

## >>> Influencing a culture of K-12 entrepreneurship in Northern Nevada



By Robert C. Hooper, Executive Director, Northern Nevada Development Authority

**W**orkforce development — at any age — is the most important component of economic development and includes supporting entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurs improve the economy by creating new businesses, increasing jobs, and stimulating economic growth.

However, entrepreneurship, both nationally and statewide, has been steadily declining since 1996, according to the Kauffman Index which tracks and measures entrepreneurial activity. Rural entrepreneurship in the U.S. is almost extinct. In 2016, the Federal Reserve observed that at 3.6% the rate of business owners under 30 years of age was at its lowest in 30 years.

The Kauffman Index also reported that young entrepreneurs are declining, and this national long term trend is ongoing. When entrepreneurship declines, it is usually accompanied by a decline in innovation and disruptive technologies. Consolidation typically occurs, and competition becomes scarce. The economy becomes unhealthy or unstable, with stagnant wages and lower productivity.

Nevada ranks as the state with the lowest percentage of business owners per capita. To improve that ranking, the Nevada Lieutenant Governor's Entrepreneurship Task Force is charged with addressing the needs of the entrepreneurial, small business, and startup communities. Its efforts are focused on developing a master plan for entrepreneurial development in Nevada.

I am honored to serve on the Northern Nevada Entrepreneurship Task Force, which has been examining the various pieces of the entrepreneurship puzzle, including K-12 entrepreneurship programs. Most of the northern Nevada K-12 school districts have incorporated programs related to entrepreneurship into their curriculum, with a variety of these opportunities available throughout the Sierra Region.

For example, K-12 students at several schools have participated in business and economic fundamentals education through a partnership between Bank of America® and Junior Achievement®. Most K-12 business and entrepreneurship classes are offered at the secondary school level, as part of the Career and Technical Education (CTE) curriculum.

There are two well-known private organizations that have youth entrepreneurship programs. The Boy Scouts of America® Merit Badge Program offers an Entrepreneurship Badge. One of the key requirements is for the scout to write a business plan that includes a description of the product or service, a market analysis, basic financial and operations information, and a marketing and promotion plan.

In the spring, the cookie entrepreneurs of the Girl Scouts of America® Cookie Program do their best to persuade us to purchase their delicious treats. While they earn money for their troops, these enterprising young women also learn essential life skills, such as goal setting, decision making, money management, people skills, business ethics, and more.

Many programs are offered through public-private partnerships. The USDA Cooperative Extension 4-H offers the Be the "E" national curriculum which helps young people in grades 7 to 12 to discover if they have what it takes to be a successful entrepreneur. Sponsored student clubs affiliated with The Future Business Leaders of America® (FBLA®) provide high school students enrolled in business classes with opportunities to compete against other high school students at the state and national level.

Many students throughout our region and all of northern Nevada, participate in FIRST® LEGO® League (FLL) programs for middle and high school students. In true entrepreneurial fashion, FLL requires students to design, build and program a robot using LEGO MINDSTORMS® technology for competition on a table-top playing field. The FLL teams also must research a real-world problem and develop a solution that is both feasible and cost effective.

The core values of the programs, which align with many entrepreneurial characteristics and qualities, help the students to develop critical thinking and team-building skills, basic Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) applications, and presentation skills. Ten years of impact data show that 87% of FLL students are more interested in doing well in school, and 88% are more interested in post-secondary education.

Gene Coulson, Ed.D., Executive Director of the National Consortium for Entrepreneurship Education, said, "In this age of educational accountability through standards and assessments with only one right answer and success measured by test scores, we need to keep young minds open for alternative ways of thinking, allow innovative ideas to spark and grow, to create an entrepreneurial culture that will grow great people and great communities. We need entrepreneurship education for every student, every year."

K-12 education that includes entrepreneurship preserves the innovative and creative thinking skills that exist in the very early grades, which tend to disappear as a student moves toward high school graduation. There is enhanced support for academic learning, as this kind of culture provides clearer context for academic subjects, giving those studies a grounding in real world applications. It addresses the "brain drain" experienced by our rural communities, which suffer when their young, bright, often entrepreneurial thinkers leave to pursue a career, resulting in unmet needs in the communities, along with lost jobs and a shrinking local tax base.

A culture of entrepreneurship can be influenced through our K-12 education systems. Every student ought to have the opportunity to explore entrepreneurship as a career path. NNDA is happy to report that our K-12 school districts are responding to this challenge, and we will continue to encourage and support fostering entrepreneurship in our Sierra Region schools. ■

## Inside the Nevada Entrepreneur Task Force

Mark Hutchison,  
Nevada Lieutenant Governor



Entrepreneurship plays a key role in growing Nevada's economy. With the spirit of creativity and innovation, entrepreneurs are introducing new products and services into the existing market thereby improving efficiency and profitability, creating job opportunities, and stimulating economic growth.

These important activities not only accelerate Nevada's growing economy, but create a diverse environment where small businesses and startup companies can develop and thrive.

In 2016, Lieutenant Governor Mark Hutchison established two regional entrepreneurship task forces charged with addressing the needs of the entrepreneurial and startup communities in Nevada.

The task forces, located in Northern and Southern Nevada have been tasked with compiling regional recommendations and a framework to address the strengths and challenges faced by their respective entrepreneurial communities.

Together, the eighteen statewide members will focus their efforts on developing a long-term master plan for entrepreneurship in Nevada, increasing collaboration among entrepreneurial communities, and working to make Nevada the top state for entrepreneurs and startups.

*Eagle Valley Middle School's Jedi Engineers FIRST LEGO League represented Carson City and the United States by winning second place in June for Robotics Design and Programming at international championships held in Bath, U.K.*

