



Unlocking Creativity: How Teachers and Students Build Entrepreneurial Mindsets Together



Success in today's economy requires more than academic knowledge. Young people need an entrepreneurial mindset—a set of skills that includes creativity, adaptability, initiative, and problem-solving. These skills prepare students to navigate change, seize opportunities, and chart their own economic mobility.

Research shows that entrepreneurial mindsets don't develop by accident. They grow when teachers are confident using project-based methods, when curricula are delivered with fidelity, and when students have repeated opportunities to present and refine their ideas.

These practices build the confidence and self-

efficacy students need to own their learning and engage with real-world challenges.¹



Teachers network at the 2023 NFTE Teacher Summit.

For policymakers, the implication is clear: invest in student-centered learning, teacher professional development, and flexible curriculum models that preserve quality while expanding access. The Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE) demonstrates what this looks like in practice: a project-based curriculum where students design and pitch their own ventures, building both competence and confidence for the future.

Acknowledging the importance of developing an entrepreneurial mindset, this research-focused brief examines how classroom practices and teacher competencies shape the growth of entrepreneurial mindsets in students. The central finding of this research brief is simple: when teachers are empowered to teach creatively, students are empowered to act creatively. Together, this fusion strengthens entrepreneurial mindsets — and offers policymakers a pathway to scale practices that work.

¹ Burnette, J. L., Pollack, J. M., Forsyth, R. B., Hoyt, C. L., Babij, A. D., Thomas, F. N., & Coy, A. E. (2020). A growth mindset intervention: Enhancing students' entrepreneurial self-efficacy and career development. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 44(5), 878–908.

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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.

Methodology

This analysis, led by the NFTE research team, draws on 2024–25 data from NFTE’s Entrepreneurial Mindset Index (EMI), paired with teacher information for 1,285 students (grades 6–12) and 51 teachers. The EMI is NFTE’s validated survey tool that measures the growth of key domains of the entrepreneurial mindset such as initiative, creativity, critical thinking, and adaptability. Students complete the EMI before and after NFTE programs, allowing researchers to capture changes in their confidence, skills, and self-efficacy over time.

The NFTE research team used regression models to examine:

- Which student actions drive entrepreneurial mindset growth.
- Which teacher competencies support those actions.
- How NFTE’s supports connect teacher practice to student success.

By moving beyond theory, this study highlights which concrete classroom practices most effectively cultivate creativity, confidence, and adaptability.

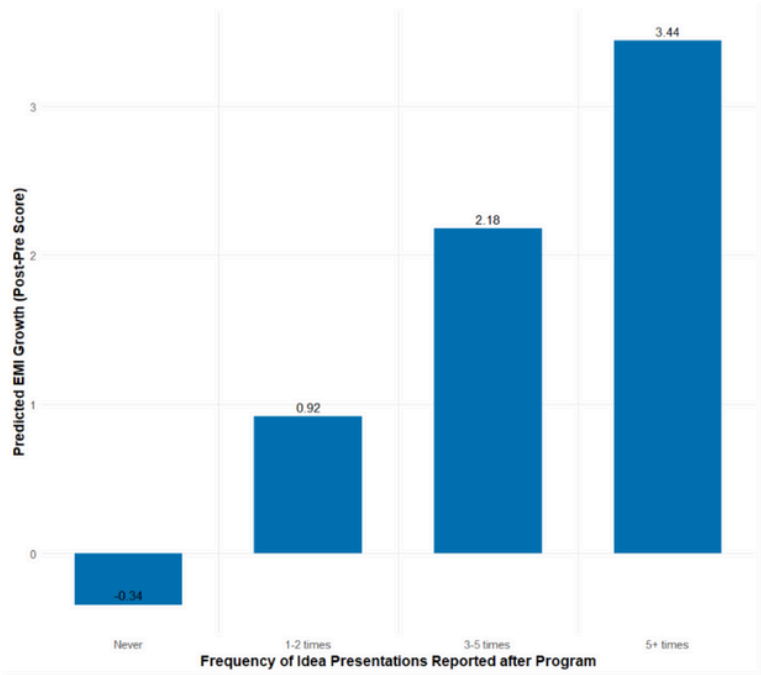


NFTE’s Entrepreneurial Mindset Index

Key Findings

Finding 1: Student presentations drive mindset growth

In NFTE programs, presentations mean more than just standing in front of a class. Students develop business ideas, create plans, and pitch their ventures to peers, teachers, community members, or competition judges. These presentations often happen multiple times: from informal classroom practice rounds to formal pitch competitions with panels of professionals. At each stage, students receive feedback, refine their ideas, and build confidence in expressing their vision.



