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Beyond Test Scores: How Entrepreneurship Education Equips Students for Postsecondary Success

Each year, as students transition from high school to their next chapter, a troubling disconnect persists: strong grades and high-test scores do not necessarily translate into real-world readiness. Despite strong GPAs and high scores on standardized tests like the SAT and ACT, many students struggle to thrive in college, career training programs, or the workforce. Critical thinking, problem solving, and adaptability are essential for postsecondary success, but these skills are overshadowed by the narrow focus on academic performance.

Students pitch their business plan to a panel of judges.

Entrepreneurship Education (EE) offers a promising, yet underutilized, solution. Rather than centering on transcripts and standardized exams, EE develops the whole student. It nurtures confidence, creativity, and resilience, while equipping young people with durable skills and a growth mindset. The Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE) has seen this transformation firsthand. Through challenge-based learning, real-world business plan development, and mentoring from professionals, students in NFTE programs build both the entrepreneurial mindset and the practical skills needed to succeed beyond high school.

If we are serious about reimagining readiness, we must move beyond narrow measures of academic achievement and embrace entrepreneurship education as a core strategy for preparing young people for the future. By expanding access to EE, embedding entrepreneurial skills into college and career readiness standards, and investing in programs that connect students with mentors and real-world experiences, we can equip every student with the tools, confidence, and adaptability needed to thrive in whatever path they choose.

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.

The Problem: A Narrow Definition of Readiness

Today's education system often equates eligibility for college with genuine preparedness. High test scores, AP classes, and polished transcripts may open doors, but they don't guarantee success once students arrive. Evidence bears this out: after the University of California system eliminated standardized test requirements, graduation rates held steady at 73% and are projected to rise to 76% by 2030[1] even as SAT submissions dropped from nearly 70% of applicants in 2019 to just 9% in 2023.[2]Similarly, a study by the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) found that students who applied without test scores graduated at equal or slightly higher rates than those who submitted them, underscoring that standardized exams are weak predictors of long-term success and disproportionately privilege students with access to costly test prep.[3]

Meanwhile, employers and universities increasingly value skills such as initiative, communication, collaboration, and adaptability—yet most high schools continue to emphasize narrow academic credentials. National data show that only 37% of high school graduates demonstrate proficiency in critical thinking and problem solving,[4] and more than half of U.S. graduates report feeling underprepared to collaborate in their first job.[5] These are not shortcomings of individual students, but symptoms of a system that privileges short-term achievement over life readiness. Teachers recognize this as well: in a 2022 Gallup survey, 70% said schools are not doing enough to prepare students for careers, citing lack of funding and limited focus on soft skills.[6]

Entrepreneurship educators have long argued that this gap undermines equity and opportunity. The Lucas Center for Entrepreneurship in Brunswick, Georgia, serves as a leading hub for entrepreneurial education, equipping students with practical, durable skills that complement and strengthen their academic achievement. Its Executive Director, Ande Notkes, emphasizes the role of agency: "It's almost like the sense of agency —that I can control the outcomes of my own world—is slipping away. That's the core of entrepreneurship education, and without it, students don't have the tools they need to be successful in postsecondary settings."Her point underscores a broader truth: unless postsecondary readiness is defined more holistically, schools will continue to send students into college and careers without the confidence and competencies they need to thrive. Entrepreneurship Education offers that holistic model.

Ande Notkes, Executive Director of the Lucas Center for Entrepreneurship

The Solution: Entrepreneurship Education

Entrepreneurship Education (EE) is not just about starting businesses. It is about preparing students to become problem-solvers, critical thinkers, and adaptable leaders in any field. EE directly targets the competencies colleges and employers say matter most. The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) defines readiness through eight core areas, including communication, teamwork, leadership, adaptability, and technology.[7] NFTE's Entrepreneurial Mindset Index (EMI) reflects nearly identical domains—such as critical thinking, creativity, initiative, and opportunity recognition—showing just how closely entrepreneurship education aligns with postsecondary and workforce expectations. The overlap is striking: the very skills admissions officers and employers seek are the ones cultivated through EE.[8]

