

E-101

It's never too early to get kids thinking about becoming entrepreneurs.



By Larry Farrell

I've always found it strange that American public schools aren't required to teach economics or the free-enterprise system—much less say a single word about the entrepreneurial spirit. Given that these subjects are the backbone of our personal and national prosperity, it would seem that a few hours over twelve years of elementary and high school could be devoted to them.

But this is not a new issue. A few enlightened people recognized the problem way back in 1919. And for almost a hundred years now, Junior Achievement volunteers have been teaching, at absolutely no cost to the schools, a variety of programs on business and economics. One could argue that Junior Achievement has been the only thing standing between America's schoolchildren and total economic illiteracy.

Today, Colorado Springs-based JA Worldwide is the world's largest organization for teaching business, economics, and free enterprise to schoolchildren. It reaches an amazing seven million students a year across the globe with both in-class and after-school programs taught by volunteers from Fortune 1,000 companies. So when Darrell Luzzo, JA's senior vice president of education, asked my company for some help in designing a new entrepreneurship curriculum, we listened carefully. Luzzo explained that JA was embarking on a groundbreaking effort to develop new programs "that will focus more on entrepreneurship and inspire stu-

dents at the middle-school and high-school levels to incorporate an entrepreneurial way of thinking into their daily lives. At the very core of preparing our youth to be successful in life is helping them to have a better understanding of entrepreneurship—and, in fact, inspiring them to become entrepreneurs themselves."

One thing led to another, and we are now advising JA on the foundation curriculum for its new entrepreneurship programs for all of its students around the world. This will be, by far, the world's largest program for teaching young people about entrepreneurship.

Everything about JA is big: four million students in the United States and three million abroad, 213,000 volunteer instructors, and offices in 142 U.S. cities and ninety-six foreign countries. So it shouldn't be surprising to learn that president and CEO David Chernow is a leader with a big vision, too. He described JA's mission to me this way: "Since 1919, JA has inspired millions of young people to achieve success in business. Since then, we've branched out into other vital content areas with our K-12 programs, but our focus remains on three key areas: workforce readiness, financial literacy, and entrepreneurship. Teaching the value of these characteristics of success helps student in all aspects of life." And when it comes to entrepreneurship, Chernow knows whereof he speaks. He's one himself, as co-founder of US Oncology, a

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\$2 billion healthcare business dedicated to cancer treatment and research.

Of course, Chernow's and Luzzo's visionary statements beg the old question of whether or not entrepreneurship can be taught—and, in this instance, to school-age children. Certainly, everyone would agree that JA's first two goals, workforce readiness and economic literacy, can and should be learned by young people. While it may be too late for 55-

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year-old GM workers to re-educate themselves for the twenty-first-century global economy, it certainly isn't too late to educate your teenage daughter or son. And in a world where high-school kids don't know how to balance a checkbook or avoid the evils of credit-card debt, most parents would agree that learning the basics of economic life is at least as useful to their kid's future as attending their umpteenth soccer camp or basketball clinic.

But for some crazy reason, entrepreneurship falls into a separate category in most people's minds. You hear it all the time from otherwise very intelligent people: "What? Become an entrepreneur? You've got to be born with the right genes to do that!" After interviewing thousands of entrepreneurs around the world, from all walks of life, I know that such statements illustrate a profound lack of knowledge about the two million people a year who are starting their own businesses. Darrell Luzzo knows this too, and pulls no punches in his rejoinder: "*Of course* entre-

preneurs can be inspired and created based on their exposure to opportunities. JA believes wholeheartedly that entrepreneurs are made. They are not born. Because we know this, we actually believe that one of our most important responsibilities to today's youth and, ultimately, to the economic well-being of their communities, is to inspire all of them to consider starting their own business one day."

The career options facing 99 percent of kids coming out of school today are becoming an employee in an existing company, working for the government, or becoming a self-employed entrepreneur. JA has begun teaching and suggesting that kids consider the latter. "We know that attitudes and opinions about the world of work are formed in adolescence," Luzzo continues, "so we believe we have this incredible obligation—and opportunity—to make a difference in the world. At the heart of this belief are these new programs."

For anyone interested in teaching or studying entrepreneurship, there are two very important closing lessons to be learned from the JA approach. First, the most fundamental notion that JA entrepreneurship programs will teach students is that they have to learn how to make or serve something the world needs and is willing to pay for. This is, in fact, the single most important concept all entrepreneur wannabes have to focus on. Students are especially lucky in this regard since they *are* still in school and can adapt their educational choices to fit their entrepreneurial dreams—whether it be a sophisticated biotech venture (triggered by a biology class) or a simple cabinet-making business (inspired by a woodworking class).

The second point is best articulated by Luzzo himself: "What differentiates JA programming from just another curriculum is that actual businesspeople and entrepreneurs come into classrooms to inspire students firsthand. These programs we are developing aren't designed for school teachers to deliver—not that they're not great teachers—but children need to be inspired by real role models from the business world."

Like all worthwhile missions, it helps to have true believers like David Chernow and Darrell Luzzo at the helm. It also helps to have enough helpers on board. The demand for JA programs far exceeds the supply of volunteer instructors; some fifteen thousand requested classes (that would have served about 300,000 kids) went untaught last year. So here's your, and your company's, chance to step up to the plate and do something really enjoyable and really worthwhile: Go to www.JA.org and click on "JA Near You" to find out how you can become a volunteer instructor of JA's new entrepreneurship programs. You'll be in good company! ♦

