

## E CITY inspires young entrepreneurs



**A**s an entrepreneur, John Zitzner knows how a great idea can pay off. In 1983, he started a software company in Cleveland and grew it into a successful business. But he always felt an urge to share his secrets to success. "I always thought that if I didn't have the software company, I could teach urban teens," he says.

As he focused on his company, he ran into Steve Mariotti, founder of the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE), a nonprofit group that teaches entrepreneurship to urban teens in 18 countries. The idea of doing the same thing contin-

ued to fester in Zitzner's mind.

In 1988, Zitzner sold his company and decided to follow his impulses to start an entrepreneur program for inner-city teens in Cleveland. He talked to Mariotti and began the process of starting E CITY — Entrepreneurship: Connecting, Inspiring and Teaching Youth — in January 2002. "We had no money, no program, no kids, no staff," Zitzner recalls.

Four years later, Zitzner has raised close to \$2 million in private grants and teaches entrepreneurship skills to teens in the Cleveland Municipal School District. "Many of these kids spent their whole life with seeing little hope," says Zitzner. E CITY students participate in a 70-hour after school program that teaches business skills, opportunity recognition and leadership. Students are given \$50 in seed money to start a business. They are coached on how to put their ideas into a business plan, and ultimately, participate in a business plan com-

petition. E CITY's work has had rippling effects. Of the 476 students who have participated, 403 have developed business plans. Students showed nearly a 48 percent improvement on a business knowledge test after the program. Participants also showed an 88.6 percent school attendance rate, with 84.7 percent graduating and preparing business plans.

Many students have gone on to create successful businesses, such as pet care, gift basket sales, athletic training and lawn care. Two E CITY students received national recognition through NFTE's annual Young Entrepreneur of the Year awards.

Zitzner is taking the entrepreneurial model to a new level in 2006, with the opening of a Cleveland charter school focused on entrepreneurship. As a result, 125 sixth-graders will be selected to attend the school, which will meet five and a half days a week year-round.

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