1 UC 2030. (2024, July 19). University of California. https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/impact/education/uc-2030
2 Vaziri, A. (2025, June 20). June 2025 SAT scores released: How to check and send results. San Francisco Chronicle. https://www.sfchronicle.com/college
3 Syverson, S., Franks, V., & Hiss, W. (n.d.). DEFINING ACCESS: How Test-Optional Works. https://nacacnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/defining-access-report
4 Kalofonos, H. (2025, March 8). The Workforce Readiness Gap - Harris Kalofonos - Medium. Medium. https://hkalofonos.medium.com/the-workforce-readiness-gap
5 Ibid
6 Ibid
7 NACE. (2020). Career Readiness Defined. Naceweb.org. https://www.naceweb.org/career-readiness/competencies/career-readiness-defined
8 NFTE. (2023). The Entrepreneurial Mindset - NFTE. Nfte.com. https://nfte.com/entrepreneurial-mindset/

Both practitioners and researchers affirm this. Ryan Kinser, an assistant professor at Arizona State University and NFTE Platform Operations Manager, has seen EE from inside classrooms and through national program implementation. “When we talk about entrepreneurship education, we’re really talking about developing durable skills for life,” he explains. “Can you be creative? Can you recognize opportunity? Can you collaborate and communicate with other people? Those are the hallmarks of entrepreneurship education, not just for entrepreneurs, but for solving any kind of problem in a career space that we’re preparing students for.” Kinser emphasizes that EE creates space for students to practice failure safely, recover quickly, and apply their learning in new contexts—preparation that traditional, test-driven models rarely provide.

Ryan Kinser, Assistant Professor at Arizona State University and NFTE Platform Operations Manager

Notkes instructs a group of learners at the Lucas Center for Entrepreneurship

Notkes underscores the same point from an equity perspective. “It’s disempowering to students when they don’t have the basic tools they need to succeed in postsecondary settings,” she explains. At the Lucas Center, EE is framed as a vehicle for leveling the playing field—helping students from all backgrounds access the confidence, creativity, and collaboration skills that predict long-term success. Notkes stresses that without these tools, students may enter college with strong transcripts but quickly find themselves unprepared for the demands of independence, teamwork, and resilience. EE helps close that gap by making durable skills—not test prep—the foundation of readiness.

Zainabou Thiam, NFTE alumna and founder of Sunu Body, showcases her business’ product.

The impact of EE is best illustrated through student stories. Take Zainabou Thiam, a Babson College student and NFTE alumna, who founded Sunu Body, an African-inspired skincare and wellness company rooted in her Senegalese heritage. Guided by the values of teranga—hospitality, warmth, and community—Thiam launched her venture while still in high school. NFTE provided her with a platform to refine her business plan, connect with mentors from Ernst & Young, and ultimately win the 2023 NFTE New England Youth Entrepreneurship Challenge. “I learned a countless number of durable skills throughout my Entrepreneurship Education in high school,” she reflects. “These translate and help me succeed in the hard classes I am taking at Babson, they allow me to manage my time and juggle all my responsibilities, and of course help continue to build my business.” Her journey underscores how EE does more than prepare students for admissions—it equips them for the realities of both higher education and entrepreneurship.

Beyond individual stories, the research evidence is strong. EE is a form of project-based learning (PBL), which Lucas Education Research has found increases engagement, boosts achievement, and builds collaboration and

Beyond individual stories, the research evidence is strong. EE is a form of project-based learning (PBL), which Lucas Education Research has found increases engagement, boosts achievement, and builds collaboration and resilience.[9] The National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) reports similar outcomes: high school students exposed to Skills for Effective Entrepreneurship Development (SEED) programs showed gains in problem-solving, initiative, and perseverance, translating into both academic and non-academic success.[10] NFTE's curriculum is built on these proven frameworks, blending entrepreneurial projects with mindset development to give students comprehensive preparation for college, careers, and life.

In short, Entrepreneurship Education redefines readiness. It equips students with the durable skills and confidence that test scores cannot capture, levels the playing field for those without access to privilege and ensures that young people graduate prepared not just to get in—but to thrive once they arrive.

