LEARNING WITH A PURPOSE:
Student Agency and the Joy of Teaching and Learning

By Evo Popoff
Foreword by Dr. Johnnie Thomas

Produced by Commissioned by
EMPOWERING SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC MOBILITY THROUGH YOUTH ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Foreword by Dr. Johnnie Thomas

Out in the “real world,” the one beyond a classroom’s four walls, the value of networking is reflected in a common expression: “It’s not what you know, but who you know.”

As an educator with two decades of experience working with young people, I’m not about to diminish the importance of knowledge. But I and my fellow district leaders can learn a thing or two from the old adage, namely that high school students need access to entrepreneurs and business leaders. They benefit from meeting people equipped with the skills and mindsets associated with professional success: adaptability, resilience and agency.

Until recently, schools gave short shrift to this notion, particularly in districts like Rich Township High School District 227, where 80 percent of students live in poverty. Many of our students — 90 percent of whom are Black and between 6 and 7 percent Latinx — grow up never meeting anyone who started a small business, ran a corporation or invented a product. This opportunity and experience gap has profound implications on students’ social and economic mobility later in life.

Julia Freeland Fisher, author of *Who You Know: Unlocking Innovations that Expand Students’ Networks*, writes that schools historically have failed in this regard by “systematically ignor(ing) gaps in poor and minority students’ access to power and relationships that could engender such mobility.” And despite employers’ cries for workers with more real-world experience, “schools fail to pursue instructional models that could connect authentically what happens inside classrooms with the wide range of industries in the real world,” she notes.

At Rich Township, we address those gaps in a variety of ways, including setting high expectations for our 4,500 students. Each day, we expect them to be prepared, engaged and focused. They rarely fail me. We’ve also reimagined our curriculum to offer students true learning with a purpose: we merged the district’s three high schools to create one “super school” with multiple campuses. A student’s homebase is determined by the career pathway he or she chooses as freshmen — either science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) or fine arts, business and communications. Some kids have to move between campuses for their classes; we provide shuttles, but it’s up to them to build travel time into their schedules. They must set challenging learning goals for themselves, whether they’re heading to college or the workforce.

Both embody our overall strategy of supporting student agency. We expect our students to take responsibility for their own learning. Agency means discovering what motivates them,
striving for continuous improvement and rebounding from their “failures.” It’s not only the key to learning, but the cornerstone of a successful life.

And that’s why entrepreneurship education is such a natural fit for us. New to our lineup of project-based offerings for the 2020-21 year, Uncharted Learning’s INCubatoredu program gives students a first-hand look at every aspect of entrepreneurship. It provides something kids in other districts might learn from their parents or neighbors: turning a germ of an idea into a tangible, sustainable and potentially profitable solution to a problem in their community.

In our district, we work with partners like the IT solutions firm CDW to coach students through the process. These mentors play a critical and vital role by demystifying business ownership for students. They teach our kids how to overcome adversity, reassuring them that failure is often part of the process. And they tell students about their own experiences with “failure,” explaining how it spurred them to work harder. That turns on a light for our kids, opening up a world that otherwise would have remained closed.

But there’s something else at play with programs like INCubatoredu, something with an even greater potential to help our students in the long-term. It makes students active participants in their own futures. They see that neither learning nor life are things done to them, but rather are things they can shape.

Based on those metrics, the coursework is already a resounding success. Our INCubatoredu students have developed confidence and agency, not just in that class, but in all of their studies. They no longer ask permission to take the next logical step in their academic progress; they simply do it on their own initiative.

And that is an incredibly powerful gift.

Dr. Johnnie Thomas is superintendent of Rich Township High School District 227 outside Chicago, Illinois.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

• Educators will reflect on the era of COVID-19 as a time of great trauma and chaos. But an important lesson emerged from all the disruption: agency is an important tool for helping students with uncertainty and ambiguity. Teachers report that kids who were encouraged to engage in meaningful activities and pursue their own interests long before the pandemic better managed the tumult during it.

• In addition, student agency plays a vital role in increasing equity in schools. As Dr. Johnnie Thomas, superintendent of Rich Township High School District 227 in a suburb south of Chicago writes in the Foreword to this report, agency “makes students an active participant in their own futures. They see that neither learning nor life are things done to them, but rather are things they can shape.”

