



## Women in Leadership Seminar Highlights

April 24, 2015

**Topic: April 24: “Discovery: How Georgia Is Preparing Students to Succeed in a Global Economy”** featuring Jack Harris, President – Jr. Achievement/GA.



Jack Harris spoke at Women in Leadership on “How Georgia is Preparing Students to Succeed in a Global Economy,” and it couldn’t have been a more interesting look into how education is evolving in Georgia! Jack Harris has worked with Junior Achievement in their international branch and now is the President and CEO of Junior Achievement Georgia. We were so grateful to have Jack speak to us about the strides that Junior Achievement has made in education and experiential learning!

Junior Achievement (JA) has long been known for promoting education and developing programs designed for students’ success. JA began in 1919 as a program to help high school students create their own businesses. Over the years, JA has entered into schools, supplemented curriculums, and implemented specific programs during and after school hours. In recent years, JA has focused on incorporating technology and developing immersive programs for students.

Jack joined the international branch, which was launched in Atlanta, and there was a lot of focus on the work JA was doing abroad. As Jack traveled to see JA programs around the world, he noticed that even in places of political and economic unrest, people always wanted to invest in the younger generation. Education was and is seen as the key to the younger generation making our world better. While JA was growing rapidly abroad, at home we understood that it was time for a refresh to meet the needs of today’s students.

As a part of the refresh, JA looked at the current state of graduates and what was needed to augment their education. According to a Gallup survey, only 11% of business leaders agreed that recent graduates had the skills and competencies to enter the workplace. As skills and competencies for jobs are changing so quickly, it’s difficult for graduates to keep up or know what they will need to do in order to prepare for a job after graduation. To help students with this challenge, Jack said “JA does work in work readiness as well as career readiness.” Work readiness begins with exposure to careers and the steps needed to acquire a specific job, but career readiness includes the overarching skills to navigate a career path and achieve success.

The other challenge JA faces is student engagement. The high school graduation rate is just over 70%. For a long time, the assumption was that teachers and support needed to intervene at Junior and Senior year to encourage graduation. However, further research found that disengagement in students begins between 5<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade. After learning this, JA began focusing heavily on developing enhanced methods to engage students in the learning process and subsequently motivate them to graduate.

As JA began exploring reasons for drops in student engagement, they found that the most common cause was that students could not connect what they were learning in-class with the real world. To curb this, JA honed in on developing immersive programs in which students could experience and connect the lessons to business and personal applications. With a focus on middle school students where engagement starts slipping, JA created an experiential learning center, the JA Chick-fil-A Foundation Discovery Center that provides students the opportunity to apply the lessons they learned in the classroom in an authentic experience.

The JA Discovery Center is home to JA BizTown, which creates a unique opportunity where 6th grade students are able to interact within a simulated economy, and take on the role of employee, tax payer and consumer. During the visit to JA BizTown, students receive unique job assignments and work in teams at their assigned business. By the end of the simulation each student completes a day's work, develops a personal budget, deposits a paycheck at the bank and makes purchasing decisions.

On the other side of the JA Discovery Center is JA Finance Park, which gives 7th and 8th grade students the rare opportunity to experience their personal financial futures first-hand. Upon entering the center students receive a 'life situation' with job, income, education, and family scenarios. Based on their adult persona, students visit businesses to gather information to make wise financial decisions and work towards a balanced budget.

Both programs were designed to connect the value of education with the lifestyle these kids want to achieve. As Jack joked, "Even if the kids don't know how to make it happen, every kid knows what lifestyle they want." The program has been so successful that a second JA Discovery Center is being built in Gwinnett, and the demand keeps coming!

The success these programs are having on middle school students has led to the next initiative to develop additional experiential learning platforms for a complete 6th-12th grade pipeline approach, connecting students to the business community in engaging, immersive and interactive environments. As students experience JA BizTown and JA Finance Park in middle school, it becomes increasingly important to provide new avenues for those students to further their learning in high school. To achieve this we are launching the JA-MBA, an innovative high school model designed to provide rigorous standards-based education infused with career readiness, entrepreneurship and financial literacy skills. The program will launch in August at Banneker High School with 150 9<sup>th</sup> graders enrolled.

## **Q&A**

What is your biggest challenge?

- Our biggest challenge is perception. JA is a well-known organization but not well understood. This is especially true in terms of how our programs have evolved and developed to meet the demands of today's students. Our main hurdle is to get our perception to match our reality.

How do you measure success?

- In what we do with the JA Discovery Center, there's an evaluation framework that has many scales. There is an evaluation of students' success, behavioral benefits, attitude measure, mindset and knowledge gain that changes with students during and after the program. With JA-MBA, we have long-term goals that we will be tracking. Though the initial measures of

success will begin with enhanced achievement, knowledge gains, graduation rates, post-secondary eligibility, etc.

How are you preparing teachers for JA MBA and do you have volunteers?

- Well, the interesting thing about a magnet school is that it means anyone from the system can apply to go there. The programs are thematic and tend to be for highest performing students with specialized electives in addition to core subjects. For our program, we will be accepting a range of students into the program from the kids with a GPA above 3.5 to some of the lower performers who need to be motivated. All of the core and electives are specially taught by selected teachers for the JA-MBA program and wrap the studies around a core curriculum. Professional development will be given to these teachers to enhance interdisciplinary learning and understand what a case study methodology looks like in the classroom. The teachers are the ones who will drive success, so we are thinking about the information they need.

How are the students selected for the JA MBA program?

- Right now, the GPA is at 2.5 for students to be accepted. We will have a range of students that are selected even outside of that range of GPA. However, we're not doing any remediation work. Students in the middle of the road have traditionally had the least access to resources, so this is where we are focusing. We are expecting approximately 150 students per grade, and at least two thirds of the students will be from schooling zone of the home school.

What is your vision for creating a technology sector?

- Our vision is that we incorporate and weave technology into everything that we're doing. We want to have the technology be an interdisciplinary aspect as opposed to its own separate part.

If you're looking at twenty percent of the students in the program having 3.5+ GPAs, how will the program affect Advanced Placement courses?

- We have designed the program to have students graduate with college eligibility. Part of what we're looking at is the potential of the students. We pick students who can thrive in the right environment and who will apply themselves given the right circumstances. Math, in particular, is where you see the most differentiation with a level of competency versus a motivation to do well. There will be a range of classes offered to cater to students who are working at different levels.

How do you foster a community involvement with these programs?

- We built this as a two sided coin of culture and curriculum. We focus on enhancing the culture inside the JA-MBA community and will interweave values of leadership and success throughout the curriculum.

What does it take for a volunteer to commit?

- In both JA Biztown and JA Finance Park, 20 volunteers are needed per day. Usually, people will sign on per day in groups or as part of an organization. We also have groups of 5 or 10 who plug in per day.

Does the concept of the JA Discovery Center exist in other parts of the country?

- About 20 cities across the U.S. have JA BizTown or JA Finance Park. With the launch of the Atlanta location we have rolled out the next evolution of the program in terms of support and involvement from the local corporate and education communities.

How can we get in contact with someone at JA to engage in the volunteering?

- If you'd like to volunteer or find out how to donate, you can send an email to [Rbrooks@georgia.ja.org](mailto:Rbrooks@georgia.ja.org) – Rebecca Brooks, who organizes volunteers in Discovery Center.