

Junior Achievement: connecting the classroom and the real world

By SARAH GONET
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Educators far and wide cringe when they hear students say they don't think what they are learning in classroom is going to help them succeed in the real world.

"Programs like this help make the connection between school and their daily lives, even at a young age," said Katie O'Hara, a Grade 5 teacher at Our Sisters' School.

O'Hara is speaking of the Junior Achievement program. Founded nationally in 1919, Junior Achievement (JA) represents a unique partnership between educators, volunteers and the business community with the goal of fostering work readiness, entrepreneurship and financial literacy in students ranging from kindergartners to high school seniors.

"Business and finances can seem like pretty abstract concepts to a fifth grader, but by having someone come in and explain it from a real world perspective makes a difference," O'Hara said.

With public high school graduation rates of 55 percent and 69 percent in New Bedford and Fall River, respectively, clearly there are a great number of students who simply don't grasp the value of education.

Junior Achievement is working to help them make the connection.

A major focus of the curriculum is centered on financial literacy; teaching students the value of money and how they can ensure a secure financial future for themselves.

"I've found that a lot of people remember the JA of their high school days, but don't really know a lot about what we do today," said Caroline Paradis, president of Junior Achievement of South-eastern Massachusetts (JASM), one of 122 JA chapters nationwide.

Headquartered in New Bedford, JASM serves 21 cities and towns throughout Greater New Bedford, Fall River, Attleboro, Taunton and Wareham.



Lou Othote, a volunteer from Southern Massachusetts Junior Achievement talks about America's free enterprise system to a classroom of 5th grade girls at Our Sisters School in New Bedford. PHOTO: MIKE VALERI/ The Standard-Times



Shay responds to a question posed by Lou Othote regarding sole proprietorships

New Our Sisters' School head said she is 'totally inspired' by OSS

For decades, Junior Achievement functioned as an after-school program for high school students built around the concept of young people developing and running their own companies. As times have changed, so has JA. Today, programs are primarily administered within the classroom by a community volunteer who leads the students through a series of discussions and activities, sharing his or her professional and life experiences along the way.

"We have a lot of amazing volunteers who bring an incredible amount of experience to the table," said Paradis.

Enter Lou Othote, a retired salesman who honed his skills in the technology sector. He was recruited to JASM by his neighbor, a board member at the time, in 2002.

Today, Othote continues to spend his time teaching fifth grade students about the intricacies of free enterprise and entrepreneurship.

"I'm pushing 70 and I'm still learning," said Othote to the class of fifth grade Our Sisters' School students in front of him as he led them in an exercise where they develop their own companies.

The concepts they came up with ranged from a pet sitting business and fashion line to accessories conjured from duct tape and a new age cell phone that projects images.

"Just look at what you did here today. It's phenomenal," said Othote to his energized class of budding entrepreneurs.

"Lou is the perfect example of what JA is all about," said Paradis, adding that like many non-profits that are primarily volunteer driven, finding funding is a challenge that never goes away.

"We don't receive state or federal funding," she said. "We rely on grants and the local business community for support."

This year, the goal of JASM's approximately 120 volunteers across Southeastern Massachusetts is to reach 4,500 students.

"For the 2013-2014 school year, our goal is a 17 percent growth in JA programs which would increase the total number of students impacted to 5,300 or more; however, this takes volunteers and funding," she said.

JASM is also working to implement a brand new event for high school students during the 2013/14 academic year called the JA Titan Challenge. The Titan Challenge is a day-long business strategy competition in which students form teams of three and compete against other high school teams using a business simulation game.

The game puts the students in charge of a virtual company where they have to make key decisions around issues such as price production, marketing, capital investments, research and development and charitable giving.

The impact of these choices will lead to the success or failure of their company.

"By exercising critical fiscal and managerial decision-making, students get first-hand experience in the challenges of operating a successful global business," said Paradis adding that at the conclusion of the competition, top performing teams take home scholarships.

"This is food for my soul," said Othote of his time volunteering with JASM.

"I'm going to keep coming back as long as I can stand in front of that classroom."

JASM is currently looking for sponsors or players for their IRONMAN Golf Tournament on May 28 at TPC Boston. Contact them at 508-997-6536 or caroline.paradis@ja.org for more information.