

Focus On

Entrepreneurship Academy grows out of after-school program

by Elissa Sonnenberg

Two years after launching E CITY, an after-school program that teaches Cleveland students entrepreneurial skills, John Zitzner, in true entrepreneurial fashion, now wants to launch another start-up.

This time, Zitzner, who founded Entrepreneurship Connecting Inspiring & Teaching Youth, wants to open Entrepreneurship Academy in 2006. A charter school for 7th - 12th-graders, it would teach reading, math, Microsoft proficiency and business planning, all under the banner of "entrepreneurial thinking" skills.

A successful entrepreneur who opened Bradley Company software firm and eventually sold it to Xerox Corp., Zitzner believes teaching kids how to start and build their own businesses can be a path out of poverty. Eighty percent of Cleveland Municipal School District students are low-income based on federal guidelines. What's more, he sees entrepreneurial education as a way of building students' confidence, improving academic achievement and boosting their chances of graduating. Only 40 percent of highschool students graduated in 2004.

Moreover, Zitzner hopes his school will stir students' interests in going on to college and obtaining a degree or two.

Says Zitzner, "The desire to create this organization came to me because of my personal success in starting, managing and then selling a business, my desire to teach others that they could do what I had done, my awareness of the abysmal high school dropout statistics in the city of Cleveland, and the related painful awareness that students who do not complete high school rarely ever rise out of poverty."

Founder of E CITY envisions a district-sponsored charter that trains future business owners. "We want to do it fast. We want to hit a home run and figure out a way to replicate it in other schools."

At first, Zitzner had hoped to open the school as one of over a dozen small schools being launched in some district high schools as initiatives of the KnowledgeWorks Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. However, Zitzner says he's opting instead to pursue a community school, or charter, which would be sponsored by the district. The district has the authority to grant charters. So far, district-sponsored charters have met with little success; its only venture, a military academy, closed a few years ago after only two months.

When Zitzner entered the world of education to launch E CITY, he armed himself with a solid business plan and the proven track record of the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE) curriculum, and the same kind of entrepreneurial enthusiasm that helped his software business succeed. "He did a thorough job and identified the right program," says Steve Minter, past executive director of The Cleveland Foundation, the first foundation to provide financial backing for E City. "He's quite dynamic and charismatic on his own. That appealed to the students he was working with."

Zitzner plans to do the same and more to lay the groundwork for the school's success. He has sought funding from area foundations, including the Civic Innovation Laboratory, for planning and research. It will include visits to top urban charter schools across the country, including Entrepreneurship High School in Cincinnati. (See story, page 14.)

"It takes more than just the Cleveland Municipal School District to pull this off," says Zitzner who noted that the district has offered key people to assist him. "We'll learn all about what it took to get started."

His vision is a school that starts with up to 150 students and is centered on strong and practical academics anchored in the teaching of entrepreneurial thinking skills, analysis, ingenuity and teamwork. Also important is a culture that acknowledges and responds to the difficulty of life for many urban children. (See glance box, page 13.)

"We want to do it fast. We want to hit a home run and figure out a way to replicate it in other schools," says Zitzner. "Then take your Shaw High School and East High School and let them see how to do it."

AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAM PLANTED SEED

In 2000, a chance encounter with the founder of NFTE inspired Zitzner to create E CITY. It launched with a simple mission: improve students' academic, business, technology and life skills so that they can break the cycle of poverty in their communities. The program can span up to 13 weeks during the school year or be completed in an intensive two-week course during the summer.

"Our main goal isn't that every kid will go into business," Zitzner explains. "The core thing we are looking for is increased interest in school and in college and increased self-confidence." The prospect of independence, along with financial security, can give some students a new perspective on traditional school subjects, Zitzner explains.

Getting high school students interested in staying after school to study math and English is tough. And motivating students who often face overwhelming problems at home can be even tougher, so Zitzner employs a back-door approach. "How many of you want to be your own boss one day?" he asks potential participants. "We're going to teach you how to create jobs."

