



Equity Through Entrepreneurship: NFTE's Approach to Education and Inclusion

In his 2019 memoir, *Goodbye Homeboy: How My Students Drove Me Crazy and Inspired a Movement*, Steve Mariotti, the founder of the Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE), highlighted the transformative power of entrepreneurship. He wrote, "imagine if all young people [...] were business literate enough to create their own pathways out of poverty. To sell a product or service to another human being is an act that has the power to revolutionize lives, rebuild families, and forever change communities. Why aren't we teaching all the world's children how to do it?"¹ This belief underscores the foundation of NFTE, which Mariotti established in 1987. He was driven by the conviction that entrepreneurship education equips students with the skills, confidence, and knowledge needed to recognize opportunities, uncover their passions, develop their talents, and expand their networks. Through this student centered approach, NFTE provides them with the tools and resources to build pathways to success.



Students engage in a day of learning during the 2024 World Youth Entrepreneurship Challenge in New York.

Mariotti, who passed away in October 2024, left behind a legacy rooted in the belief that empowering students through entrepreneurship education can lead to transformative outcomes. Since its founding, NFTE has upheld this mission while evolving and adapting its programs to continually emphasize equity and inclusion for all its learners. In 2020, the organization launched the Culturally Responsive Curriculum Taskforce to ensure its work serves all learners effectively. This effort reflects NFTE's ongoing commitment to adapting its practices to be inclusive in order to meet the needs of diverse learners. In our ever-changing education landscape, we must continue to provide learners with opportunities to see

themselves in the lessons in the classroom as well as the applications to the real world.

Research shows that despite BIPOC individuals having higher total entrepreneurship activity, White individuals remain more likely to run established businesses.² Entrepreneurship education seeks to address this problem by providing equity and inclusion and leveling the playing field for all learners.

1. Mariotti, Steve, and Debra Devi. *Goodbye Homeboy: How My Students Drove Me Crazy and Inspired a Movement*. BenBella Books, 2019.
2. Global Entrepreneurship Monitor. "Record-Breaking Entrepreneurial Growth in U.S. According to Latest GEM National Report." GEM, 14 Sept. 2023, <https://www.gemconsortium.org/news/record-breaking-entrepreneurial-growth-in-u.s.-according-to-latest-gem-national-report>.

About NFTE

The Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE) is a global education nonprofit that empowers partners to integrate entrepreneurial education across curricula and equips youth in under-resourced communities with the skills, connections, credentials, and real-world experiences needed to lead change and own their futures. Since 1987, NFTE has reached more than a million learners worldwide.

By providing the tools to allow all learners to succeed throughout their lives, entrepreneurship education can be the great equalizer. NFTE infuses our commitment to equity and inclusion throughout all its work, such as creating holistic internal operations, having robust external engagement and continually evaluating its comprehensive curriculum.

Entrepreneurship education, as exemplified by NFTE's practices, holds significant potential to empower students and transform educational outcomes. We believe NFTE serves a model for how education systems nationwide can embrace entrepreneurship and culturally responsive practices to center students in their learning and give them the tools to succeed in life.



2024 National Youth Entrepreneurship Challenge Winner Lucio Hightower-Rojas, with runners up Sonolia Allen and Jessica Kahn and NFTE President and CEO, J.D. LaRock.

Equity-Driven Innovation in NFTE's Programs and Curriculum

Since its founding in 1987, the Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE) has been at the forefront of creating innovative, experiential entrepreneurship education programs for young people in under-resourced communities across the United States and around the world. NFTE was among the first to pioneer the concept of the entrepreneurial mindset—a set of skills and attitudes that can be learned and refined through practice—empowering students to unlock their potential and chart their own paths to success. NFTE's programs have a lasting impact on the young people it serves. Students who complete these programs are more likely to engage in learning, achieve their educational and career goals, launch businesses, and experience increased lifetime earnings and greater job satisfaction. By cultivating an entrepreneurial mindset, NFTE uniquely prepares students for career readiness and success in the future of work.

While NFTE's mission has always centered on opportunity and equity, the organization continues to evolve to address societal challenges. In 2020, following the murder of George Floyd, NFTE's staff reflected on its values and identified areas where more could be done to promote equity. This led to the creation of the Culturally Responsive Curriculum Taskforce (CRCT), a cross-departmental team focused on reviewing and improving NFTE's programs, curriculum, and competition series. Each year, the Taskforce sets goals aimed at enhancing NFTE's efforts to serve students and educators more inclusively.

“The work of the CRCT is important because it's a group of dedicated NFTE staff who want to see the various elements of NFTE's programs be as inclusive, accessible, and culturally responsive as possible. The cross-functional nature of the task force allows us to make improvements in our programs beyond just curriculum enhancements.”