• Youth enterprise and entrepreneurship programs are an important pathway for fostering agency, since they provide students with opportunities to identify and address problems in their communities.

• INCubatoredu, Uncharted Learning’s entrepreneurship curriculum, exposes students to the joys and challenges of building a business from the ground up. According to INCubatoredu classroom instructors, the experience not only equips students with the tools they need to thrive in the “real world,” it helps them become more resilient in the face of adversity — or even failure.

• When COVID-19 required INCubatoredu student groups to navigate the entrepreneurship process remotely, they rose to the challenge. They connected through video conferencing tools, demonstrated flexibility with product testing and even sought to solve problems created by the pandemic — displaying the very agency the program seeks to create.

• Watching students take charge of their own learning and develop transferable skills during the pandemic provided a much-needed breath of fresh air for exhausted educators. They say watching as students creatively addressed one challenge after another was not only inspiring, but proof that learning with a purpose does indeed promote student agency.

• This report considers the role youth enterprise and entrepreneurship programs play in creating student agency through interviews with teachers who bring purposeful learning to classrooms across America. It also highlights how these programs have helped educators rediscover their love of teaching and learning during a time of great upheaval.
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Named State Policy Maker of the Year by the State Education Technology Directors Association (SETDA), Evo Popoff ranks among the small handful of education policymakers who have worked as an education entrepreneur and executive within the private sector.

Evo previously served as Chief Innovation and Intervention Officer and Assistant Commissioner for the New Jersey Department of Education, where he oversaw the state’s education technology and school and district improvement efforts. Prior to joining the Department, Evo led the development of education technology products and school improvement solutions in collaboration with district and state leaders, and educators.

Before beginning his career in education, Evo practiced law at McDermott, Will & Emery where he worked on labor and employment, antitrust, and general corporate issues.

He holds a B.A. in Political Science from the University of Chicago and a J.D. from the George Washington University Law School.

Uncharted Learning is a not-for-profit organization with a mission to kick-start students for life by equipping them with real-world skills. We help inspire students to discover their passions, strengthen their capabilities, and create their own futures. Our programs offer authentic, rigorous entrepreneurship experiences to students in over 250 schools across the United States and Australia.

Whiteboard Advisors brings an unmatched understanding of policy and market trends to work on behalf of the organizations, employers, and entrepreneurs working to promote social and economic mobility in a knowledge economy. Our team of researchers, policy wonks, and storytellers is reimagining the way we learn, work, and live.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful for the expertise of friends and practitioners who have provided valuable support and insights to the authors in the development of this paper, including:

**Ted Coine**
Entrepreneurship Teacher, Collier County Public Schools, Florida

**Valerie Cooper**
Entrepreneurship Teacher, Lewisville Independent School District, Texas

**Julia Freeland Fisher**
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INTRODUCTION

To state the obvious, the 2020-21 school year has been difficult for everyone. That’s particularly true for educators and students (and their parents who, if they weren’t already, became teachers during periods of remote learning).

Among the reports of growing student achievement gaps and increased stress among educators are shining examples of things we might have learned — or perhaps “relearned” — over the past year. And here’s one of the most significant: the critical role student agency plays in empowering students to navigate the uncertainties of day-to-day life and in setting students up for success in school and beyond.

In story after story from schools that prioritized student agency before the pandemic we hear about educators and students who weathered the transition if not flawlessly, then at least more smoothly than peer schools. Indeed, Chelsea Waite, a research fellow at the Christensen Institute, identified “learner agency” as a critical factor leading to increased levels of student engagement in a school during the pandemic, finding that “[a]s it turns out, nurturing students’ abilities to contribute and lead can have big payoffs as schools face ongoing uncertainty.”

The stories in this report from educators in schools and districts across the country show that the benefits of student agency — for instance, as an antidote to student anxiety — extend far beyond the exigencies of the pandemic. This report explores the pivotal role of student agency in purposeful learning and success in life through interviews with teachers in programs deeply rooted in student agency: youth entrepreneurship programs. It also will consider the role student enthusiasm has had in rejuvenating pandemic-weary educators and returning joy into teaching and learning.

