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Future financiers

High school entrepreneur program teaches students link between learning and life

By Barbara Grady, BUSINESS WRITER



McCLYMONDS HIGH SCHOOL teacher LuPaulette Taylor (second from left) talks with student Daniel Sparks (second from right) in the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship business class in Oakland. (D. ROSS CAMERON - Staff)

MICHAEL BRADLEY and George Gonzalez of Oakland are like so many entrepreneurs in the Bay Area. They talk excitedly and effusively about their new business. They spend odd hours night and day working on their business plan. They wear T-shirts with the company logo on it.

But unlike most Bay Area entrepreneurs, Bradley and Gonzalez are 17-year-old inner city youths for whom the prospect of running their own business — indeed the prospect of determining their own destinies — seemed remote just a few years ago.

They are students of a business entrepreneurship class taught at McClymonds High School provided by the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship.

"Whenever I come to this class, I feel comfortable. It helps me think more efficiently and get a better understanding of business," said Gonzalez, whose intentions are to go to college and then follow in his single mother's footsteps and start his own business. "It helps us get a better understanding of how economics works, how to run a business and manage money," Gonzalez said. Their business "Vans over Money," or VOM, is a skateboard club that encourages membership and is gearing up to sell merchandise.

For some classmates, the idea of becoming an entrepreneur gives an alternative to what's happening in the neighborhood. "It keeps me out of trouble," said Kemper Hardy, who put his new entrepreneurial skills to work right away selling candy at Oakland's professional sports pavilions.

For Daniel Sparks, whose mom does not currently have a job and whose dad is not around, it inspired him to think about his future. "It wasn't much on my mind before," Sparks said, adding that he figured he'd get some kind of job after high school.

The National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship has been influencing the lives of inner city youth for almost 20 years in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Boston, San Leandro, San Jose and elsewhere. The organization provides textbooks and teacher training to schools that offer its course. Now in 31 states across the country, it also has programs in poor rural areas in Kentucky, Ohio and in several other countries.

This past year it expanded in Oakland with the help of a grant from an undisclosed philanthropy connected with a financial services firm.

"This year we'll be working with 1,200 kids in the Bay Area," said Gerald Richards, executive director for the foundation's Bay Area chapter. Of them, 300 kids will be in Oakland, where the foundation operates sites at McClymonds High School, Castlemont High School, Oakland Technical High School, Lionel Wilson College Preparatory Academy and in after-school programs at Pivotal Point and at Digital Underground Storytelling for Youth. The foundation also operates at San Leandro High School's Academy of Business and Finance and at Arroyo High School in San Lorenzo.

Famous alums

One of its more famous alumni is Berkeley native Robert Reffkin, now an investment banker at Goldman, Sachs & Co. who served as a White House Fellow for 2005-2006 advising Deputy Secretary of the Treasury Robert Kimmitt.

Another is San Leandro High School graduate Edwin Rodriguez-Duplesis, who formed graphics designer PedPRO Publications and was one of the foundation's 2005 Entrepreneur of the Year award winners. PedPRO is paying his way through college on the business proceeds.

The foundation's program fits right into the community-in-the-schools setup at Oakland public high schools. McClymonds has three community high schools within its building, one of which is the Business Entrepreneurial School of Technology (BEST).

James Gray, principal of the BEST community high school within McClymonds, said the foundation's program does more for the students than steer them toward business.

"We see kids become more interested in math and core curriculum subjects when they understand entrepreneurship and what they need to go into business. They realize they have to be math literate to understand supply and demand and margin analysis."

'College-going culture'

The school is striving to create "a college-going culture," Gray said, and the program has helped nurture that. McClymonds also strives to "integrate our program into the culture of our students," so that they see the connection between learning and life. Accordingly, culinary arts and construction technology are two of the entrepreneurial focuses.

LuPaulette Taylor, who was trained by the foundation and now teaches business entrepreneurship at McClymonds, says the course "shows them a connection between their lives and what they are learning in school." It also gives them practical ideas for how to help pay for college, she said, as many of them envision going into business after they graduate from high school to earn money for college and then continue with the business to pay bills as they go along.

Study measures results

The foundation's program has been studied by Harvard University's Graduate School of Education and by Brandeis University. The Harvard study found that interest in going to college rose 33 percent among high school students enrolled in the foundation's program compared with before they enrolled in the program. Leadership behavior, measured in starting or founding activities at school, rose 8.5 percent. And, more generally, the study found that participants came to believe that attaining personal goals was within their control.

"It's really to get them thinking about choices in their lives. Math is a big part of what's needed," Richards said.

The National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship is funded by donations from corporations, foundations and universities. Its largest contributor is the Goldman Sachs Foundation.

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