



WITH SUPPORT FROM  
LOCAL FOUNDATIONS  
AND BUSINESSES,  
A NATIONAL  
ENTREPRENEURSHIP  
PROGRAM IS TEACHING  
SKILLS TO PITTSBURGH-  
AREA HIGH SCHOOL  
STUDENTS THAT CAN  
HELP IMPROVE THEIR  
PERFORMANCE IN THE  
CLASSROOM AND  
ON THE JOB.  
BY JENNIFER BAILS  
PHOTOGRAPHY  
BY JOSHUA FRANZOS

## BIZ KIDS

The bell clangs inside the fluorescent-lit hallways of Carrick High School on this bright spring morning, signaling a dozen students to scramble for their chairs at computer pods set up throughout the lab. → “Opportunity is all around you,” reads the sign in large blue and yellow letters above the blackboard, where a projector screen has been lowered for today’s class. → Some of the students open Microsoft PowerPoint on their computers and furiously begin making last-minute changes to the presentations they must give this period. Others keep their heads down as they browse the Internet for their favorite music or chat online with their friends. Finished or not, no one wants to be called on to go first. → Seated at the front of the class, quietly talking to each other, are five suit-clad investment managers and market analysts from downtown Pittsburgh-based Fragasso Financial Advisors. Also with them is the firm’s president, Robert Fragasso. This morning marks the fourth visit made by Fragasso and his colleagues to this 10th-grade classroom, which includes students from some of the low-income neighborhoods in the southern section of Pittsburgh. During the past semester, these financial professionals have invested their time and hope in the teenagers by working with each of them to write a business plan that provides a road map for how to launch a small business. → The project is the culmination of an innovative high school curriculum developed by the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship, known widely by its abbreviated name, NFTE, pronounced “nifty” by participants and others familiar with the program. → Founded more than 20 years ago in New York City, the nonprofit group has been steadily spreading its message of self-empowerment by reaching thousands of primarily disadvantaged youth with its entrepreneurship education program. Trade executive-turned-public school teacher Steve Mariotti started NFTE as a way to keep at-risk students in school and to improve their academic performance by helping connect their classroom experience with practical applications to their everyday lives.



As president of Fragasso Financial Advisors in Pittsburgh, Robert Fragasso helps people make sound investment choices. He and colleagues from his firm also mentor students at his alma mater, Carrick High School, through the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship, or NFTE, program. The business professionals show the teenagers how to develop a plan for launching a small business.

Today, NFTE is an international organization with programs in 21 states and 14 countries, including a Pittsburgh regional office that opened in 1995 with the help of grants from The Heinz Endowments and the Richard King Mellon, Scaife Family and McCune foundations. The Endowments has continued to support the program, awarding it 12 grants totaling more than \$1.4 million since its arrival locally.

This long-term investment is intended to help meet the Endowments' goals of promoting the professional development of teachers and enabling students who face a variety of challenges in life to achieve success in school, explains Joe Dominic, who retires as the foundation's Education Program director at the end of this year. Ultimately, he adds, the meaningful impact made by these grants could boost the quality and diversity

of southwestern Pennsylvania's workforce.

"We saw it as an opportunity to expand learning opportunities for children who might not otherwise be exposed to entrepreneurship," Dominic says. "And what we're betting on is that a number of these young people will go on to make contributions to Pittsburgh and its quality of life, either as business people or as leaders in their own way."

Here's how the program works: Teachers are trained in week-long summer workshops to deliver the 40- to 80-hour NFTE curriculum as they would any other lesson plan. Typically, the course is offered in schools in urban and often financially struggling communities as an elective in business or computers.

Participants in the program—many of whom have had difficulty in the traditional classroom—learn complex business and entrepreneurial concepts through hands-on, real-world activities such as participating in a wholesale buying trip and then selling their products in a makeshift school mall. In doing so, they build critical math, reading and technology skills—along with life skills of immeasurable value.

Business teacher Yvette Cook, who taught the NFTE program at Carrick for almost a decade, says most of her students entered her classroom shy, unfocused and insecure. But going through the project-based curriculum gave them a renewed sense of self-worth and a belief in their limitless potential.

Students who previously didn't talk in class became the first to raise their hands. Others joined sports teams and after-school clubs for the first time. Some even gained the confidence to run for student office.

