

Business Partnership Forum on Entrepreneurship

*Naperville Community Unit School District 203
Naperville, Illinois*

Administrators from the Naperville School District helped budding entrepreneurs visualize their future during a conference last year. The district's Business Partnership Forum on Entrepreneurship brought 65 students and 55 small business owners together to discuss finance, marketing, and what it takes to turn the business plan of their dreams into a reality.

District administrators thought that a conference would help strengthen the 21st Century Skills curriculum. 21st Century Skills is a program for students in grades K-12, which helps students become productive citizens through lessons in civics, health, and financial literacy. Naperville's School, Family, and Community Partnership (SFCP) team decided to strengthen entrepreneurial skills last year. They decided that a business conference that brought students from its two area high schools together with successful Naperville entrepreneurs would be a good way to support the curriculum.

SFCP officials sent invitations to community organizations, including several Rotary Clubs and the Naperville Area Chamber of Commerce. High school teachers helped recruit of business-savvy students, based on students' interests and class enrollment.

In mid-November, the students and community business leaders gathered at the Holiday Inn for a classic conference-style lunch. The event opened with a brief talk from the district superintendent, restating the goal of the afternoon and sharing the district's vision. He also shared a YouTube video that highlighted the fast-paced nature of today's technology-driven economy. Following the video, local business leaders led a panel discussion on related topics.

After lunch, conference attendees reconvened in small groups to discuss the ins and outs of being an entrepreneur in Naperville. Community members from local

catering companies, design firms, beauty salons, and other specialties moderated the discussions at their assigned tables. High school students shared their ideas and questions about investment, communication, and marketing skills in today's business world.

Many students were inspired to follow their small-business dreams and happy to have the opportunity to network with potential future employers. Teachers recruited the business leaders to come to speak in their high school finance classes. Business owners were delighted to share their knowledge and experience with the group.

"I have talked to a number of people who were in attendance and everyone was very, very pleased with the event," one business owner said.

At least one community leader proposed a three part plan to expand the school's entrepreneurial program, including a business start-up guidebook, a business mentoring partnership, and a micro-loan plan for the most serious students. "My mind has been percolating about the next steps for high school kids," he said.

The SFCP used its funds and donations from business partners to cover the \$1,200 cost of the forum. Administrators hope to continue and to strengthen the entrepreneurship curriculum in various ways.

*Nina M. Menis
Director of Community Relations
(630) 420-6475
nmenis@naperville203.org*