Our analysis showed that students who presented their business ideas multiple times had the strongest entrepreneurial mindset (EMI) gains. Those who never presented actually saw declines in mindset growth, while those who presented more than five times grew by over three points.

Why? Presentations build the belief that “I can do this.” In fact, self-efficacy explained roughly one quarter of the relationship between presentations and mindset growth. Students who had repeated opportunities to share, defend, and refine their ideas became more confident, resilient, and entrepreneurial as a result.

Pictured left: Students who presented their ideas more frequently after participating in the program experienced significantly greater entrepreneurial mindset growth.

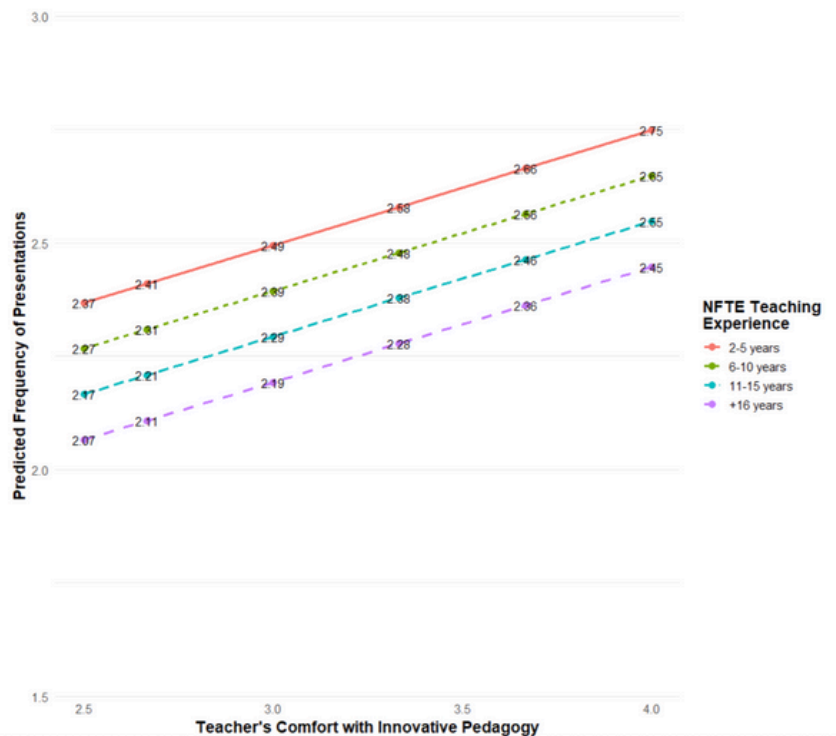
As Ray Parris, digital media & entrepreneurship teacher at Hialeah-Miami Lakes Senior High School in Florida, explains, NFTE does more than teach business plans — it “builds confidence, resilience, and adaptability. The entrepreneurial mindset teaches students how to turn setbacks into comebacks, how to spot opportunities, and how to lead with purpose. These are life skills that extend far beyond school.”

Finding 2: A teacher’s comfort with innovative pedagogy is a primary factor in driving students’ presentations

Behind every strong student outcome is a teacher who creates space for it. In NFTE classrooms, that means educators using innovative, student-centered approaches such as project-based learning, experiential activities, and guided mentorship. Instead of standing at the front and delivering content, NFTE teachers often set the stage for students to explore problems, collaborate with peers, and share solutions with authentic audiences.