So far, with one part-time and four full-time staff members, the 70-hour program has served more than 350 students. It has tapped into the resources of more than 300 volunteers from businesses including Mellon, Key Bank, E&Y, Skoda, Minotti & Co., and many local banks. Professionals from landscapers to stockbrokers return to session after session to give students real-world insights.

Early on, E CITY generated student enthusiasm and other visible successes.

One success story is Crystal Ramos, an 11th-grader at SuccessTech, a district small school. Ramos used E CITY training to build a flower-arranging business, a hobby she had pursued since girlhood when she did arrangements for church and special occasions.

Ramos says E CITY taught her how to turn a profit by conducting market research and analysis, buying wholesale and coming up with a business plan.

continued on page 19

Ingredients for an Entrepreneurship Academy

Entrepreneurial education seeks to build on the "strong character traits" that urban kids have in common with successful entrepreneurs such as "mental toughness, survival instinct, persistence, creativity in finding solutions and selling a point of view," says John Zitzner, founder of the E CITY after-school program. Here are the elements that Zitzner plans to use to make an entrepreneurship charter school a success:

CURRICULUM

- Licensed by the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE), it focuses on analytical, research and innovative thinking skills
- Before and after school math, reading tutoring programs
- Instruction, and in some cases, certification in the latest information technology (all Microsoft products)
- Arts and physical education

PERSONNEL

- An on-site chief operating officer who runs the school with a focus on leadership, teamwork and organization
- Instructs NFTE-trained and certified as entrepreneurship teachers
- Trained facilitators
- Community volunteers

CULTURE

- A daily small-group "debriefing" in which students and trained facilitators talk about "what is on their minds" i.e., incidents or issues at home that may hamper their ability to focus on learning
- Family-style lunch with teachers
- Dress code
- Classical music played between classes

STRUCTURE

- An extended school day with program offerings that can keep kids busy during times when they tend to get in trouble
- An 11-month school year with a brief summer vacation

ENROLLMENT

- Begin with 100 to 150 applicants
- Begin with 7th-grade and add one grade each year through 12th



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ECITY

E CITY business plan coach, David Williams, helps SuccessTech Academy students, Todd Brunson & Darnell Cephus, develop their idea for a business (top). Jasmine Coad and George Granville III, Whitney Young students, prepare their business plans (middle). Glenville High School students celebrate with community members who served as judges for E CITY's Business Plan Competition (bottom).

BUILDING MORE TRUST

continued from Page 11

"Teachers were training to help the students, but we were learning it ourselves and practicing it between colleagues."

SOLVE THE FUNDING CRISIS

This year, teachers say, Cleveland's funding crisis is undermining trust with layoffs and a lack of supplies.

"Teachers get a lot of stuff told to them: 'You've got to do this. You've got to do that,' and then they don't have a lot of support," says Wiece. "I know that there are a lot of teachers that don't have the books and materials they need."

Wiece acknowledges that supplies are still plentiful at Louisa May Alcott, but says her school's good fortune is in spite of, not due to, official funding. "We write grants," she explains.

Layoffs have meant increased class sizes and the transferring of staff from school to school—well into the school year and after teachers and teams already had been established. "Not only is it bad for morale, but for teaching," says Deborah Callahan, special education teacher at A.G. Bell.

"We're pretty much in relationships with other teachers, and we're working so nicely together—and all of a sudden—we're transferred. We have to learn a new subject or a new grade level," Callahan explains. Of the new teams formed by transfers, she says, "I won't say we don't trust each other, but it has definitely hurt." (See *Catalyst*, Dec/Jan. 2005.)

Adequate funding from the state would solve these problems, the teachers say. Callahan reflects the views of many teachers when she says, "Ohio needs to look at how they fund schools. I mean I think that any of us that defied the Ohio Supreme Court [three] times would be in jail. But for some reason, the state of Ohio just seems to be anti-education. I don't understand that." ■

CLEVELAND CLINIC DONATES

continued from Page 17

year, Rokakis admits. But a program like the one in Boston, where 40 nonprofits pay a total of about \$12 million a year, could knock as much as three mills off of a school operating levy here, he contends.

