

Alcoa’s students had the opportunity to hear from a Connecticut apple expert and learn firsthand how a proper apple orchard is cultivated, harvested, and maintained. The apple expert used his iPad to take them on a digital golf cart tour of his orchard and visit with his animals.

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Classroom Settlers

Students experienced an immersive lesson on the Pilgrims and their journey to America with a VCPZ field trip to Plymouth, Massachusetts. They even took a virtual stroll on the deck of the Mayflower!

Sleepy in St. Louis

Students got up close and personal with some wild and exotic animals at the St. Louis Zoo. They had the opportunity to speak with zoologists about how the St. Louis staff prepares the animals for hibernation.

Candyland

To coincide with their reading of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, Alcoa's students traveled virtually to a candy kitchen and a real-life chocolate factory.

At the Old Mill Candy Kitchen, the "chef" walked them through the process of making candies using 100-year old machinery. The Old Mill staff even sent taffy samples to the students before the event so that the students could sample the candy throughout the tour.

They also toured the French Broad Chocolate Factory in Asheville, North Carolina. The students explored the process of making chocolate from cacao bean to chocolate bar. The factory also sent samples along with cacao beans and cacao nibs for the students to enjoy a tactile (and tasty!) experience.

Where Will You Take Your Students?

Virtual field trips and video collaboration technologies offer today's students access to the vast global landscape. As Patty Thomas notes above, these experiences are more than just field trips—they are life-changing events that can open a student's eyes to a wide spectrum of opportunities!



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Video Collaboration Powered by zoom

If you are interested in learning more about ENA's Video Collaboration Powered by Zoom, contact Chad Arnold at carnold@ena.com.



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