"It definitely had a larger impact than anyone ever dreamed it would," Cook says.

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**Robert Fragasso**, president, Fragasso Financial Advisors

**“A major lesson that NFTE taught me at the age of 16 is the hard work that it takes to own your own business. You can kiss your social life goodbye, you are going to put in 80 hours a week, and you won’t be guaranteed a paycheck.... But my job isn’t work.”**

**Justin Strong**, owner, 7th Movement Development Inc.

A 2002 study of the NFTE program conducted by the Harvard Graduate School of Education found that students taking the organization’s entrepreneurship course had a 32 percent higher interest in attending college than their peers who did not take it. After the course, the study said, students’ interest in getting a job that required a higher level of education also rose 44 percent.

An earlier study conducted by Brandeis University found that students who participated in NFTE gained a knowledge and understanding of business that was 20 times greater than that of their peers who had not been involved in the program. The participants also were 30 times more likely than their peers to start a business. And a follow-up evaluation found that 8 percent of the program’s alumni had started businesses, compared with the national rate for minority adults of 1 to 3 percent.

While new studies are just beginning to better analyze teacher feedback and track student progress, success stories continue to be told around the country. After attending a NFTE business camp three years ago, high school student Fantashia Stevens of Cleveland formed a company called Fizzalae Botanical Blends that manufactures bath and body products for people with sensitive skin like hers. Chicago 11th-grader Milan Alexander was 15 when he started cutting hair to afford necessities such as school supplies and clothes. During his NFTE class in 2005, he created the business plan for Exclusive Cuts Barber Service, which he launched while finishing high school.

Economy-boosting outcomes like these also dovetail with the strategy of the Endowments’ Innovation Economy Program, says Director Christina Gabriel. Pittsburgh was ranked just 48th on Entrepreneur magazine’s recent list of the 50 best large American cities for entrepreneurs, so clearly there is room for much-needed improvement. “We’re trying to stimulate the entrepreneurial economy in Pittsburgh, and NFTE is one way to do that,” Gabriel says.

In 1995, Justin Strong attended a NFTE summer BizCamp while he was a senior at Taylor Allderdice High School, one of the top high schools in the Pittsburgh school system. Unlike many participants, Strong was no stranger to the world of business; his family has owned Strong Dry Cleaners & Laundry Service in the city’s Homewood section since 1945. But he says the program’s curriculum gave him the correct terms for what he already learned informally.

Strong went on to use his newfound business skills—along with his ingenuity and creativity—to establish 7th Movement Development Inc., which operates the Shadow Lounge and the adjoining AVA Bar and Lounge in the city’s East Liberty neighborhood. These highly popular nightspots have helped to spark the ongoing renaissance of what had been a downtrodden neighborhood by offering a showcase for culturally diverse music and entertainment.

Strong regularly shares his inspirational story with groups of young participants, without sugar-coating the details. “A major lesson that NFTE taught me at the age of 16 is the hard work that it takes to own your own business,” he says. “You can kiss your social life goodbye, you are going to put in 80 hours a week, and you won’t be guaranteed a paycheck. . . . But my job isn’t work.”

Justin Strong owns two popular nightspots in Pittsburgh and grew up in a family of entrepreneurs who operated a neighborhood dry cleaning service. But he says it was at a NFTE summer BizCamp he attended as a high school senior that he learned the correct business concepts that complemented what he already knew informally.



20x

NFTE participants had a 20 times greater knowledge of business than students not in the program.

32%

Students in the NFTE program had a 32 percent higher interest in attending college than their peers who were not in the program.

30x

NFTE students were 30 times more likely to start a business than their non-participating peers.

## RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Of course, not every student who completes the program will become Oprah Winfrey, Bill Gates or even Justin Strong.

Jerry Cozewith, executive director of NFTE of Greater Pittsburgh, says the true power of the program can't be measured by counting how many graduates start their own businesses. At a time when more and more Americans are becoming self-employed or working for small businesses, it is crucial that schools teach students the basics of our economy and show them what place they can have in it beyond minimum wage, Cozewith says. Most important, he explains, NFTE gives young people the self-esteem and knowledge they need to access and create opportunities to improve their own lives.