As former New Jersey State Commissioner of Education Kimberley Harrington Markus states, this connection between student agency and educator happiness shouldn’t be a surprise: “As educators, nothing brings us more satisfaction than seeing our students succeed, and the satisfaction of seeing them figure out a solution to a question or problem doesn’t come close to the joy that comes from seeing them come up with the problem or question themselves in the first place.” She continues, “(S)tudent agency — and programs that foster student agency — are critical to putting students on a path to success both in school and beyond.”

As educators, nothing brings us more satisfaction than seeing our students succeed, and the satisfaction of seeing them figure out a solution to a question or problem doesn’t come close to the joy that comes from seeing them come up with the problem or question themselves in the first place.

Kimberley Harrington Markus, former New Jersey State Commissioner of Education
WHAT IS STUDENT AGENCY?

Let’s begin with a basic question: What is student agency?

There’s a large body of research, dating back many years, on the benefits of student agency, which is why it’s importance is something educators “relearned” last year. Indeed, “[r]esearch has demonstrated overwhelmingly that students who have agency in their learning are more motivated, experience greater satisfaction in their learning, and, consequently, are more likely to achieve academic success.”

Superintendent Dr. Tom Leonard of Eanes ISD in Texas, points to another potential benefit of student agency: addressing growing issues of student anxiety. In explaining the role that entrepreneurship education programs play in supporting student social emotional well-being, Superintendent Leonard writes that the programs “empower [students] to become agents of change and equipping them to solve problems, empathize with people who might not look like them, and pick themselves up after adversity.”

Research also suggests some common elements of a definition of student agency, with an ability for students to “set and pursue their own learning goals” at the heart. In her overview of the research, Jennifer Davis Poon from the Center for Innovation in Education identifies four:

- Setting advantageous goals
- Initiating action toward those goals
- Reflecting on and regulating progress toward those goals
- A belief in self-efficacy

The stories in this report point to another recurring theme in discussions of student agency: when done right, it can foster greater student empowerment. This connection isn’t surprising, since, as author John Spencer writes, “engaging environments often promote empowerment because they focus on student agency and ownership.”

While teachers and teaching practice play a critical role in advancing student agency, instructional models are also important, since some models are inherently engaging and naturally promote agency. Tom Vander Ark cited examples of these models in a 2015 piece:

- Competency-based learning environments
- Project-based, interest-based and purpose-based learning models
- Work and service learning experience, including youth entrepreneurship education programs

Consequently, one path to fostering student agency is by adopting new instructional models like these.
STUDENT AGENCY AND EQUITY

Given the benefits of student agency and its role in fostering empowerment, agency is a critical factor for addressing issues of equity in our schools. According to a 2016 EdWeek Blog post: “This, therefore, is the equity challenge of our day: to develop and strengthen agency in students, so that armed with skills and competencies, they can head into college, careers, and their lives equipped to make the changes most relevant to them.”

In the Foreword to this report, Dr. Johnnie Thomas stresses the role that agency — and the empowerment that comes through agency — play in addressing social and economic mobility, and why entrepreneurship education helps set up his district’s students for success. It’s an opinion shared by Phyllis Lockett, the CEO of LEAP Innovations: “We must shorten the distance between “school” and economic opportunity for black, brown and high-poverty students. We have to reimagine learning if we are serious about addressing equity. A critical starting point is empowering our students to lead their own learning so they can become masters of their own success in and beyond school.”

Developing student agency through work-based learning, including youth entrepreneurship programs also has the potential to address the systemic opportunity gaps that impact life outcomes alongside better-reported academic gaps. These programs often connect students with mentors and industry experts in real-world contexts that provide relevance and meaning to academic subjects, while helping students develop social capital and networks vital to success later in life.

