

Project teaches Appalachian students how to become entrepreneurs

By Jon Hale

Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues
School of Journalism and Telecommunications
University of Kentucky

MOREHEAD, Ky. – Amid predictions of continuing migration from Appalachia by its young people, a new educational program is teaching elementary and middle school students in Appalachian Kentucky the entrepreneurial skills that can prepare them for a future in the region, creating jobs for themselves and others.

The E-Discovery Challenge helps 15 of the Kentucky counties that the Appalachian Regional Commission classifies as economically distressed. The project, launched by the Kentucky Entrepreneurial Coaches Institute at the University of Kentucky, provides students with small seed grants to start their own small business, which they spend a semester developing.

Students are divided into teams, which craft a business plan, develop a product and participate in a year-end sale event. Any profits (income exceeding the amount of the seed grant) are distributed equally among team members.

The students learned economics, mathematics and other essential business skills, but they say the biggest lesson they learned was the value of working together and trading ideas with others. “I learned you have to trust your teammates and work with them to do the job,” said Morgan County student Josh Adkins, whose team made T-shirts.

Another middle-school student, Devon Middleton of Elliott County, agrees. “It’s good to get along with people even if you might not like them,” Middleton said.

Middleton said the program made him and his teammates consider becoming entrepreneurs as adults, while Adkins aspires to be an investor in new businesses. “I want to make money from my job and then invest it in something like what we did” in the program, he said.

Students and teachers in the program say the most valuable lesson may have been that there is opportunity in Appalachia.

“It helped them see that they are not necessarily stuck,” Lawrence County teacher Joe Halfhill said. “If they have a new idea or a twist on an old idea they don’t have to do what they have always done, what their parents did.”

Lawrence County has coal, but most of the 15 counties in the project do not. “There is nothing in our area to do unless you go to college and become a nurse or teacher,” Lewis County teacher Lisa Zornes said. Students “have to leave for a good job unless they can start their own business.”

The Entrepreneurial Coaches Institute trained 55 teachers in Bath, Carter, Casey, Clay, Clinton, Elliott, Hart, Lawrence, Lewis, Monroe, Morgan, Robertson, Russell, Wayne and Wolfe counties to incorporate the E-Discovery Challenge’s entrepreneurial curriculum into the classroom. The project reached nearly 1,700 students and created close to 500 small businesses, Institute Director Ron Hustedde said.

All the counties in the program are rural. Hustedde said 18 percent of rural Americans already have their own business, and that number is projected to increase. He is seeking funding to continue the program through next year and expand it to other Appalachian counties. Of the 78 economically distressed counties in Appalachia, 40 are in Kentucky.

“This process has sparked creativity and imagination in the students and teachers alike with a new hope for the possibilities for the future,” said Melony Furby Denham, the E-Discovery Challenge project manager.

Student products ranged from bottle-cap necklaces to pop-tab bracelets to Gummy Bear popsicles and super-hero coloring books. Many of the student teams finished the semester with a profit, but some were faced with a negative return, which teachers said taught valuable business lessons.

Most of the educators at a project wrap-up meeting at Morehead in July said they were surprised by how much thought and effort the students put into their enterprises.

“The kids could be creative, and they could do more than we had realized,” Lawrence County teacher Alicia Robinette said. “We learned we could push them further than we thought.”

Some teachers in the program were reluctant to say that entrepreneurial education should be required for middle school students, but all agreed on the benefits of the hands-on nature of the E-Discovery Challenge.

“Instead of giving back a definition [of social studies terms] they can use their own life experience to define these terms,” Halfhill said. “When they can do that, they have learned it.”

The program can “change the way people think about integrating social sciences with math, science, etc.,” Hustedde said.

Still, the most valuable lesson may have been pointing students’ eyes toward the future, teachers said.

“We recently lost a factory in our community and a lot of people lost their jobs,” Bath County teacher Jennifer Blount said, adding that one of the best conversations she had with her students during the program came when they discussed what small businesses could do for their area. “We talked more in detail about rural issues. They are concerned about the future of our community.”

For more about the E-Discovery Challenge contact Furby Denham at melony.furby@uky.edu.

Jon Hale is a native of Floyd County, Ky., and a graduate assistant at the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues, based in the School of Journalism and Telecommunications at the University of Kentucky.