The research found that when teachers reported being more comfortable with these methods, their students were more likely to present their ideas. Comfort with pedagogy mattered more than years of teaching experience, suggesting that what counts is not how long a teacher has been in the classroom but how confident they feel using approaches that invite student ownership.

This finding underscores the role of professional development in equipping teachers. When educators feel supported and capable in student-driven learning strategies, students benefit — stepping up to present more often, refining their ideas, and building entrepreneurial confidence.



Teachers who report greater comfort with innovative pedagogy tend to foster more frequent student idea presentations. This relationship holds across all levels of NFTE teaching experience, though newer teachers (2–5 years) see the highest predicted presentation rates.

Finding 3: Curriculum fidelity supports new students, while flexibility benefits all

Not all classrooms use NFTE in the same way. Some teachers weave in a few lessons, while others deliver the program more fully. The analysis shows that new NFTE students benefit most when the curriculum is implemented with high fidelity — meaning teachers use it as designed and in greater depth. For these students, fuller integration helps reset inflated self-perceptions and ground their confidence in real entrepreneurial practice.

For returning students, however, curriculum integration did not significantly predict mindset growth. This suggests that once students are familiar with NFTE, the bigger drivers of growth are how teachers teach — their comfort with innovative pedagogy and their ability to create authentic opportunities for students to present and refine ideas.

The study also compared classrooms where NFTE was taught as a stand-alone course versus those where it was

“infused” into another subject. Nearly a third of students were in infused courses. While infusion expands access, students in fully implemented courses made somewhat larger gains. Taken together, these findings show that fidelity can matter for new learners, but overall growth depends less on course format and more on pedagogy and practice.

In other words, fidelity and pedagogy matter because they connect classroom learning to what students are already experiencing in their own lives. As Luke Petro, English and entrepreneurship teacher at Chicago Hope Academy, puts it: “More students are working now or have some kind of side hustle... New technology has opened up all these opportunities, especially in the gig economy, and students are already stepping into that space. So when they engage with programs like NFTE, it just builds on what they’re already doing — it taps into that entrepreneurial mindset they’ve already started developing.”

The Big Idea: Creativity Is Contagious

The findings point to a crucial observation: teacher and student creativity fuel each other.

- Students who present and refine their ideas build the confidence and mindsets needed for college, careers, and life.
- Teachers who feel confident teaching innovatively — and who implement NFTE fully — help create the conditions for student success.
- Together, this cycle strengthens entrepreneurial mindsets and prepares young people for an economy defined by change.



Lodias Martinet, a student from the School for the Highly Gifted in Grand Prairie, Texas, presents his business, Style Selector, at the 2024 NFTE National Youth Entrepreneurship Challenge. Style Selector is an app that helps generate outfits for those who cannot decide what to wear.

Policy Recommendations

Based on these empirical findings, NFTE has the following recommendations for policymakers and educators:

Increase Opportunities for Active Student Engagement Opportunities like Presentations

Encouraging multiple, iterative opportunities for students to present their ideas and receive feedback—rather than as one-off capstone events—bolsters their entrepreneurial confidence and mindset. Schools and teachers should structure entrepreneurship curriculum to maximize student voice and ownership, making presentations a regular, formative part of learning rather than a one-time capstone event. Fostering entrepreneurial self-efficacy through opportunities such as connecting with mentors, learning about the foundations of business, and practicing entrepreneurial skills in authentic contexts can further be an important mechanism through which the entrepreneurial mindset is developed.

Policymakers can encourage this by allocating funds from the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) or the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (Perkins V) to grants that support entrepreneurship curricula featuring iterative student presentations, mentorship from local business partners, and embedded pitch competitions. For instance, Indiana’s Youth Innovation & Entrepreneurship Caucus

launched in early 2025, supports the Innovate Within pitch competition, which connects students with seed funding and real-world feedback opportunities—empowering them to bring ideas to life in the classroom and beyond.

