

Business Group: First Worcester, Then The World

InnerCity Entrepreneurs sets out for new territories

By Livia Gershon, Worcester Business Journal Staff Writer

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Beth Goldstein leads classes for ICE in Worcester and supervises other ICE instructors across the country.

In 2007, InnerCity Entrepreneurs, a three-year-old Cambridge-based organization dedicated to helping small businesses grow, expanded into new territory for the first time, adding a Worcester operation to its Boston-area base.

Now, less than two years later, I.C.E. is planning three more Massachusetts programs, it's running classes in 10 cities across the country in conjunction with the SBA, and it's preparing for even bigger things.

Kay Paine, I.C.E.'s director of programs, said the experience of starting the Worcester program taught the group's leaders about the need for having local partners to help get the classes off the ground. In Worcester, I.C.E. works with the Martin Luther King Jr. Business Empowerment Center, where it holds classes, as well as other groups like the Center for Women and Enterprise, local colleges and local business leaders.

"Because Worcester was our very first city outside of Boston, I think we did learn quite a bit about what it takes to start a program," Paine said.

All Over Massachusetts

Now, I.C.E. is using that knowledge in Lowell, where it is planning a new program for Merrimack Valley businesses, scheduled to start next year. After that, Paine said, I.C.E. is looking at the Pioneer Valley and the Fall River/New Bedford area as possible spots to add additional sites. Those plans won't move forward until at least 2010, though, she said.

"We're going to kind of take a little pause here as far as expansion in 2009," she said.

But outside the state, I.C.E. is expanding in different ways. It's now in the middle of the first year of providing the instructors and curriculum for SBA's Emerging 200 initiative, an effort to help 200 inner-city small businesses grow and create more jobs. Beth Goldstein, a Holliston resident who taught the Worcester

and Boston classes, is now supervising the instructors chosen to lead classes all over the country. She said the techniques that have worked in Boston and Worcester are proving applicable elsewhere as well.

“The issues and challenges are very similar,” Goldstein said. “We were thrilled that we didn’t really have to make any modifications.”

The SBA classes are shorter than the regular nine-month I.C.E. program. They started in July and will wrap up in mid-December. But Goldstein said they still convey the same information as the original program.

The main difference between the original I.C.E. classes and the SBA collaboration is that, in the later, the SBA recruits participants, finds classroom space and takes care of other logistics, freeing I.C.E. up to concentrate on instruction.

Tuning Up the Lessons

The I.C.E. curriculum itself has changed over time. Jim Fee, the group’s Worcester programs coordinator, said he helped with an effort to improve the lessons, concentrating on the subject of finance.

“Teaching finance to people who don’t have a financial background kind of is always a challenge,” he said. “Although we were doing it the way that typically it has been done or is done in business schools, it didn’t seem to have the impact we wanted to have.”

Fee and others reworked the lessons so that individual entrepreneurs would focus on their own companies’ situations, rather than on theoretical examples. That makes instruction more complicated, Fee said, since each student is doing something different, but it’s ultimately proved more useful.

Paine said the SBA program, which now operates in Philadelphia, Baltimore, Memphis, Atlanta, Chicago, Milwaukee, Albuquerque, New Orleans, Des Moines and Oakland, may expand to other locations next year.

Meanwhile, she said, I.C.E. is looking at a plan that would allow it to take another step toward focusing purely on coming up with the best lessons possible. The group hopes to license its curriculum to organizations around the country. The local groups would recruit entrepreneurs and instructors and handle the logistics, and I.C.E. would provide training and support, including online webinars, PowerPoint presentations and other materials for the students and teachers. Paine said the licensing plan is still in its early stages, but it’s a model that makes more sense to the group than setting up dozens of local offices.

“We want to kind of stay small, lean and mean in terms of staffing and costs here,” she said.