Policy Recommendations

To ensure all students gain access to the benefits of entrepreneurship education (EE), policymakers must take strategic action rooted in research and real-world success. Below are five key policy areas for implementation.

Integrate Entrepreneurship Education into High School Curricula

Entrepreneurship education (EE) should be embedded into standard high school curricula as a core component of 21st-century learning—not relegated to electives or after-school programs. EE provides students with hands-on opportunities to apply knowledge across disciplines, develop creative solutions to real-world problems, and cultivate critical life and career skills. States like Delaware have recognized this, incorporating entrepreneurship and financial literacy into their statewide K–12 academic standards.[11] In Iowa, the state's K–12 Core Standards include 21st Century Skills, with entrepreneurship explicitly named as part of the employability skills domain.[12] Iowa has further advanced this integration through initiatives like STEM Innovator,[13] which connects high school students with entrepreneurial, project-based learning experiences tied to local business and community challenges. These state-level actions demonstrate how EE can be institutionalized to broaden access and embed durable skills into formal education systems.

In Singapore, students take part in NFTE programs delivered by the Halogen Foundation.

Internationally, the European Commission has documented more than 60 impactful EE programs in schools across its member countries.[14] These programs report measurable improvements in student motivation, academic engagement, and readiness for higher education and work.[15] In Finland, for example, entrepreneurship education is integrated into national curricula through project-based learning and interdisciplinary modules, fostering entrepreneurial mindsets from an early age.[16] Meanwhile, Singapore's national EE strategy, embedded

9 Gse, P. (n.d.). Rigorous Project- Based Learning An Inquiry- Based Educational Approach High-Quality Professional Learning for Project-Based Learning.
10 Curto, V., & Fryer, R. (2011). NBER WORKING PAPER SERIES ESTIMATING THE RETURNS TO URBAN BOARDING SCHOOLS: EVIDENCE FROM SEED.
11 Rosen, S. & Gibson, S. (2016). Financial Literacy Education: State of Delaware creating its first-ever K-12 financial literacy standards. University of Delaware. https://www.udel.edu/udaily/2016/december/financial-literacy-education/
12 Iowa Department of Education. 21st Century Skills. https://educate.iowa.gov/pk-12/standards/academics/21st-century-skills
13 Jacobson Institute. STEM Innovator. https://jacobsoninstitute.org/steminnovator
14 European Digital Education Hub & EU Digital Education Action Plan. (2025). European Commission. http://learnworkecosystemlibrary.com/initiatives/european-digital-education-hub-eu-digital-education-action-plan/
15 OECD. (2020). https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2020/03/policy-brief-on-recent-developments-in-youth-entrepreneurship_bf53d760/5f5c9b4e-en.pdf
16 Finnish National Agency for Curriculum. National core curriculum for primary and lower secondary (basic) education. oph.fi/en/education-and-qualifications/national-core-curriculum-primary-and-lower-secondary-basic-education

within its broader SkillsFuture initiative, provides high school students with exposure to innovation labs, startup incubators, and business competitions.[17] These examples underscore the global consensus: when entrepreneurship education is part of the formal school experience, it better prepares students not only for college admission but for persistence in postsecondary pathways, lifelong adaptability, and civic participation.

Promote Cross-Sector Partnerships

Students participate in NFTE programming delivered at Babson College.

Entrepreneurship education is most impactful when built on strong, sustained partnerships between K–12 schools, higher education, community organizations, and industry leaders. These collaborations ensure that students access real-world mentorship, authentic projects, work-based learning, and exposure to entrepreneurial ecosystems beyond the classroom. When employers and postsecondary institutions co-design curriculum, learning becomes more relevant, applied, and future focused. For students, these relationships often open the door to internships, college credit, entrepreneurial hubs, and networks that support long-term success.