“We can’t expect to address systemic opportunity gaps through traditional, academic pedagogical approaches and classroom models alone,” says Julia Freeland Fisher, director of education research at the Christensen Institute and the author of Who You Know: Unlocking Innovations that Expand Students’ Networks (Wiley, 2018). Instead, she continues, “schools must adopt and embrace approaches — like work based learning and service learning — that deliberately connect students with real-world opportunities to develop their social capital that can extend beyond their networks forged in school.” To achieve these outcomes, Fisher also notes that schools can’t leave connections to chance. “Measurement and equity go hand in hand. If schools truly hope that work-based learning will address opportunity gaps, they will need to begin measuring connections brokered, not just experiences accessed.”
STUDENT AGENCY, PURPOSE AND THE ROAD AHEAD

As educators consider what to carry forward to life after COVID-19, robust learning experiences that promote agency and engagement need to be at the top of the list. It’s one of the most important lessons of the last year: students realize the deepest learning when their passions meet an opportunity for action — even during a pandemic, despite the ups and downs of remote instruction.

In fact, it may be what helped them thrive during the pandemic in the first place. Experiential learning environments, such as entrepreneurship courses, emphasize student agency and creative problem solving, the very skills needed for successful at-home learning. Time and again since March 2020, teachers have said that students enrolled in these programs have been better equipped for the transition. They’ve logged in each morning, completed their assignments on time and most importantly, remained engaged. In the face of adversity, they’ve displayed flexibility and resilience.

They’d long-since taken ownership of their own learning, courtesy of youth entrepreneurship education.

“They feel in control. They feel like they have a purpose, like this is more than just turning in a worksheet,” said Valerie Cooper, who teaches entrepreneurship courses at Lewisville Independent School District in Lewisville, Texas. “Every day, there is accountability. My students become more comfortable with ambiguity. They get comfortable and start taking initiative.”

Youth entrepreneurship teachers say they’re feeding off this energy from their students, many of whom are engaged in an authentic learning experience for the first time. These students are a source of joy and renewed excitement for teachers who are themselves dealing with the unfamiliar world of remote and hybrid learning. And the joy spreads to colleagues searching for ways to rekindle their love of the profession.

“You end up being a cheerleader for sure,” said Anthony Miller, an entrepreneurship teacher from Township High School District 211’s Conant High School in Hoffman Estates, Illinois. “There’s an intrinsic feeling you get as an educator when you see the kids go the extra mile — 15-, 16-, 17-year-olds who were able to do this.”
A PHILOSOPHICAL SHIFT

About a decade ago, educators and workforce development experts proposed a radical new approach to K-12 learning:

What if ensuring that students leave school with a sense of purpose was just as important as their grade point averages and class rankings? What if exploring their passions and interests was as much a priority as preparing them for college or the workforce?

Authentic youth entrepreneurship programs — like INCubatoredu — are part of this philosophical shift from “sage on the stage” to “guide on the side.” It’s a growing movement that believes that giving students the opportunity to build a business from the ground up and solve authentic problems for people provides them with the meaningful, real-life experiences that they not only crave, but absolutely must have for life-long success.

The INCubatoredu year-long courses begin with something real. Groups of students brainstorm a problem in their communities, anything from minor annoyances like keeping their cell phones charged to more consequential global issues like climate change. Their assignment? Create a product or service that addresses that problem, then try to convince investors to provide the financial backing — real dollars from actual investors — to take that product to the marketplace.

Teams might build their products using 3-D printers or with materials they buy at local hardware stores. Others develop digital solutions, such as apps or smart devices. No matter what the form, the products must undergo rigorous testing. The teams decide what they got right — and the assumptions they got wrong — then use the results to improve the outcomes. They develop experiments to test their assumptions and hypotheses, then study the opportunities and limitations of the marketplace, tinkering with their products more and more with every discovery. Once they have the kinks worked out, they pitch their viable product to investors with the hope of creating a startup.

Student agency may be the goal, but they’re not on their own. In addition to the INCubatoredu teacher, each group checks in regularly with a mentor, usually a local business expert or entrepreneur who has real-world experience in product development, marketing, angel investing or some other facet of the entrepreneurial process.

And, yes, “failure” is not only a possibility, but a probability. Teachers and mentors offer the teams advice, but stop short of stepping in to rescue one that’s floundering. If a group fails to find a workable solution to a problem, or is unable to secure funding at a pitch competition, then that becomes a teachable moment.

