

Philadelphia's Entrepreneurship Ecosystem and Its Students: A Pathway to Shared Success

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We know the statistics; nearly all net job creation in the US since 1980 is occurring in firms less than five years old. The National Bureau of Economic Research found that the youngest companies (less than a year) account for 20 percent of all new jobs in the U.S and that businesses between one and five years old may account for as much as two-thirds of all U.S. job creation (*Forbes*, 2012).

In the past, our country has looked to risk-taking innovators to recharge the economy. However, the reality is that over the last thirty years, the US has been seeing a steady drop in new startup activity. According to an analysis of Census Bureau data, the number of startup firms as a percentage of all firms in the US has declined from about twelve percent in the 1980s to roughly seven percent in 2010 (*Forbes*, 2012). There are many theories as to why this is occurring, however the one consistent sentiment is that startups are a vital part of our economy and communities must be strategic to support them.

In recent years, Philadelphia has taken notice of this data and has stated loud and clear that it supports innovation with new initiatives including StartUp PHL and the School District's partnership with the Middleton Foundation to improve Career and Technical Education (CTE) opportunities. The StartUp PHL grant has already funded two initiatives that specifically support Philadelphia's entrepreneurial ecosystem and skill development in students to ensure they are a part of it.

The first recipient is PhillyCORE Leaders to support their Philly SEED (Supporting Entrepreneurship in Education) Innovation Competition, a crowd-funded and crowd-sourced opportunity for education entrepreneurs. StartUp PHL will fund social entrepreneurship training for all the SEED finalists through a partnership with the Social Innovations Lab class at the University of Pennsylvania's Fels Institute of Government. The second recipient is StartUp Corps, an organization that provides curriculum, workshops, mentorship and micro-capital for Philadelphia high school students who wish to launch micro-ventures. These investments are clear signs that our City is embracing entrepreneurship and aims to prepare the rising work force to play a vital role in this area of development.

As Philadelphia positions itself to be a hub of innovation and entrepreneurship, we must be thinking strategically about the surrounding ecosystem in which entrepreneurship thrives in our City. We must pay

particular attention to how our students are being prepared for a market in which young entrepreneurial companies are going to be a stable source of employment. This will require the support of all pillars in our City -- government, business, education and communities -- and will demand that there is communication and collaboration across them.

Philadelphia Ecosystem Supporting Innovation

We realize that young companies are a vital part of our economy and our City aims to ensure that entrepreneurship has a place in our City. People will argue whether an entrepreneurship ecosystem can be intentionally designed or if it must evolve naturally. I believe it is a combination of both--the result of moving markets, but also involving the awareness of a community to see the shifts and be strategic in helping sustain growth and development in the necessary areas.

These critical elements for a thriving entrepreneurship ecosystem include a good culture that promotes innovation, access to sufficient financing, supportive central leadership, additional institutional supports and quality human capital.

Philadelphia is not Silicon Valley and it does not need to be; we have local resources and conditions that will shape our own ecosystem. We have rich opportunities in health

services as well as education. Job opportunities in these areas have grown by 19% in the last ten years and have been by far the greatest area of growth in jobs for our City ("The State of the City," 2012). We need to shape our ecosystem around local conditions such as these.

Philadelphia's private sector is also stepping up to create the necessary financing to support this ecosystem. With new initiatives in our City like GreenLight Philadelphia, Investor Circle Philadelphia and Philadelphia School Partnership, the private sector is investing in innovation throughout our City. Of course the necessary checks and balances need to be in place to ensure that this infusion of capital, especially in public space, is done justly.

Philadelphia's leaders -- through policies and practice -- are also sending signals that they are ready to support innovation. With initiatives like the Mayor's StartUp PHL and the Economy League's World Class Greater Philadelphia, our City is stating imperatively that we are embracing entrepreneurship and the startup community, recognizing it will play a significant role in the future for our students and our City.

In addition to these critical existing elements, our City needs a larger number of surrounding institutional supports for this ecosystem. Organizations and initiatives like PhillyCORE Leaders, Philadelphia Social Innovation Lab and Oxford Mills (a mixed-use development designed to create a community of organizations committed to

education reform in Philadelphia, with a planned designed space for education entrepreneurs) aim to be a significant part of this.

The last and most vital piece to a successful entrepreneurship ecosystem is quality human capital. We already have this in our classrooms in Philadelphia, in both teachers and students. Over the past few years, an incredible network of teachers has been organizing to support one another and ultimately, our schools. -This network includes organizations like Teachers Lead Philly, Reflective Teacher Network and Teacher Action Group (TAG).

Teachers are empowering one another and working together to identify and request necessary changes that will give them the skills and space to replicate best practices, and to continue to enhance their instruction. This is critical to ensure that students are prepared for this new type of job market that has emerged and that our City is embracing.

Preparing Philadelphia Students for the Entrepreneurial Job Market

Researchers and educators are making it clear that students need a different set of skills to be successful in college and in the new job market. Students must be able to critically assess and use the limitless amount of information that is available to them. In addition, in a

market in which traditional jobs are less readily available, character strengths such as resilience and creative thought become necessary to chart the new waters of employment and contribution to community.

