

Thundering Toward Excellence in Entrepreneurship



a market-analysis project for merchandise being considered for the store. This mini-store was available in the cafeteria during lunch periods and served as both an advertisement for the future store, as well as a survey instrument to better understand what products the student body would be willing to purchase.

More challenging lessons on inventory and merchandise required students to research appropriate wholesalers and develop an objective interview process for them to use when choosing vendors. Field trips focused on visits to local school districts to learn more about their school store operations. Students gained valuable insight from faculty and business owners through a vital partnership with Shippensburg University's Entrepreneurial Studies program. Students were also encouraged to actively participate in Carlisle's DECA Chapter in order to strengthen their presentation skills and learn more about the different career pathways a business education could afford them.

By Michele M. Orner and Joseph Wagner

In May 2013, Carlisle High School's Bison Corner, a school-based enterprise (SBE) in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, was recognized at DECA's annual International Career Development Conference in Anaheim, California. Carlisle's school store was one of 166 SBEs achieving Gold Level certification. This accomplishment was an important milestone in Carlisle High School's plan to provide Business Academy students with real-world opportunities. More importantly, Gold Level certification signified to all district stakeholders that a clearly defined, student-centered approach to teaching entrepreneurship motivated Business Academy students to take ownership of their learning and strive for excellence.

Going Into Business

In September 2011, students in the Entrepreneurship class were tasked with converting a storage room in the gym into a successful retail venture. During the first several weeks of school, the instructor, Joseph Wagner, divided students into six teams, with three students per team. Wagner wanted the students to approach the store's opening as real-life entrepreneurs would, using concepts essential to the development of a business plan.

As students mastered the different facets of entrepreneurship, they applied those same ideas to their team's business plan. Every theory lesson was followed by practical application. For example, lessons on marketing required students to design

Money and Materials

The biggest obstacle the young entrepreneurs faced was financing the project, as the school district was not in a position to provide the capital needed to renovate the space and purchase the start-up inventory. Constructing and renovating proved to be daunting tasks, as well. For example, although the storage space was large enough to accommodate a walk-in retail facility, it could only be accessed through the gym; therefore, they needed to construct an appropriate storefront so that customers could access the store from the hallway in front of the gym.

With administrative support, and in keeping with the school district's goals of

student achievement, fiscal responsibility and stakeholder engagement, the class challenged local businesses, student groups and community organizations to participate in their entrepreneurial vision. The stakeholder response and engagement were overwhelming, and were a testament to the community's belief that it was important to teach entrepreneurship at the secondary level. Through generous monetary contributions from Members 1st Federal Credit Union and the district's Bison Foundation, donations of material and time from local contractors and stores, and the services of the district's Construction Trades program, not a single taxpayer dollar was needed to fund the project.

Articulating the Vision

Once financing was settled, each team had to complete a culminating project—an oral defense of their business plan. Wagner coached students to treat this presentation as if they were business owners seeking support from potential investors. In May 2012, parents, fellow students, teachers, administrators, business owners and community representatives were invited to hear each team present its business plan. It was exciting to watch these young leaders, dressed in their best attire, articulate a clear vision for the school store.

After careful review of each team's plan, administration chose a combination of the six plans to establish an SBE at the school. This step meant that the district was ready to move forward with re-establishing an essential aspect of school life that had been missing from Carlisle for 15 years. Renovations and construction began in the spring of 2012, with many of the Entrepreneurship program students providing the labor, and continued over the summer with a grand opening scheduled for the start of the new school year in September. Samantha Myers and Ali Harclerode, students from rival business plan teams, were chosen as the first school managers. With the store in their capable hands, we knew it would succeed.

Preparing for Customers

The preparations for an October 2012 grand opening, to coincide with the high school's College and Career Exposition, along with putting the final touches on the physical facility, kept both classes and the student store managers very busy. Such projects as a "Name the Store" contest, along with recognition from the Carlisle Chamber of Commerce as the first SBE member, gave students even more opportunities to take ownership of the project.

Although the students were ready and eager to open their store, Mother Nature was not. Several days before the grand opening, Hurricane Sandy caused record flooding and power outages in Pennsylvania, closing school districts in the Carlisle area for several days and forcing the cancellation of the College and Career Exposition.

In the end, Hurricane Sandy proved to be a teachable moment, reinforcing the pros and cons of owning a business. Students went to work on "Plan B," and in consultation with the students, Wagner and other staff made the decision to move the grand opening to a Saturday in November when the school's Model UN would be hosting a holiday craft show. This proved to be a win-win for everyone. Since the store was centrally located within the busiest part of the craft show, the grand opening attracted many visitors. The Bison Corner opened to record sales and positive exposure.

DECA School-based Enterprise Certification

In order to make the store even more successful and highly respected, the students decided to seek certification for Bison Corner through DECA's SBE program.

The SBE certification process is best described as an educational tool that forces students to reflect continually on the effectiveness of their business enterprise. There are three levels of certification: bronze, silver and gold, with the program operating under a "Challenge by Choice" theme,

which allows students to pursue the level of certification they wish to earn. Students had to submit extensive documentation to demonstrate adherence to various marketing and retail standards. This required the Entrepreneurship students, with leadership from the school store managers, to compare the business plan they were using to the standards established by the DECA SBE program. Students spent countless hours documenting the benchmarks and defending the business philosophy of Bison Corner.

Not long after, they sent their 200-plus page application to DECA. Even though stakeholders were more interested in the feedback the application would garner, receiving the basic level of certification would have been reason to celebrate. When DECA notified the students that their school-based business, operational for less than a year, had earned the Gold certification, they were overjoyed.

Maintaining Excellence

The DECA SBE certification program continues to drive the curriculum, as students must defend a new standard every year to maintain the store's Gold certification. In four years, the store's business plan must be reviewed in its entirety to ensure compliance with SBE standards. Challenge by choice remains the theme of the program, as no student wants to be responsible for Bison Corner losing its gold seal of approval.

In reviewing news articles in preparation for telling this story, the authors came across a comment Harclerode made to the press after the grand opening. She said, "I see myself in this store." That statement is a fitting testament to the ownership students have in Bison Corner and the relevance of career and technical education. ■

Michele M. Orner, Ed.D., is the director of the Center for Careers and Technology at Carlisle High School. She can be reached at ornerm@carlisle-schools.org.

Joseph Wagner is a Business Academy teacher and DECA advisor at Carlisle High School. He can be reached at wagnerj@carliseschools.org.