“I’ll ask them questions to lead them in the direction they need to go, but sometimes just falling into the hole is the best thing that could ever happen,” said INCubatoredu teacher Laura Boyd Smidt of the Academies of Loudoun in Leesburg, Virginia.16
But an amazing thing starts to occur: Students want to make these decisions for themselves — for better or for worse. Like a toddler suddenly demanding to dress himself, the students begin to take ownership of their burgeoning entrepreneurial enterprise. They begin to personalize it, referring to it as “my business” rather than “my project” or “my class,” said Ted Coine, an INCubatoredu teacher from Collier County Public Schools in Naples, Florida. They stop asking for his permission, he said, and just take the initiative to do it themselves — because they know it’s the best thing for the product, and by extension, for the team.

In short, they develop agency. And agency becomes advocacy for the self.

Said Dana Jones, who teaches the INCubatoredu course in the Leander Independent School District in Leander, Texas: “The thing that motivates them is that it is their business and company. (The) direction they take the company is theirs.”

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Dana Jones, INCubatoredu course teacher
SOLVING REAL-WORLD PROBLEMS

This much is clear: Students want a purpose for learning that goes beyond the four walls at school, said Kristin De Vivo, executive director of the George Lucas Educational Foundation, which advocates for project-based learning.¹⁹

“They want something that’s authentic to themselves and to their lives,” she said, “something that’s relevant to their futures.”²⁰

But researchers are finding empirical evidence that experiential learning promotes deeper insights and increased student engagement. Students in these programs perform better not only on traditional assessments but also on problem-solving and critical-thinking measures as well, according to De Vivo.²¹ In addition to increased engagement, students also display greater collaboration, empathy and reflection, and agency, she said.²²

Most importantly, she said, it gives them a purpose.

“We want students to grapple with figuring out what they need to know before they’re just delivered the information,” she said. “And we want them to collaborate with one another to figure out how to get the information they’ll need. This will result in a deeper understanding and one that’s generalized to newer opportunities to learn.”²³

Each step in a young entrepreneur’s journey, in a course like INCubatoredu, builds skills that provide these new learning opportunities:

- Identifying the problem and inventing a solution promotes curiosity and creative problem solving.
- Building the prototypes involves anything from engineering and code-writing to math and physics.
- Testing their product requires using the scientific method to identify weaknesses and improve the user experience.
- Pitching to investors means presenting to and connecting with adults, which promotes social-emotional skills.
- Managing a successful startup — if the groups make it that far — demands soft skills (collaboration, time-management and perseverance) along with more concrete skills like accounting, database management and inventory control.

The most successful groups are the ones that become so independent, so confident in their decision-making that teachers must keep up with their progress.

Take, for example, GreenDirt, the product developed by the team that won INCubatoredu’s 2017 national pitch competition — and a $5,000 investment in the product to go with the $20,000 they received from a district-wide event. A group of five students from Conant High School in Hoffman Estates, Illinois, wanted to solve the problem of food waste in landfills. The students interviewed restaurant owners to find out how much of the food they actually
discard, especially vegetable scraps, can be easily composted. According to their teacher, Anthony Miller from Township High School District 211, the students mulled several solutions before settling on composting.

The project developed rapidly, outpacing the curriculum and moving beyond the school’s four walls. During Thanksgiving break, the group bought a composting tumbler on Craigslist and, in the middle of winter in suburban Chicago, built an elevated tumbling machine to test turning food scraps into compost, Miller said. From there, it was a blur of one development after another, all initiated by the students. After building a prototype of a vermicomposting system (one that operates on worm-power), a team member — on his own — convinced the school’s maintenance department to store the equipment in one of the heated garages.

GreenDirt eventually packaged the compost and sold it in four or five local garden centers. The startup operated for about 1½ years until the students finally moved on, he said.

Miller’s proudest moments were when the students asked for his help after hours or on weekends — the very definition of student agency.

“You’ll take time out of your personal life to have conversations with them on Slack, to look at what they’ve created, to spend time on a Saturday or Sunday working on their business model,” he said.

That attitude has been particularly noticeable during the era of remote instruction. For the better part of two school years, students around the country have taken part in these “hands-on” classes from some place other than their classroom. Several teachers said their students must display even more enterprise now, since they’re not all together in school.

And they’re rising to the challenge. Jones, the teacher from Leander Independent School District, said her class meets daily and “everyone is there with cameras on every day. It’s incredible,” she said. “The learning hasn’t slowed down at all, and the students haven’t left their bedrooms.”

