

Student entrepreneurs need local business support

**By Elizabeth B. Koch, Chairman of the Board
Youth Entrepreneurs Kansas**

Do you believe that disadvantaged young people in Kansas have any chance at success?

Do you believe they can contribute productively in the workplace, enhancing their own lives, their families and their community?

I do. I've already seen it happen. Through Youth Entrepreneurs Kansas (YEK), students are learning how to start businesses and compete in today's challenging market place.

YEK has been in Kansas for 17 years, helping thousands of young people learn business fundamentals, creative problem-solving and self discipline through classroom curriculum and workplace mentoring. We have sent students to college and into successful careers. Some have launched their own businesses with venture capital grants from YEK.

The Charles G. Koch Foundation founded YEK in Wichita in 1991. Although our program is well established in Wichita, Lawrence and Topeka, in Kansas City, Kan., our work is just beginning.

Four Kansas City, Kan., high schools are currently teaching YEK's yearlong business curriculum, thanks to generous support from the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation. YEK classes are offered at J.C. Harmon, F.L. Schlagle, Wyandotte and Washington high schools.

It's my personal goal to make YEK available to every student in Kansas City, Kan., who wants to participate. Approximately 78 percent of Kansas City, Kansas, high school students qualify for free and reduced meals. These are the young people who most need our help.

In YEK classes, each student conceives and writes a viable business plan. Students learn the realities of business competition, vying against classmates and other area YEK students for venture capital and scholarships.

However, the real life-changing value of YEK comes through hands-on training in summer partnerships with local employers. Therefore, it's critical we get buy-in from Kansas City businesses.

In Wichita, many businesses provide these inspirational YEK summer partnerships. We desperately need Kansas City businesses to do the same.

I'm talking about partnerships between successful companies willing to work with talented, young people to help them succeed.

For example, Cessna in Wichita gives YEK students creative challenges and demystifies corporate structure, as well as offering scholarship opportunities. At Smith Barney, students work with financial analysts, competing for a trip to New York to visit Wall Street.

I am confident we can generate similar corporate involvement in Kansas City.

Recently I met Megan Harris, who took the YEK class last year as a sophomore at Kansas City, Kan., Washington High School. She created the winning display for our end-of-year business showcase. This month, she will graduate a year early and begin classes at Kansas City Community College. She plans to pursue a nursing degree at University of Missouri Kansas City.

She, like most of our YEK students, will be the first in her immediate family to attend college. After becoming a registered nurse, she wants to start her own business.

I'm extremely proud of what Megan has accomplished. Kansas City, Kan., schools are full of students like Megan, who would benefit so much from applying what they learn in a YEK classroom to life in a dynamic workplace. They just need someone to show them the way.

Elizabeth B. Koch is chairman of the board of Youth Entrepreneurs Kansas, which she founded with her husband, Charles, chairman and CEO of Koch Industries, Inc.

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