What is CEO class?

CEO class (Creating Entrepreneurial Opportunities) engages high school juniors and seniors in a hands-on learning experience embedded in the context of hometown businesses. Financed by the contributions of local investors, the CEO class offers students access to mentoring relationships with business leaders and the opportunity to design and start a real business, with the goal of helping young entrepreneurs see and take advantage of the possibilities for success in their local communities.

How did CEO class get started?

High school teacher, artist, and entrepreneur Craig Lindvahl noticed that his students knew very little about the context of their hometown of Effingham, Illinois. Many students expressed a desire to leave rural Illinois and move to a more urban area. Lindvahl worked with other educators, business owners, entrepreneurs, and interested students to form the first CEO class as an opportunity for students to learn about the opportunities right in their own backyard. Graduates of the class emerged with increased personal confidence, deeper knowledge of the mechanics of the economy in Effingham, and access to personal relationships with bankers and local business owners. Some graduates even launched their own businesses in Effingham. Since then, Lindvahl has been working with the Midland Institute for Entrepreneurship (MIE) to help other communities replicate the experience of that first CEO class.

The Innovation: What happens in a CEO class?

Each weekday at 7:30am, CEO class students meet for 90 minutes at businesses in their community – never in a traditional classroom. Though the CEO curriculum is aligned with the National Entrepreneurship Education standards and Common Core, and some classes have been designed for students to receive two high school credits as well; students soon discover that this class is different from others they have attended. While learning goals are embedded in the curriculum, the trajectory of the class experience is influenced largely by the curiosity and interests of the students. Students engage in discussions with entrepreneurs, visit working businesses, and listen to guest lecturers. Through the course of the class, students develop two business plans and present them to a banker or investor. In addition, students launch one business, and showcase their new enterprise at a trade show hosted by the CEO class. They also have the opportunity to form a mentoring relationship with a professional from the business community. Grades, which are based on whether the student is doing their best work on time, are not the focus of student effort: “We don’t reward students for doing their work a certain way,” says
Lindvahl. His goal for the class is to empower students to think critically and with curiosity, and to work with excellence and consistency.

Lindvahl laments the migration of talented and motivated young adults from rural areas. He believes that while many entrepreneurial training programs exist, CEO class is the only one designed to engage student learning and interest within the real-life context of their own community. Instead of talking about entrepreneurial concepts in an abstract way, CEO class invites students to discover those principles at work in the businesses right next door. He hopes that students can see themselves as entrepreneurs with opportunities for success and engagement without leaving their home communities.

The Process: Starting a new class

There are currently 14 classes in place, with 14-16 more set to begin in the fall of 2015. Communities hosting the classes range small to large: from Newton, Illinois with a population of 3,000 to the large urban center of St. Louis, Missouri. All kinds of community members – teachers, students, school administrators, entrepreneurs, and community leaders - can initiate the process of starting a new CEO class. The Midland Institute for Entrepreneurship (MIE), based in Effingham, Illinois, provides support during the start-up phase of a new class and beyond. Developers of a new class pay a $25,000 one-time start-up fee, (and then a $5,000 annual fee), for access to materials, expert guidance, and ongoing mentoring from the Institute. Included is a carefully developed timeline to launch a new class. Important actions in this process are the formation of a governing board, securing the support of community business donors, hiring and training the class teacher, and recruiting students. For most new classes, the entire process from board formation to the first day of class takes 9 – 12 months. Lindvahl and the MIE are closely involved in the development of the class and training of the board and class teacher.

**Governing board:**
The success of any CEO class is built on a strong working partnership between education and business; neither sector is allowed to feel complete ownership or focus solely on their individual interests. Educators and entrepreneurs often see the world and pursue their goals in different ways. For example, education administrators may value careful and prolonged decision making, while entrepreneurs may be more nimble and opportunistic when making decisions. However, a healthy working alliance between the two can strengthen the outcomes of CEO class, benefiting both sectors. For this reason, the CEO governing board must include the school superintendent, principal, guidance counselor, and entrepreneurs from the community.

**Donors:**
All costs related to the CEO class development and maintenance must be covered by funds contributed by investors, not monies allocated from school budgets. These investors can be business owners, professionals, or other community members.
investors commit to giving $1000 each year. This equity in contribution is very important, so no one investor feels entitled to a higher level of involvement or influence in the class based on the size of contribution. Between 30 and 50 investors need to be in place for a new CEO class to successfully operate for one year.

**CEO Class Teacher:**
Finding the right person to facilitate the CEO class is critical to the success of the class. An effective teacher does not necessarily be trained as an educator or have personal experience as an entrepreneur, but they must possess four important characteristics:

- First, they must be the most excited learner in the room, modeling curiosity and critical thinking.
- Second, they must be a relationship builder, able to connect with each individual student to understand their unique needs and strengths.
- Third, effective facilitators must be good communicators, able to express themselves clearly through speaking and writing.
- Finally, they must be able to think critically about the evolution of the CEO class, to see what new challenges and opportunities are developing over time. MIE tailors facilitator training for each CEO teacher based on their unique background experiences and personal strengths.

**Students:**
Prospective CEO students (generally high school juniors and seniors) must prepare and submit applications for acceptance. The application usually includes essays written by the student and references from a school guidance counselor and other adults who are influential in the student’s life. Grade point average is not included in the application, because it is not generally a good predictor of student success in the CEO program. Trustworthiness and a strong work ethic are the two most important factors when selecting students. A committee of governing board members selects students after reviewing applications with names and identifying information redacted.

**Outcomes: So what?**

Lindvahl and the Midland Institute for Entrepreneurship see real evidence for the effectiveness of the CEO class model. Some outcomes, like increased confidence and the opportunity to design and start a business, benefit the students directly. But for communities suffering from an exodus of young entrepreneurs, there is another significant outcome: students emerge from the CEO class with a renewed sense of curiosity and imagination. “Our goal is to repopulate communities with kids who now see their hometowns as a place of opportunity, not as a place they need to escape,” says Lindvahl. “Kids are not stupid, they are ignorant – they don’t know what is going on in their hometowns. Once they know, they feel connected and see the possibility all around them.”
For example...

The communities of Staples, Motley, and Wadena are joining forces to bring the CEO concept to students in central Minnesota. The new class, named CEO Central Minnesota, is guided by an advisory board made up of school administrators, local business leaders, and city officials. They began working with the Midland Institute for Entrepreneurialism (MIE) in the fall of 2013, and launched the first class of students in the fall of 2014. Jerel Nelson, executive director of the City of Staples Economic Development Authority, serves on the advisory board. Despite the significant time commitment required to plan for and implement a new CEO class, Nelson is excited about the opportunity it represents for young people in his community. He admits that starting up a new CEO class has been full of challenges, but notes that the continued support from the MIE has been especially valuable. “Working with them has been very helpful,” Nelson said, “especially the weekly webinars for the class facilitator and the monthly webinars for the advisory board.” One significant challenge has been a logistical one: trying to schedule meetings and engage equally with students from each of the three communities represented in the CEO class. In addition to financial support from investors in the business community, specific funding to help cover student transportation costs has been provided by a local partnering organization. During the program, students have launched a wide variety of small businesses, including raising meat animals for sale, making and selling fleece blankets, and operating a small catering company that specializes in Jamaican food.