... everyone is there with cameras on every day. It’s incredible. The learning hasn’t slowed down at all, and the students haven’t left their bedrooms.

Dana Jones, INCubatoredu course teacher
The teams have had to learn to hold meetings with mentors and other community contacts through Zoom or Teams, which has given them yet another marketable skill, she said. And her pandemic-era students have also had to display more flexibility with the products they’ve created. Jones said many teams in her classes couldn’t perform beta-testing on their products because of social distancing restrictions. That includes one that developed a new type of table for tailgating — because football games were cancelled.

“Our students were ready to pivot because we teach that process throughout the class,” Jones said.26

One group from Coine’s class in Collier County, Florida, gathered inspiration from the pandemic to solve a problem at the school. Students couldn’t buy unwrapped food in the cafeteria because of health restrictions, so the group created the All-In Box, fancy boxed lunches served in plastic containers for $5. Students could go to a website and select meals — things like crepes, mushrooms in Thai sauce, onigirazu (seaweed and rice) — then pick up their meals the following school day.

“They built the website before I even told them to,” Coine said.27
REIGNITING A LOVE OF TEACHING

This boost in student agency has created an unexpected (and much-needed) side effect: teachers are feeding off the positive energy generated by the teams of student entrepreneurs. And though that has always been the case, many youth entrepreneurship teachers say their colleagues’ enthusiasm grew when schools first transitioned to remote instruction in early 2020.

During COVID-19 in particular, teachers wanted to be reminded why they originally entered the profession.

That’s because morale is at an all-time low, a combination of chronic overwork, the challenges of remote instruction and fears about learning losses. In January, a survey from the EdWeek Research Center revealed that nearly 75 percent of respondents said their morale had dropped since the pandemic, a significant increase from 63 percent reported in March 2020. The January survey also found that 42 percent said they feel less motivated at work because of the pandemic.

Some research suggests that low teacher morale and long-term stress can impact student performance.

But INCubatoredu teachers say they’re hearing that the program is one of the bright spots for teachers who are struggling to find inspiration. The entrepreneurship students remain engaged in the businesses they’ve created, and the teachers follow suit.

Coine said teachers of other subjects have taken a greater-than-usual interest since the district’s recent transition to in-person learning. When one group needed welding for its project and another needed someone with expertise in auto repair, teachers in both of those programs picked their best students to work with the INCubatoredu teams on their projects.

“It’s really fun to help build a business that matters to (their students),” he said.

His colleague in Collier County, Kelly Wilson, said there’s a buzz in school about how much the students love the program and how much fun the class is.

Entrepreneurship education is about more than teaching students how to make a pitch to investors or create a marketing plan. For educators, the joy comes from watching students develop agency, said Stephan George, an INCubatoredu teacher in the Leander Independent School District. It’s about showing them how to look within themselves to find motivation to learn, to solve problems, to care for their communities and to summon the courage to try again after failing.

“When they start becoming young adults and start taking control, it’s super inspiring,” he said.
CONCLUSION:
PURPOSE AND THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION

The idea that students and teachers alike are looking to entrepreneurship programs to find purpose during a global health crisis speaks volumes about the transformative power of experiential learning. It’s equally compelling that students enrolled in programs promoting agency and highly engaging content found it easier to deal with the transition to at-home learning. For many of these students, experiential learning environments, such as entrepreneurship education programs, equipped them to face uncertainty with creativity and adaptability. Their experience helped them develop creative problem-solving skills, the ability to thrive amid uncertainty and pursue their own learning goals.

With so much talk about what has been “lost” over the past year, the stories in this report should provide hope as we see the examples of what students can accomplish — during a most challenging year — when they are empowered to pursue their purpose.

Teachers and mentors in entrepreneurship programs could have predicted such an outcome. They have been witnesses to the power of student agency when coupled with a sense of purpose for years. It’s the reason these programs are gaining popularity around the country. And it’s all the more reason for districts, as they continue to reimagine learning based on lessons learned over the past year, to consider giving their students and teachers the same opportunities to discover the power — and joy — of purposeful, project-based learning.
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