

The Value of Creating an Innovation Talent Pipeline (Illinois Innovation Day Guest Blog Post)

April 2, 2014 / By [Illinois Science & Technology Coalition](#) / Category [Beyond the Index](#), [Jobs](#), [STEM](#), [Theme: Talent](#)

By Britta McKenna, Chief Innovation Officer, Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy

Investing in the innovation pipeline today translates to Illinois business tomorrow. Somewhere between the rise of “STEM” and “staying globally competitive” in a time after Millennials is Generation Z. [Gen Z](#) digital natives are now making their way to and through primary and secondary education and we need to be ready to nurture the emerging talents of these and other future innovators. This is particularly important in Illinois where developing – and retaining – top talent will be a key driver of the state’s knowledge-based economy. There is hard work ahead reimagining what education should look like to support this budding entrepreneurial talent. We need to allow talent to drive innovation and be willing to check our teacher egos at the door.

Navigating Talent Development

Primary and secondary schools and programs are the practice fields for talent development. Just as major league baseball has the minor league system to develop and call up homegrown talent, Illinois needs to create and promote an innovation talent pipeline. A channel should be opened that draws in students early and keeps them engaged through opportunities in Illinois higher education and finally as Illinois start-up companies.

Talent finds a way to navigate their own personal learning pathways – through out-of-school time clubs, extracurricular programs, internships, externships and summer experiences – but it is incumbent upon educators and future employers to facilitate this exploration. Organizations like the Boy Scouts of America have recently seized the opportunity, hiring STEM Coordinators to nurture program development. Specialized Exploring Posts are on their way, focusing on themes like [aviation](#) that engage community financial and intellectual capital and blur the lines of where education stops and careers are inspired. We need to help students build their personal portfolio in and out of the classroom that moves their natural curiosity of youth and self-developed ideas into something tangible. This is a great start and we need more.

Creating New Educational Spaces to Nurture Talent and Innovation

In schools, new places for our talented STEM students and innovators need to be fashioned along with programs to enrich them and sustainable models to support them. We must shift our outdated (educator) perception of students from consumers of technology and innovation to *creators* of it. Spaces need to be dedicated and philosophies authored that embrace failure as a part of learning – not something to be ashamed or avoided. Higher education and industry are already harnessing the power of innovation hubs while our talent development pipeline needs space to ideate and germinate. Three such spaces are disrupting traditional education to re-imagining the primary and secondary innovation pipeline.

On the drawing board in Aurora is the [IMSA Innovation Hub](#), where the entrepreneurial think tank meets STEM education 2.0 in a collaborative educational laboratory. The Innovation Hub will be a permanent home for the growing [IMSA TALENT](#) (Total Applied Learning for ENTrepreneurs) program to flourish. Meanwhile, this year Barrington High School has opened a new entrepreneurship classroom space, the [Business Incubator Start Up](#), where real-world entrepreneurs and business experts serve as coaches and mentors guiding student teams through the process of ideation, market research, and business plan development. Coming this fall, and just around the corner from IMSA is the [John C. Dunham STEM Partnership School](#). Arising from innovation and collaboration, this vision creates a new model of education focused on learning through STEM content, utilizing the community as a laboratory. We need more public-private partnerships like these to strengthen and model our STEM innovation pipeline.

Illinois Innovation Day is a great chance to bring together builders of our pipeline and to work on fitting the pieces together. We can talk and blog all we want, but what are we willing to co-design and implement collaboratively? It’s time to nurture our youngest talent and grow our new STEM innovation ecosystem in Illinois. Let’s not wait too long, our talent is waiting.