Voters rejected the district's attempt to pass an 11.5 mill, \$68 million levy in November; it is unclear when another levy will be placed on the ballot.

According to Rokakis, PILOTs can help participating nonprofits avoid costly legal challenges to their tax-exempt status.

The clinic's status, for example, is under fire in two suburbs. In September, an examiner for the Ohio Department of Taxation recommended against tax-exempt status for a clinic site in Beachwood; in October the Ohio Supreme Court ruled that the system could not be granted an exemption for medical offices in Strongsville. Both cases are likely to see long appeals processes.

The tax-exempt status of large hospital systems has become a lightning rod for legal challenges nationally, says James Unland, editor of the quarterly *Journal of Health Care Finance*. At the heart of many such challenges, generally brought by city, county or state governments, are issues like high executive salaries and the amount of charity care provided by hospitals in comparison to revenue, he says.

While nonprofits have no legal obligation to sign a PILOT agreement, Rokakis' proposal would have been legally binding once signed.

Rokakis says support for his plan from school district and city officials has been weak and that he is considering how to proceed with the initiative.

The clinic's gift should not get in the way of pursuing PILOT agreements with the Clinic or any other non-profit, says Alan Seifullah, chief spokesman for Cleveland schools. He says he expects conversations on the idea between the district and Rokakis to continue.

Rokakis isn't sure. "It is becoming clear to me that attempting to initiate a program like this without the full cooperation of the school superintendent and the mayor," he says, "could be nothing more than a waste of time on my part." ■

ENTREPRENEURSHIP ACADEMY

continued from Page 13

By the time she completed the program, she received an order from a Shaker Heights businessman for 12 arrangements.

Her efforts were recognized by the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship when her business plan won her the Young Entrepreneur of the Year competition—a \$1,500 award and a trip to New York City with her grandmother to accept it.

Each E CITY session culminates with students completing their business plans—and a major celebration.

Despite these indications of success, it's still too early to tell whether E CITY helps participants improve academic performance. Zitzner hopes that a team of Harvard University researchers now studying E CITY's outcomes will provide quantitative analysis that back up anecdotal evidence that the program improves student achievement and behavior at school.

The research findings may offer more clues to what will make Entrepreneurship Academy succeed at getting more Cleveland kids into caps and gowns and colleges, Zitzner says. ■

PUBLISHED BY
Urban School News

PUBLISHER and EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Linda Lenz

EDITOR
Charlise L. Lyles

ASSOCIATE EDITORS
Piet van Lier
Stephanie Klupinski

MARKETING/CIRCULATION
MANAGER
Daniel Gray-Kontar

DESIGNER/PRODUCTION MANAGER
Rick Dall, Jr.

WEBMASTER
Rick Dall, Jr.

INTERN
Josiah Quarles

PHOTOGRAPHERS
Janet Century
Betsy Molnar
Bob Scheadler

ILLUSTRATORS
Clarence Meriweather

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS
Maureen Kelleher
Caitlin Scott
Elissa Sonnenberg

EDITORIAL ADVISORY BOARD

Jack Favret
Timothy D. Goler
Catherine E. Hackney
Anise Jefferson
Erik Johnson
Kristien Marquez-Zenkov
Martha Michael, Ph. D.
Jan Resseger
Joanne Schwartz
Mano Singham
Brian Tucker
Nina Turner

CIRCULATION
(216) 623-6320

WEB SITE
www.catalyst-cleveland.org

E-MAIL
editorial@catalyst-cleveland.org

FUNDED BY

The Cleveland Foundation
The George Gund Foundation
The Joyce Foundation
Peter B. Lewis
John P. Murphy Foundation
Key Foundation
The United Black Fund
Thomas White Foundation

A publication of Urban School News.
1621 Euclid Avenue, Suite 1530, Cleveland, Ohio 44115. Phone: (216) 623-6320; FAX (216) 623-6651. Copyright 2004, Community Renewal Society. All rights reserved. The opinions expressed in Catalyst are not necessarily those of CRS. Catalyst is a trademark of the Community Renewal Society.