-- Jason Delgatto, Vice President of Curriculum and Research, NFTE

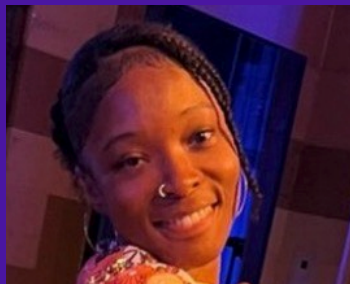
Updates to NFTE's Curriculum to Support Learning for All Students

NFTE offers a range of programs for young people, spanning middle school through post-secondary education. These programs provide students with opportunities to learn how to create business plans and deliver pitches, while also developing essential entrepreneurial skills and attitudes such as adaptability, creativity, communication, and problem-solving. These competencies are critical not only for entrepreneurship but also for career success across industries.

Ray Parris, an Instructor of Digital Media, Business and 3-D Design at New World School of The Arts in Miami-Dade County and longtime NFTE teacher said, “Equity and inclusion in the curriculum are vital to creating learning environments where every student feels seen, valued, and empowered. A culturally responsive curriculum equips young people with the confidence and skills they need to thrive and contribute meaningfully to their communities.” Through continuous reflection and action, NFTE exemplifies how organizations committed to education and youth empowerment can remain adaptable and responsive to the needs of their communities.

Building Culturally Conscious Libraries: The Vision of Read It & Leave It

Miosha Randolph-Johnson's entrepreneurial journey began long before she encountered NFTE. As an elementary school student, she created handmade paper fans adorned with Lisa Frank stickers and sold them for 25 cents each. Her budding business was so successful that it drew the attention of her school principal, who made her stop selling and return the money. Disappointed but undeterred, Miosha later started an after-school babysitting business, providing mentorship, homework and general care to young people in her community. These early experiences demonstrated her natural entrepreneurial drive, which would later be nurtured through NFTE.



Miosha Randolph-Johnson

Miosha's formal introduction to entrepreneurship education came during a summer BizCamp at New York University hosted by NFTE. The program offered her valuable support and resources, reinforcing her ability to buy and sell products in her community while developing essential business skills. NFTE remained a touchstone throughout her journey, providing opportunities such as NFTE's alumni business accelerator, Founders Forum. It was there that she developed a strategic plan for her nonprofit, Read It & Leave It, which builds culturally conscious libraries for students of color in book deserts, inspired by Miosha's observations as a young mother. "I noticed there weren't any books in

homes," she explains. Her nonprofit began with books her son had outgrown and grew into a movement that changed the culture of local schools and communities.

For Miosha, entrepreneurship education is vital because it presents young people with opportunities they might not know exist. "If you don't know something like this exists, you won't know it's an option," she says. She emphasizes the importance of economic empowerment, creativity, and self-sufficiency, particularly for communities of color. By fostering creativity and innovation, entrepreneurship education equips students with tools to imagine a better future and the skills to make it a reality.



Students from Read It & Leave It enjoy the love of reading and their new books.

To guide improvements to NFTE's curriculum, the Culturally Responsive Curriculum Taskforce partnered with the California Conference for Equality and Justice (CCEJ) to conduct a comprehensive analysis of NFTE's programs and materials. Based on the insights from this collaboration, NFTE made several meaningful adjustments to its curriculum. These changes included incorporating more stories of BIPOC entrepreneurs, tailoring content to better support diverse learning needs, and providing students with opportunities to explore and reflect on their individual identities and backgrounds as they develop their business plans. NFTE remains committed to ensuring its curriculum stays relevant and supportive by conducting annual reviews and making updates to meet the evolving needs of students.

Delivered by educators globally, NFTE programs are continually refined to enhance their impact and accessibility. NFTE staff collaborate closely with partners to identify and implement curriculum improvements. One such partnership in 2023 involved the Perkins School for the Blind, the oldest school for the blind in the United States, which supports over 1.2 million children with disabilities worldwide. The NFTE team sought Perkins' expertise to make their curriculum more accessible for students with disabilities. Perkins reviewed NFTE materials and suggested modifications, including the addition of large print and Braille, to ensure inclusion for all learners.

Recognizing that some students, particularly English Language Learners and those with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), required additional support, NFTE's curriculum team introduced innovative resources to enhance understanding.

For instance, they created a Read-Along Companion for the preparatory program for Certiport's Entrepreneurship and Small Business certification exam. This tool, powered by AI, provides a human-like reading experience with natural pauses, making the learning process more engaging and accessible. Plans are underway to develop similar companions for other NFTE programs.