Twenty-year-old Ciera Dempsey participated in the program three years ago when family troubles led to her living at the Three Rivers Youth group home on Pittsburgh's North Side. The nonprofit agency serves abused, neglected, runaway and homeless children.

During the class, Dempsey created a business plan for Obsessions Braided Creations hair salon that took first place at NFTE's regional competition. "It was the first time I was able to really have my own ideas and create something on my own, which was exciting," she says.

Growing up on the crime-ridden streets of northwest Philadelphia, Dempsey was a poor student who never dreamed of a future beyond high school. "Getting by enough to graduate" was the best she ever hoped would happen. If she were lucky, she thought, maybe she would find a job styling hair that paid better than minimum wage.

Now, Dempsey is studying psychology at Community College of Philadelphia and hopes to use the business skills she learned through NFTE to open a private therapy practice one day. "NFTE showed me that, regardless of the circumstances that you are in, you can still do something important and move forward," she says.

Still, getting Pittsburgh-area schools to buy into the program's mission has been a challenge. One major obstacle that the staff has encountered has been the school requirements under the federal No Child Left Behind Act. The regulations emphasize reading and math test scores and leave little time for less conventional instruction. Recruiting and retaining teachers who are already overworked is another hurdle. It also has been difficult to attract busy professionals to volunteer as coaches and guest speakers for NFTE students.

Yet, through the support of foundations and other charitable donors, the program now reaches more than 500 students each year in southwestern Pennsylvania, working through the Pittsburgh Public Schools as well as several private and charter schools and community organizations. The latest NFTE initiative is intended to better enable students like Dempsey to use the program as a true bridge to a career path, rather than simply as one more abstract high school course. A recent Endowments grant of \$50,000 will help the organization adapt the curriculum for middle school students and deepen the involvement of Pittsburgh's business leaders and community colleges.

"We have this dream here in Pittsburgh that one day this program will be so well regarded and so well delivered that employers will look upon a NFTE certificate as truly saying something about a person's readiness for life after high school," Cozewith says.

That dream is starting to take shape in places like Carrick High School, where the volunteer coaches from Fragasso Financial Advisors serve as judges by listening to the students present their business plans and rating their work. The top finalists in the school contest will qualify for NFTE's annual regional competition in which the winners are awarded \$2,000.

On this morning, each of the Carrick students nervously shuffles to the front of the classroom to share his or her business plan with Fragasso and his fellow judges in eight-minute presentations that they have toiled over for the past several months.

Fragasso grew up as the son of a tailor and graduated from Carrick in 1963. His firm has been one of the underwriters for the Carrick NFTE program during the past two years, and he says returning as a successful entrepreneur through the program helps to show students at his alma mater that they have the opportunity to influence their own futures just as he did.

"NFTE gives young people an understanding of what it takes to risk one's capital and invest one's intellect and energies and time—and what the correct payback should be for people who take that risk," says Fragasso, who was recently named chairman of the local organization's advisory board.

Potential risk-takers at Carrick include 15-year-old Kaiyla Shuey, who tells the judges that she aspires to sell homemade lady locks, made from a top-secret family recipe, for 25 cents apiece through her business, Kaiyla's Kookies. "My short-term goal is to finish high school, and my long-term goal is to finish college," she says. "And my business goal is to sell my lady locks at coffee shops and restaurants."

Classmate Nick Hilgert aims to use his computer skills to provide typing and printing services to his fellow students in need of help with their schoolwork, while another student, Dominique Dobbins, plans to sell iced tea at prices that undercut the school vending machines.

Each of the students talks in the universal business language of profit and loss, startup costs and selling prices. They break down their marketing research and describe their products and target consumers. And one by one, the novice public speakers all manage to make it through their presentations and gracefully field difficult questions from the judges.

"This is not necessarily about how many kids will go on to open the next Apple Computer or Fred's Deli," Cozewith says. "It's that they know they could. Or someone says to them that they should consider it, and they see the power of ownership." *h*



Kaiyla Shuey, 15, hopes to take advantage of her family's top-secret lady locks recipe by selling the sweet dessert through her company, Kaiyla's Kookies, for which she developed a business plan in her NFTE course.

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Kaiyla Shuey, student, Carrick High School