

Entrepreneurial Curriculum Guides Students to Success

Michael Doyle is President and CEO of Brand Iron, the only branding agency in the U.S. focused on building brands for the purpose of helping clients drive revenue. He is also driven to help young people in Denver receive the best education possible. "I'm a big believer in education," he says. Doyle is on the advisory board of Denver Venture School (DVS), a public charter school that opened in August 2008. One of the premises of DVS is that the skills required to be a successful entrepreneur are the same skills required to be successful in college and in the workplace.

"Its focus is aimed on an entrepreneurial curriculum to not only help provide education but teach students practical life skills on how to be accountable and responsible. To take charge of not just running a business but help them take charge of their own lives too," Doyle says.

DVS's daily practices reflect and reinforce its core values of R.E.A.C.H.: Responsibility, Ethical Behavior, Advocacy, Collaboration and Hard Work.

"It is open to anybody that applies and doesn't cost the students anything to participate. The school's been funded on donations by the local Denver business community, as well as foundations and corporations." Organizers raised \$1.4 million in donations, with donors including the Colorado Small Schools Initiative, the Walton Family Foundation, the Piton Foundation, the Rose Community Foundation and the Colorado Department of Education. The school also gets support from Denver's mayor, John W. Hickenlooper.

DVS follows a rigorous liberal-arts academic program that will prepare students for four-year colleges and universities. It is a project-based learning environment, based on the Expeditionary Learning model, giving students the chance to engage in hands-on studies in areas of interest to them. Through the experience of starting and running a real business, students will develop the essential qualities of entrepreneurs, including independence, self-confidence, a strong work ethic and a passion for success.

Doyle says, "One of the things students have to do is to not only write a business plan but actually start a small business and learn what it takes to run a business."

The school was started by a group of concerned educational and business leaders with a vision to open an entrepreneurial charter school in downtown Denver. "There are really no schools and downtown Denver is looking for people who not only live and shop there, but who also want to educate their kids there," says Doyle.

In the February 5, 2008 issue of the *Denver Business Journal*, DVS's executive director Amy Slothower is quoted as saying, "We will be providing a very high-quality program and are excited to open in a location that is accessible to a diverse group of students." Slothower is a former vice president of finance at the Colorado Children's Campaign.

Doyle states, "I think the demographics for the first-year students are 80% minority. We're talking to a lot of them and they're saying, 'We just want a place

where we can thrive and learn skills for ourselves, and hopefully better advance our education.' That's what cool – seeing the kids take responsibility and accountability for themselves at such a young age."

Doyle and the educational and business communities are not the only ones passionate about DVS. The students are also excited about and supportive of the school.

"I love seeing the kids get excited. Not only about the school, but about getting other kids to come because they think it's a great environment. How many schools can say their students are excited about the school they attend? That doesn't happen very often. Just to be a part of that is very rewarding," Doyle says.

DVS and its supporters are also ensuring that the parents are involved.

"It's all about building relationships," Doyle says. "You've got to meet with their families and build a rapport, talk about what an exciting opportunity it is."

To tie in with the entrepreneurial aspect of the school's education, DVS also encourages its pupils to find ways attract more students. "Right now there's only a freshman class. So we're trying to get enrollment for the next incoming freshman class."

One of the ways in which DVS got students involved in the recruiting process was to come up with a student challenge, breaking them up into crews of 12-15 students with a faculty advisor.

"We had them over to my house for the holidays and said, 'We want you to write a marketing plan on how you're going to market to students the Denver Venture School.' They were psyched about writing a marketing plan and learning about marketing," Doyle adds.

He goes on to say, "We [Brand Iron] are all about branding. And branding is not only about external messages, but doing things holistically, getting inside an organization. Helping them to grow and get to that next level requires getting plugged in. It's cool to be able to build that kind of relationship with the Denver Venture School."

For more information about Denver Venture School, go to www.denverventureschool.org.

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