



YEK worthy of being model

By LINDA GRAVES

Inexcusable "achievement gaps" exist in education today that threaten the future of America's minorities and the poor, President Bush has declared. He has proposed a workable, bipartisan education plan to eliminate those gaps in an effort that is sure to spark a national review of innovative and effective education programs at the local and state level. U.S. policymakers — and educators — would do well to look to Kansas for an example of such a public-private program that is working and making a real difference in the lives of a new generation of Kansans.

For five years, I have been involved with an organization called Youth Entrepreneurs of Kansas (YEK). This organization partners with Kansas public schools, and targets students at risk of failing or dropping out of high school.

At no additional cost to the schools, YEK offers a curriculum — developed by experts and tailored to low-income and minority high school students — that teaches economics and business fundamentals.

YEK recruits certified teachers already working in the public school system. These teachers are trained to ensure they have the skills and knowledge required to effectively deliver this specialized curriculum. In return for the extra effort required to lead a YEK program, teachers are compensated with an annual stipend beyond their regular pay, and the most passionate and motivated among them are eligible for performance-based bonuses.

This means students accustomed to being labeled and left behind are introduced to options for the future through age- and experience-appropriate curriculum.

In the classroom environment, YEK students are encouraged to try new ideas. Community business leaders act as guest lecturers and mentors, with employers also often stepping forward to support YEK students. But most importantly, YEK teaches students to live their dreams profitably. Teens turn their natural passions into money-making ideas, entering business plan competitions and contests for venture capital and scholarships.

On March 28 in New York, Jon Berseth, a YEK teacher at Wichita South High School, was named one of NFTE's Certified Entrepreneurship Teachers of the Year and was awarded \$1,000. Tien Nguyen of Wichita, and Zack McDougall of Topeka, both YEK graduates, were named Young entrepreneurs of the Year and were awarded \$1,000 each.

YEK exists because of the support of the Charles G. Koch Charitable Foundation. Perhaps not so coincidentally, at that same March 28 event in New York, Liz Koch accepted a Volunteer of the Year award on behalf of the Koch family, Koch Industries, and the Koch family foundations for their support for this program.

This public-private partnership is an example of the community coming together, working within the context of the current public education system, but providing more than the public schools could ever do on their own. With a strong foundation, access to a supportive community, and the promise of a brighter future, so-called at-risk youths are less truant, more likely to graduate, earn better grades and more inclined to seek higher education. And many are already operating successful small businesses. And, in contrast to the public education system generally, program costs per student have declined by 70 percent over 10 years.

I commend the state's public educators who have embraced this program, the Koch family, Koch employees, and the many companies — from Cessna Aircraft Company to Salomon Smith Barney, to Hills Pet Nutrition to The Bank of America — that have stepped to the plate to make this public-private partnership happen. Together they have created a shining example of the innovation and dedication that is required to close those "inexcusable achievement gaps" highlighted by President Bush. The success here in Kansas of the YEK program, and the principles underlying the president's proposed reforms, is so promising it must not be overlooked.

Linda Graves is first lady of Kansas and a Youth Entrepreneurs of Kansas board member.

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