

Charter school to plug entrepreneurship

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Last fall, John Zitzner visited the E City program at Glenville High School. What he saw made him angry, but it also inspired him.

E City, a 70-hour, after-school entrepreneurship program for high school students that Mr. Zitzner founded and now runs, had only three students at Glenville and no teacher. Mr. Zitzner figured there must be a better way to make a difference in the lives of students in the Cleveland Municipal School District. That's when he got the idea for the Entrepreneurship Academy.

Mr. Zitzner said the academy will be launched in fall 2006 as a charter school that will groom students for college and entrepreneurship. And, unlike other charter schools, it has the blessing of the Cleveland Municipal School District, said Mr. Zitzner, who has pooled volunteers from the business community to create the academy.

Barbara Byrd-Bennett, CEO of the Cleveland schools, already has signed a preliminary agreement to work with the academy and champion its efforts, Mr. Zitzner said. A call from Dr. Byrd-Bennett's office seeking comment on the academy was missed by Crain's, and a subsequent call was not returned by deadline.

'This is going to be one of the great urban charter schools,' said Mr. Zitzner, who founded Bradley Co., a Warrensville Heights software firm that was sold to Xerox Corp. in 1998. He will continue to run the E City program, which remains successful at many Cleveland-area schools and is growing.

'I will tell all of the students, 'If you stay here from the sixth through the 12th grade, you will get into a four-year college. That's my promise to you,' Mr. Zitzner said.

Great expectations

But Mr. Zitzner also will assure them that it won't be an easy - or typical - educational route.

Students from the Cleveland schools will enter the school in sixth grade, at which point they and their parents will sign a contract stating they will abide by the rules of the school. The first two weeks of the sixth grade will be spent learning those rules, as well as basics such as how to raise your hand to ask a question or for permission to go to the bathroom and how to stand in line when asked, Mr. Zitzner said.

Each student will wear uniforms and will attend school from about 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, said Marshall Emerson III, who was hired last week by Mr. Zitzner as the head of schools. Long summers off won't be an option anymore, as Mr. Emerson intends to implement a year-round schedule.

'It's going to be different than some of the schools they've been to, but kids have a knack for adapting pretty quickly, so I'm not worried about that,' said Mr. Emerson, who last week resigned as an administrator with the W.E.B. DuBois Academy, a Cincinnati charter school.

The concept might sound like a pipe dream, but it's already working at the DuBois Academy and at charter schools along the East Coast, according to Mr. Zitzner, who said he spent February, March and April visiting 15 of the best charter schools in the country. All those schools had extended schedules and tough disciplinary programs, which he said were embraced by the students.

'These kids want to be in school because, from day one, they're told, 'You will graduate, you will get into college,' he said.

Michael Cristal, a volunteer helping to establish the academy, said students are hungry for more structure in their lives.

'The fact of the matter is, as much as kids bitch and moan, they need structure, they want it,' said Mr. Cristal, who is president and CEO of Consolidated Risk Management, a Cleveland risk management firm.

The academy's proponents will find out just who is willing to put in all the extra time and effort next January, when parents of students now in fourth and fifth grade will be required to apply for the school, Mr. Zitzner said. A lottery system will determine the students who will enroll in the academy, which will have no more than 500 students at a time, he said.

Like many charter schools, the academy will add a grade each year until it reaches 12th grade, Mr. Zitzner said.

Hunting for a home

Mr. Zitzner and the other volunteers creating the academy now are interviewing architects to transform a yet-undetermined building in the downtown area into a high school. The group has looked at a dozen sites, including the former Myers University building on Prospect Avenue, but ideally it would like a donated building, he said.

Mr. Cristal said the academy would be most effective if located in the central downtown area, close to Public Square and local businesses. It also will need to be accessible by public transportation, because students likely will be responsible for getting to and from school.

'I would love to get something like the May Co. building,' he said.

Mr. Zitzner said local business leaders and foundations already have shown interest in the school.

Organizations such as the Cleveland Foundation, the Nord Family Foundation and the Council of Smaller Enterprises already have contributed a total of \$115,000 to launch the academy, Mr. Zitzner said. Academy volunteers are continuing to apply for grants and seek private donations.

A total of \$500,000 is needed to launch the school, some of which is available through state and federal programs, Mr. Zitzner said.

Though the students will be groomed for college, Mr. Zitzner said he has four simple goals each one must accomplish before graduation.

Each student must have a relationship with a bank manager, meaning they must have a checking account. Every student must develop and present a business plan, and also must make a presentation in front of 500 people. Finally, each student must be able to shake hands appropriately, look someone in the eyes and welcome them to the school.

Mr. Zitzner said he hopes the academy's structure will spread to other schools in the area.

'I think Cleveland could be on the map as the No. 1 urban center in the country if this takes off the way I want it to,' he said.