Invest in Teacher Professional Development on Innovative Pedagogies

Teacher confidence in project-based and experiential learning is linked to student entrepreneurial growth. Districts and schools should prioritize professional learning that equips educators with the tools, modeling, and ongoing support they need to implement student-centered teaching practices effectively instead of relying primarily on traditional, teacher-centered approaches. Moreover, findings suggest that comfort with innovative pedagogy matters more than years of experience with NFTE. When hiring, training, and supporting teachers, school leaders should emphasize building pedagogical capacity, rather than relying solely on experience with the curriculum, to foster an environment where students can thrive.



NFTE Mid-Atlantic Board Member Judy Stewart presents the 2025 Emerging Teacher of the Year award to Precious Ojeda and the Veteran Teacher of the Year award to Lorena Izzo at the Mid-Atlantic Youth Entrepreneurship Challenge.

Several states are already demonstrating how policy can strengthen teacher capacity in innovative pedagogies. Delaware has embedded entrepreneurship into its statewide Career and Technical Education (CTE) pathways, pairing this with state-funded professional development to ensure teachers are equipped to deliver entrepreneurship courses effectively. California’s Career Technical Education Incentive Grant (CTEIG) program requires districts to document how funds are used to expand teacher training in project-based, career-connected instruction, making PD a condition of sustained function. In Texas, the Work-Based Learning Framework includes professional development supports that help educators connect classroom learning to authentic business and industry contexts. These examples show how states can leverage policy to scale teacher readiness for experiential learning, ensuring that entrepreneurial mindsets are cultivated in classrooms across diverse settings.

Encourage flexible models for implementing NFTE’s curriculum



It is important to champion flexible models for implementing the NFTE curriculum. Teachers should have the option to teach NFTE as a stand-alone course or to integrate its content into subjects like business, marketing, economics, or cross-disciplinary classes. The evidence shows that what matters most is not where entrepreneurship is taught, but how it is

Pictured left: Sayana Scott, a student from the Saint Louis Science Center in St. Louis, MO, presents her business, Naturals, at the 2024 NFTE National Youth Entrepreneurship Challenge. Naturals is an online and in-person marketplace, to solve both problems through ecofriendly, biodegradable, and natural products, including “Naturals Specialty Kits.”

taught. Growth in entrepreneurial mindset comes from practices that build self-efficacy and give students authentic opportunities to develop and present ideas. Policymakers should therefore focus on funding teacher training and instructional supports that strengthen experiential learning, rather than requiring rigid course structures.

Several other states are demonstrating how flexibility can expand access to entrepreneurship education. Florida includes entrepreneurship as part of its Career and Technical Education (CTE) frameworks, allowing districts to offer stand-alone entrepreneurship courses or embed entrepreneurship competencies into broader business management, marketing, and finance programs. In Colorado, the state's Career Development Incentive Program provides funding to districts that offer high-demand CTE courses, including entrepreneurship, whether taught as discrete classes or woven into cross-disciplinary programs. These examples show how flexible policy design allows entrepreneurship to reach students through multiple channels, while preserving the experiential practices that drive entrepreneurial mindset growth.



Students celebrate at a NFTE competition.

Conclusion

This study makes clear that entrepreneurial mindset growth is driven by intentional teaching practices. Students gained the most when teachers delivered NFTE with fidelity, felt confident using project-based pedagogy, and gave students multiple opportunities to present their ideas. These conditions build skills like confidence, adaptability, and problem-solving — the skills today's economy demands.

As Deneen McDonald, a middle grades teacher at Francis Scott Key Elementary/Middle School in Baltimore, Maryland notes: “While ideally speaking, all of my NFTE students would go on to start and maintain successful businesses... the reality is that most do not. However, it is the confidence gained, the lessons learned, the real-life applications, and the skill sets introduced and practiced that DO lead most of my students to success outside of the NFTE programs. I receive countless emails from students in college who feel prepared for the challenges they face because of NFTE — and even high schoolers tell me they are better problem solvers, critical thinkers, and risk takers as a result.”

Entrepreneurship education is not an enrichment — it is a strategy for equity, workforce readiness, and lifelong success. By investing in evidence-based practices that empower teachers and give students authentic opportunities to practice and present, policymakers can ensure the next generation graduates not only with knowledge, but with the mindset to turn ideas into action.

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