

# **STRENGTHENING ST. LOUIS' ECONOMIC FUTURE REQUIRES EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION**

By Tom Purcell

The St. Louis region's slow population growth, declining educational resources and economic development challenges are putting pressure on the area's collective destiny. Preparing today's young students to meet our region's future economic needs has never been more important – and challenging – than it is today. New models of education are needed...models that leverage collaboration among educators in partnership with the industries most important to our region's economy.

In St. Louis, having a talent pipeline of future plant scientists is extremely important to the short- and long-term success of the influential companies that make up our region's high powered biotech industry. But getting today's younger city students interested in pursuing such careers is difficult. We need new pathways that empower current and future generations of elementary students to pursue these careers, which is leading to new ways for delivering education.

Thankfully, several new educational partnerships are emerging in our region to meet this critical need. These models focus on:

- Fostering new relationships with educators, scientists, industry groups, volunteers and support organizations working together to fulfill a regional mission.
- Securing new resources and building sustainable educational models, systems and facilities to enhance and expand the science curriculum currently taught in K-12 education.
- Creating opportunities for students to participate in STEM-related activities in a supportive environment for student development.
- Bringing different school systems together to focus on a similar need.

To get today's young students interested and involved, several of these new partnerships are focused on addressing one of the biggest long term challenges facing today's K-12 students: food security and a sustainable urban food supply.

The Green House Venture has been providing an innovative education program since 2016 that educates, excites, and equips an inclusive population of St. Louis elementary students to pursue a sustainable world through hands-on plant growth and urban agriculture learning experiences and experiments. The first program of its kind in the Midwest, the Venture has inspired hundreds of kids from participating schools to learn about, plant, harvest, and cook healthy food for themselves and their families at the schools and on its 3.5-acre outdoor 'classroom' in the heart of south central St. Louis.

The Venture's students come from three nearby magnet, parochial, charter and religious elementary schools. Teachers at these schools partner with scientists from St. Louis University and retired educators to lead indoor and outdoor food growing projects utilizing computerized equipment and other growing technologies so children can start seeds, carry out experiments, and explore subjects ranging from soil and plant chemistry to ecology to the great cycles of nature. A planned \$4.7 million Education Center will provide the technology to carry these lessons and experiments to schools and students across the St. Louis region and beyond.

Other innovative education programs with similar goals have recently been announced by two suburban school districts. The Lindbergh School District is transforming a large historic farmers market and 3.6 surrounding acres into a modern agricultural learning center for students. The district says it wants to engage students in real ag-tech, sustainability and entrepreneurship opportunities by reconnecting them to a healthy food system and teaching them how to grow and prepare fresh food.

The Spoede Elementary School in the Ladue School District is 'reinventing' its Outdoor Learning Center, a 'living laboratory' that it says will bring the community and the school together in partnership for experiential learning opportunities related to planting, growing and harvesting various foods.

Other collaborative educational programs focus on a wider range of subjects. In East St. Louis, the Jackie Joyner Kersee Foundation and Community Center supplements local public school education by providing area students a wide range of age-appropriate STEM and other academic programs to ensure every youth is given the opportunity to achieve greatness in a learning-rich environment.

Access Academies has been partnering with multiple middle schools in St. Louis to supplement their curricula with academic, arts, leadership, and character development through extended school day and summer programs for historically underserved students. City Academy and Loyola Academy of St. Louis have advanced the integration of STEM education into their elementary education programs to foster critical, creative thinking.

All these programs represent creative and collaborative local responses to the changing educational needs of today's young students. More resources, community participation and innovative collaborations at the earliest levels of education are needed to bring these types of programs to their full academic potential and ultimately make a big impact on our region's economic future.

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*Tom Purcell is President of the Board of Directors of The Green House Venture and has served on dozens government, business, community, and nonprofit organization boards spanning a 50-year career of distinguished civic leadership in the St. Louis region including the renewal of St. Louis' Riverfront, Shaw, Downtown, and Carondelet neighborhoods. He can be reached at 314-604-8050 and purcell1@sbcglobal.net.*