A powerful model for such collaboration is the Triple Helix framework, which unites academia, government, and industry to co-create innovation ecosystems.[18] Already widely adopted in Europe and Asia, the model has shaped entrepreneurship programs at leading institutions such as Babson College, INSEAD, and the London Business School, where students engage in incubators, accelerators, consulting projects, and venture competitions. Translating this model to the high school level holds immense potential: early-college high schools, career academies, and initiatives like Junior Achievement's Company Program in Canada or Young Enterprise UK demonstrate how secondary students can launch ventures and connect with business mentors. By scaling these kinds of partnerships, school systems can create more coherent pipelines from education to employment, making entrepreneurship a lived experience rather than a theoretical subject.

Redefine Accountability to Reward Durable Skills

Today's school accountability systems remain heavily focused on standardized test scores, often overlooking the durable, transferable skills that drive long-term success—such as collaboration, adaptability, initiative, and problem-solving. To better reflect what colleges, employers, and students themselves value, policymakers should expand accountability frameworks to measure and reward these competencies. States like Indiana are already exploring this shift through a new point-based accountability model that includes indicators such as work-based learning and soft skills development, alongside academic performance.[19] Similarly, Pennsylvania's Career Ready Skills (PA CRS) framework weaves social-

Students connect with each other at the 2024 Mid-Atlantic Youth Entrepreneurship Summit.

17 MySkillsFuture. (2025). Who is it For? https://www.myskillsfuture.gov.sg/content/portal/en/career-resources/career-resources/education-career-personal-development/skillsfuture-series.html
18 Mandrup, M., Jensen, T.L. Educational Action Research and Triple Helix principles in entrepreneurship education: introducing the EARTH design to explore individuals in Triple Helix collaboration. Triple Helix 4, 5 (2017). https://doi.org/10.1186/s40604-017-0048-y
19 Indiana Department of Education. Indiana's Future Accountability Model. https://www.in.gov/doe/accountability/

emotional learning and employability competencies directly into K–12 standards, reinforcing their role in day-to-day instruction and student assessment.[20]

Solonia Allen celebrates being announced as a finalist at the 2024 NFTE National Youth Entrepreneurship Challenge.

Other scalable models include the Brookings Institution's Soft Skills Report Card, which provides teachers with a way to assess practical, observable behaviors like completing challenging assignments or demonstrating persistence—skills that predict college and career success.[21] ACT research further supports this approach, finding that behavioral skills such as cooperation and sustained effort are strong predictors of high school completion and postsecondary enrollment.[22] Additionally, frameworks like CASEL's social-emotional learning domains offer a robust foundation for integrating relationship-building, decision-making, and self-management into both curriculum and accountability.[23] Taken together, these models show that rewarding the development of durable skills is both feasible and essential. By aligning incentives with the real-world competencies students need, education systems can deliver a more equitable and future-ready definition of success.

Conclusion

The evidence is clear: test scores alone do not define readiness, nor do they ensure success once students leave high school. What students need most are the durable skills—creativity, adaptability, initiative, collaboration—that allow them to thrive in college, career, and life. Entrepreneurship education provides a proven pathway to cultivate these competencies while also expanding opportunity and equity. By embedding EE into curricula, building cross-sector partnerships, and redefining accountability to reward real-world skills, policymakers can align education with the demands of a rapidly changing economy.

The stakes are high. If we continue to measure success narrowly, we risk leaving countless young people underprepared and undermotivated at the very moment they should be stepping confidently into their futures. But if we embrace entrepreneurship education as a cornerstone of postsecondary readiness, we can deliver on the promise of education: equipping every student not just to gain admission, but to persist, to adapt, and to lead in a complex world. A shift beyond test scores toward durable, entrepreneurial skills is not just desirable—it is essential for a more inclusive, future-ready society.

20 Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania Career Ready Skills. https://www.pa.gov/agencies/education/resources/student/career-ready-pa/pennsylvania-career-ready-skills
21 Whitehurst, Grover J. (2016) Grading soft skills: The Brookings Soft Skills Report Card. Brookings Institution. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/grading-soft-skills-the-brookings-soft-skills-report-card
22 Walton et. al. (2022). Social and Emotional Skills Predict Postsecondary Enrollment. ACT Research. https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/2022/R2287-SE-Skills-Predict-Postsecondary-Enrollment-11-2022.pdf
23 CASEL. What is the CASEL Framework? https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-is-the-casel-framework

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