

YOUTH *today*

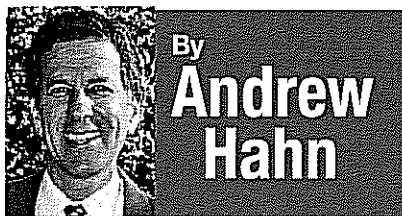
the newspaper on youth work

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Building the Case for Entrepreneur Ed



A group of educators, advocates and donors has been meeting under the auspices of the Youth Entrepreneurship Strategy Group (YESG) to ponder a challenge: how to spread entrepreneurship education in the United States.

By “entrepreneurship education,” YESG and its partners – including the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE), the Aspen Institute and E-Trade Financial – primarily mean increasing the number of public school courses in business skills, business planning and ownership. They also want to meet broader challenges, such as maintaining an innovative society that can help the United States secure its competitive edge.

As both a member and observer of this group, I have found myself asking whether we really need new training and education schemes focused on entrepreneurship – either in school or non-school settings – to promote innovation, ownership and competitiveness.

Having studied entrepreneurship programs and policies and believing in their potential, I have answered my own question with a strong “yes.” But I have questions about how this movement should be framed, in public policy terms.

First, consider whether it is a good idea to sell this movement as a way to address the need for innovation and competitiveness.

I believe that American youth are among the world’s most imaginative populations, constantly inventing and reinventing themselves and the country’s youth culture, and forming businesses. Hip-hop, fashion, software and a dazzling array of youth-run and youth-oriented businesses – all part of America’s export industry – demonstrate that youth-focused innovation and imagination are hallmarks of our market-oriented economy.

So I wouldn’t want to argue for new youth policies to teach innovation at a time when our youth are doing fine in this department.

What, then, is a better frame for promoting entrepreneurship education?

The aim should be the old-fashioned goals of increasing business development and ownership in disadvantaged and minority communities.

Expanding entrepreneurship education in the schools is a critical first step. That step must be balanced, however, by concern for the quality of the education as programs grow. Schools, we have sadly learned, can kill a good idea with mediocre implementation.

One study published by MIT Press – “Does business ownership provide a source of upward mobility for blacks and Hispanics?” – shows that self-employed black and Hispanic men have higher mean and median earn-

ings than their counterparts who work for someone else. Nevertheless, self-employed black and Hispanic men still earn less than self-employed whites.

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This indicates that we have a long way to go with entrepreneurship education. My policy focus would be to encourage life-changing, high-quality programs to close the income gap between whites and minorities.

That requires expanding the youth-serving programs that provide this training – programs like Junior Achievement, NFTE, Delta Epsilon Chi Association (DECA), Food from the Hood, REAL Enterprises, the Center for Teaching Entrepreneurship, Entrepreneurship and C.E.O. Academy.

These programs carry out entrepreneur training both in schools and beyond. But they reach only a small fraction of the youth who need them.

Expansions under way include DECA, an international market-

ing, management and entrepreneurship training program. It is looking at 200 low-income high schools where entrepreneurship education can be further promoted through its network.

The Cleveland Metropolitan School District offers an entrepreneurship elective called E CITY, and the district leadership has approved expansion of the elective to more schools.

Colleges have been enlisted in the effort. Philadelphia University President Stephen Spinelli, a YESG member, is developing a higher education coalition in his city to promote entrepreneurship education at the post-secondary and secondary levels.

Consider, too, that entrepreneurship education was the focus of a widely viewed PBS documentary last fall (see www.thesekidsmeanbusiness.org), and that YESG will carry this momentum forward by working on public policy, advocacy and more.

These encouraging developments mean we need not justify more entrepreneurship education by using high-sounding rhetoric about international competitiveness or innovation. Instead, make it real.

Entrepreneurship education requires three things: well-targeted programs in places of greatest need, expansion, and a steady focus on providing high-quality training.

As a nation of innovators, we can do it all.

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