

SPEAKING OUT

ROCHESTER, NEW YORK

DemocratandChronicle.com

Nurturing innovative spirit in youth is important for future



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File photo
Eric Meyer of Geneseo in 2006 presents his company Spotlight Entertainment Videography at the Young Entrepreneurs Academy.

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As the presidential election draws closer and the candidates continue to address and discuss their platforms with the American public, it becomes more apparent that technology and innovation in education have become hotbed issues for American voters.

However, if you've ever seen a teenager texting on a cell phone while downloading songs onto an iPod as he creates a new Web site for Facebook friends and photos, you may not think this is such a new issue.

For many of us as parents, educators, business leaders and role models, we recognize that our opportunity to help this thinking emerge may be very early on in a student's life cycle. Students as young as 12 years old can grasp concepts like return on investment — so don't sell them short. By developing an entrepreneurial mindset, they will be able to question, contemplate and learn how to harness their creativity.

It will bring them a sense of confidence that, when combined with core academic skills, will someday enable them to create the kind of innovation necessary

to develop new technologies and sustain economic growth. It is our belief that the desire is there for people to discover and innovate. It can be found in the nation's constant search to develop alternative sources of renewable energy, make more fuel-efficient cars and clean up the environment. It can also be found in people's need to be social entrepreneurs and find ways to help facilitate the cleanup of hurricane destruction or address issues such as poverty and education. And lastly, this entrepreneurial spirit is evident in people's fascination with the Internet and the need to constantly develop better ways to gather information and network online.

But as author and entrepreneur Judy Estrin argues in her new book *Closing the Innovation Gap*, the technologies used for Apple's iPods and Web sites such as Facebook were developed several decades ago, and if we don't strive to continue to be

on the cutting edge of technology, we run the risk of no longer being regarded as a leader in innovation.

We need to provide students with the skills, tools, confidence and belief that they can be the next generation of CEOs and entrepreneurs in the United States, and as importantly, around the world.

Recently, presidential candidate Barack Obama addressed the issue in his presidential announcement speech saying, "Let us be the generation that reshapes our economy to compete in the digital age. Let's set high standards for our schools and give them the resources they need to succeed."

Presidential candidate John McCain has also expressed a desire to educate the work force in the innovation age by creating the America Competes Act, to help address recent trends in education and training. Both men may not agree on a lot, but they are both advocates and sup-

porters of using education to increase our chances of competing and dominating the global market.

We are reminded of this need as a program we are both passionate about, and believe will help to change the world, kicks off its fifth year at the University of Rochester. This week, The Young Entrepreneurs Academy or YEA!, welcomes 30 students ages 12 through 17 from across the Rochester area who are excited and passionate about keeping the spirit of innovation alive.

The nine-month program ushers students through the steps it takes to create a business or social movement, from the ground up, whether it be product based, Web driven or socially motivated. While the end result of the program is to have created a fully formed and functioning business, it is really about giving the students the tools and the mindset they need to become innovators. It is our hope the exposure to programs like this will give our next generation the confidence and character to enable them to create the kind of innovation necessary to develop new technologies and sustain economic growth. □

Jagel is founder and executive director, Young Entrepreneurs Academy, and Laurito is president and CEO, Rochester Gas and Electric Corp.