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Get a job? No, make a job

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By **Laura Vanderkam**

Michael Simmons, 25, always liked the idea of working for himself. At age 16, he started a Web development company that blossomed as dot-coms proliferated. But then the bubble burst, and many of his clients imploded. Faced with new challenges, Simmons decided he had a lot to learn about running a business.

Still a teen, he won a scholarship to an online class offered by the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE). He learned how to use spreadsheets, make PowerPoint presentations, speak publicly about his business and find mentors to help his business grow.

"It helped me get an understanding of what the real world was like," he says. And it helped him launch Extreme Entrepreneurship Education, a business that conducts workshops on the nitty-gritty of self-employment for high school and college students.

As Simmons and his protégés have learned, not all successful entrepreneurs are born that way. Like anything, entrepreneurship can be learned. Unfortunately, it's rarely taught. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which turned 5 last month, pledged to make sure kids learned the reading and math skills the modern economy requires. But those aren't the only skills modern students need.

More and more Americans are becoming self-employed, both for the lifestyle and out of necessity. Yet fewer schools teach entrepreneurship skills than teach kids to be excellent readers and mathematicians. But this is starting to change — and that bodes as well for the economy as do the increases in reading and math skills NCLB is starting to inspire.

From its Manhattan headquarters, NFTE has been quietly spreading the self-employment revolution in schools since 1987. Founder Steve Mariotti ran his own import-export company until he was mugged by some young thugs in the early 1980s. Shaken, he decided to become a teacher to confront his fears. He soon realized most of his Bronx and Brooklyn charges had great potential.

Boredom in the classroom

"The biggest problem in education in certain communities is that kids are bored," he says. (A 2006 Gates Foundation survey found that more than six out of 10 high school dropouts were earning a C average or better when they quit.) Mariotti's students showed sharpened interest when he discussed running a business. So over the years, he developed a curriculum that challenged students to try entrepreneurship themselves.

NFTE has since trained 4,100 teachers, and its programs have been adopted in 600 mostly low-income schools. The organization also runs online courses such as the one Simmons took.

More than 150,000 students have written business plans, learned how to open bank accounts and tracked income per unit of product or service sold. Research from Harvard and Brandeis universities finds that NFTE students are not only likely to consider entrepreneurship as a path out of poverty, but they also grow academically. Writing business plans is a sneaky way to make kids think about grammar.

Calculating profits has kids learning math. Harvard research found that NFTE kids show a 32% increase in interest in attending college vs. a decrease over the same time frame among comparable low-income student groups. "This is the biggest breakthrough in at-risk youth education in the last 100 years," Mariotti says.

But it's not just at-risk kids who need to learn about entrepreneurship.

Micro-businesses

The vast majority of U.S. businesses have fewer than four employees. Young people are even more interested in starting these micro-businesses than are adults; a 2006 Junior Achievement survey found that 71% of middle and high school students would like to be self-employed at some point, up from 64% in 2004.

Technology makes this increasingly possible. For a few bucks a month, anyone can create a website that advertises a product or service to the planet's 1 billion Internet users. That's the pull factor.

There's also a push. Few people can count on lifetime employment in a big company. So corporate types

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moonlight or move around within their companies to stay marketable, notes Marci Alboher, author of the upcoming *One Person/Multiple Careers: A New Model for Work/Life Success*. "The idea that everyone has their one little spot on the line is gone," she says. "We all have to be entrepreneurial," which she defines as constantly learning new skills.

If the point of school is, in part, to prepare you for life after school, then more kids need to learn how to pick up new skill sets, judge markets, find their competitive advantages and make their cash registers ring. NFTE schools recognize this, and so do many colleges; 2,100 colleges and universities teach entrepreneurship, *BusinessWeek* reports, up from fewer than 400 in the early '90s.

This growing population of trained free agents will benefit the whole economy. A study by technology consultant Allan Engelhardt found that when you triple the number of employees in an organization, you halve each one's productivity. The corollary is that in general, more small businesses mean greater productivity. Greater productivity per worker translates into higher living standards, just as better reading and math skills usually do.

Entrepreneurship education programs recognize that, just as you can learn to read, you can learn to run a business. Michael Simmons has taken that lesson to heart. He and his Extreme Entrepreneurship Education partner (and wife) Sheena Lindahl were just named to *BusinessWeek's* Best Entrepreneurs under 25 List.

They're building a business while doing what they love. That's certainly a message worth teaching.

Laura Vanderkam, author of Grindhopping: Build a Rewarding Career without Paying Your Dues, is a member of USA TODAY's board of contributors.

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