In addition to these innovations, NFTE responded to teacher feedback by introducing more resources tailored to students with IEPs. These include supplementing online lessons with print materials and embedding inclusive differentiation strategies within the curriculum. These enhancements ensure that all students, regardless of their needs, can effectively engage with and benefit from NFTE's programs.

NFTE Read-Along Companion

What Is Human-Centered Design Thinking?

Design thinking is a process for solving problems with a focus on a consumer's needs and interests. This process relies on observation and deep customer **empathy** to achieve a continual cycle of creative solutions.

Think of it this way:
Imagine a problem a friend of yours has. Have you ever tried to help solve it?
This is the same way that many successful businesses begin.

Read-Along Companion

To improve accessibility and learning outcomes for students who learn best by listening, NFTE provides "bite-size" audio clips that surpass the capabilities of screen readers.

Each lesson is delivered in natural language, akin to a teacher or podcast, offering scaffolded instruction to guide students through every step of the lesson. NFTE's approach not only cheers students on but also supports teachers who may need to slow down to read content aloud in class. Adapted scripts are readily available for translations, and AI-generated recordings can be easily updated.

Enhanced Volunteer and Mentorship Networks

NFTE's robust volunteer network and competition series are central to the mission. Students who complete NFTE's programs often have the chance to pitch their business ideas in regional, national, and global competitions, with opportunities to win funding to launch or grow their small businesses. Professional volunteers play a key role in this process, serving as coaches, mentors, and judges throughout the programs and competitions. These interactions are highly impactful, frequently resulting in meaningful and lasting connections between students and volunteers.

The Culturally Responsive Curriculum Taskforce prioritizes enhancing both the volunteer network and the competition series. Efforts include recruiting a more diverse pool of volunteers, improving training to better equip volunteers for their roles, and inviting more NFTE alumni to serve as judges, given their firsthand experience with the process. As we begin 2025, the Taskforce aims to refine the competition judging rubric to ensure greater clarity and fairness in the evaluation process, further strengthening the experience for all participants.

Staff Engagement is Paramount to Success

NFTE believes that staff engagement benefits both the external and internal systems of our organization. Staff at NFTE have many avenues to engage in developing the most robust entrepreneurial education programs in the world, as well as in improving internal operations. We promote staff-driven opportunities including the Culturally Responsive Curriculum Taskforce, our 2023-2024 Re-Dream NFTE process to update key areas of our organization, regular retreats and roundtable discussions, our Employee Resource Group (ERG) and several staff-led Affinity Groups. NFTE also encourages emerging leaders in the organization to develop their skills through rotating appointments on our Senior Leadership Team. Through these efforts, our staff are able to learn, grow and use the same entrepreneurial mindset skills we teach our learners.

Recommendations

Programs like NFTE serve as a model for how education systems nationwide can embrace entrepreneurship education to center students in their learning and give them the tools to succeed in the future.



Atman Patel from Baltimore presents during the 2024 Capital Regional Competition.

Given this student-centered approach, the following are recommendations that organizations should consider in approaches to their work.

1. Provide regular review of content and curriculum to ensure it looks like the community you serve. NFTE staff meet regularly to review content and curriculum and develop yearly strategic plans to ensure updates are completed. This includes review from staff across the organization to provide the best possible outcomes. Organizations should also engage with outside experts to ensure methods of delivery are up to date and include a broad range of students, including those with disabilities and English language learners. NFTE works with partners across the country that are experts in this work and is always looking for new ways to connect with more learners.

2. Ensure volunteers and mentors reflect the students you serve and are trained to be adaptable and accessible. NFTE makes a concentrated effort to provide our learners with the engagement that works best for them. NFTE volunteers and mentors enable our learners to see their full potential by using this model.

3. Involve staff in dedicated opportunities to contribute, grow and collaborate. NFTE has built-in programs to promote equity and belonging, including a range of staff-led working groups, the creation of an employee resource group, several affinity groups and the hiring of staff specifically focused on engagement and culture.

Conclusion

Equity and inclusion are at the heart of our work at NFTE. By continually reflecting on our values, mission and the outcomes we provide, engaging with other world-renowned programs, creating environments for improvement, and keeping all of these efforts centered on our learners, we are driving change in our field. We hope this can be a roadmap for other organizations doing this valuable work. Since our founding, we have been dedicated to providing our learners with the opportunities to see themselves succeed and we plan to continue doing that for years to come.

**"Entrepreneurship education is not just about starting businesses; it's about developing a mindset that can transform lives and communities."
– Steve Mariotti**

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