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Porcher L. Taylor III

University of Richmond, ptaylor@richmond.edu

Catherine S. Fisher

University of Richmond, cfisher@richmond.edu

Michael J. Caslin

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Perspectives: Entrepreneurship Training Can Empower Students Being Left Behind

by Michael J. Caslin III, Porcher L. Taylor III and Dr. Catherine S. Fisher

If Congress renews the controversial No Child Left Behind Act this fall, as it is expected to do, some impoverished, low-performing students will inevitably lose the hypercompetitive race to get into college. As a result, unemployment or low-paying jobs might await them as perceptively unattractive options.

Perception, tragically, often becomes reality.

Entrepreneurial self-employment, however, would hold great promise for business-minded students, if they learn entrepreneurship in high school and can test out their innovative business plans on consumers in their own neighborhoods and beyond — especially Internet start-up ideas. The social and community networking success of MySpace opens a wide door for anyone to market a new idea or product to a myriad of potential customers instantly.

In a bold, dramatic move to address the entrepreneurship learning deficit in NCLB, Congress should amend the law to fund the certification of high school educators to teach entrepreneurship electives, especially to students most likely to be left behind. Alternatively, Congress should pass separate legislation to this effect or the federal Department of Education should launch this as its own initiative without a Congressional mandate. Unfortunately, there is no current push by lawmakers to include entrepreneurial education in NCLB.

The National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE), which has trained over 4,700 teachers since 1987, would be the ideal pedagogical vehicle to launch such an initiative. During its existence, more than 180,000 students gained the ability to follow a pathway to prosperity — not be left behind — by taking NFTE's rigorous, relevant and relationship-driven micro-MBA type program.

NFTE students have: been taught by their teachers to conceptualize, design and defend their own business plans guided by volunteer business plan coaches, learned to open up bank accounts and conduct business operations while tracking income and costs per unit of product or service sold. Drafting a personally chosen business plan is an experiential and asset-based approach to enable students to understand the importance of grammar and calculating personal profits provides context and rewards for learning math. Significantly, the NFTE's teaching programs have been adopted in 600 mostly low-income high and middle schools in 21 states and 13 countries. This demand-side growth comes from success at NFTE's two founding sites 1988: South Bronx, N.Y., and Newark, N.J.

Such an experiential approach could prepare our future workforce to be innovative, competitive and entrepreneurial. And it would complement the rote learning taking place day after day in classrooms across the country in order to meet minimum NCLB benchmarks—an approach that leaves most students bored and many teachers demoralized. In today's classrooms, the lack of experiential and contextual methods — which are the heart of entrepreneurship education — keeps the students needing the most help left behind and turned off.

With America becoming ever more of an entrepreneur nation, the timing is right to amend NCLB. An amendment should promote the teaching of standardized academic skills, including essential life skills such as entrepreneurial development, which would help students prepare for success in the marketplace via success in the classroom.

Recently, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation's research and policy guide, "On the Road to an Entrepreneurial Economy," stated that "a central task for educators and policymakers is not only to give students the key skills to

thrive in any work environment — reading, math, science, technology and history — but also to nurture whatever creative and entrepreneurial skills each of us has by birth. Programs that teach basic entrepreneurial skills to middle and high school students might be especially valuable for children from disadvantaged backgrounds as a way to encourage their interest in academic achievement in general.”

A 2006 Junior Achievement survey revealed that 71 percent of middle and high school students wanted to be self-employed at some point, up from 64 percent in 2004. The phenomenal explosion in recent years of business downsizings and overseas outsourcing of U.S. service jobs only adds to the need for entrepreneurship skills.

Most important, NCLB mandates math and reading proficiency. In order to help deserving youth who are entrepreneurially inclined to avoid being left behind, Congress needs to amend NCLB so those students can gain entrepreneurship literacy as an essential step towards participation in the world’s most dynamic entrepreneurial economy.

Michael J. Caslin is executive vice president for public policy of the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship and adjunct professor at Babson College’s Arthur M. Blank Center for Entrepreneurship.

Porcher L. Taylor is a professor at University of Richmond’s School of Continuing Studies who also teaches business ethics at the university’s Robins School of Business.

Dr. Catherine S. Fisher, a professor of education and director of Richmond’s Teacher Licensure Program, is a retired high school principal with 15 years each of classroom teaching high school administration experience.