As an entrepreneur and someone who spends all of my time in Philadelphia schools, I am constantly reflecting on how we are preparing our students for this new reality. When I enter classrooms, I focus less on where I do not see this "preparation" happening and more where I do. Because that is where the hope lies, in knowing that we can prepare our students for their futures, and we simply have to find ways to extend this preparation to all students.

You just know when you enter the classroom of a teacher who understands what it means to "prepare" students for the years ahead. It is not a classroom compartmentalized around traditional subjects, but instead the learning is focused around skills: inquiry learning and real-world problem solving.

Thinking about this, I am reminded of a teacher I had the pleasure to work with in one of our District public schools, Ms. Stone. The way she weaved between the skill and the application was truly an art, not to mention being able to identify which students had mastered this skill and which had not, and then taking fluid steps to re-teach the skill while other students moved forward into deeper levels of applications. All of this done while inspiring persistence

in her students, encouraging them to take the necessary steps to grasp the concepts and strive beyond basic comprehension.

Ms. Stone was modeling problem-solving for her students: they witnessed her working through a challenge, drawing on all of her resources and knowledge to answer the question. It was in these moments, lacking any apparent script, that the real instruction took place.

I also watched Ms. Stone let students push the limit on behavior when working together on a problem/project. When it got to a certain threshold, she was able to bring the focus back. However, it was on the fringe when the students got to explore their behaviors and their choices. This brought up significant reflections from the students about their choices in those moments, what they think they did well and where they think they can improve.

It was in these moments of uncertainty when powerful learning and reflection happened. If it was not clear before, this highlighted the skills of Ms. Stone: her stellar management of a classroom of 30 students, having the respect and the confidence to lead them back to center and the understanding of when she needed to refocus them. In addition, her questioning was artful, knowing just what questions to ask to ensure that reflection and learning occurred in this instance.

Ms. Stone knows that character is built through

experiencing and overcoming failure, and she gave her students opportunities in every class to do just that. She understands that intense curiosity is a necessary character trait that will help her students thrive, so every day there were chances to exercise this curiosity through "big questions" and access to resources to answer them. Ultimately Ms. Stone knew these qualities, persistence, resilience and curiosity, would be at the root of success for her students now, but even more so in the future.

I would watch in awe as Ms. Stone made this art look effortless. However, as an educator, I understood the complexity of the work she was doing. She was helping her students become skillful thinkers who made good choices, all the while ensuring they mastered the necessary basic math content. She was infusing thinking skills into every moment of teaching content.

When I see this happening in a classroom, I am reminded that the truest innovators are excellent teachers. They are natural disrupters who enter the profession of teaching because they are driven to find new, more effective ways to get information to people. I used to have a sign on my desk when I taught fifth grade that stated, "If my students do not learn the way I teach, I will teach the way they learn." I got this from an amazing mentor and it encapsulates what many of us are passionate about as educators, identifying the comprehension challenge and using all resources available to cross the divide and effectively communicate the information to all students.

Then, we observe as students continue to build on it and take it to the next level.

Clearly the simple solution is to have more classrooms like Ms. Stone's. However, we all know this is far from simple due to many complexities. The majority of our schools are not built around structures that allow this level of freedom to create and teach a curriculum that focuses on the development of students' critical thinking skills through authentic, real-world "performance tasks" within content areas. Even those that are still struggle with resources to realize all they want to make happen in their classroom.

And then there are those teachers who are willing to dig up the resources, go to all ends to secure whatever elements they need to create this environment, but then realize they need additional development in this area. They need coaching or to connect with another teacher who has walked this road before. There is a struggle to find these resources: the time and expertise for development in this area of instruction.

Given the reality of our current education system, we know that a healthy budget will not solve these challenges. Therefore, we need to think differently about how we empower our schools and teachers to enhance collaboration across schools. So many great examples of innovation exist among Philadelphia's teachers and schools, including but certainly not limited to, The Sustainability Workshop, YouthBuild, Big Picture Schools,

Science Leadership Academy, and Russell Byers Charter School (Expeditionary Learning), as well as organizations supporting our schools such as StartUp Corps and Need in Deed. In addition, there are countless teachers, like Ms. Stone, who are instructing at this transformational level in their own individual classroom. However, given our current structures and systems, these are not the norm. And the norm is where most of our students live.

So how do we ensure that all students are exposed to this type of instruction, (promoting critical thinking and character building), and how are teachers supported in the development of practices that will lead to these outcomes? The answer to this is incredibly complex and one that as a community we are beginning to come together and answer with events this spring like PhillyCORE's "Teacher Effectiveness #COREchat" and Teachers Lead Philly's "Forum on Conditions that Teachers Need to be Effective". Progress will start with a City that invites key stakeholders to the table, creates a space to share ideas, provides the tools to allow comprehensive collaboration and promotes courage to think creatively about new structures and systems.

Philadelphia has all of the key components to support both an entrepreneurship ecosystem and a school system that develops students who will thrive in it. As we begin to have the key conversations to work together to make this happen, we just have to keep the spirit of our City and most importantly, our students, at the center of it.

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