

Business Club Teaches Financial Literacy and More

Cindy's Story

When Cindy Lowe began her career in the banking industry, she was shocked by the number of clients who had ruined their financial credit report, often by the age of 20. That motivated her to return to school to get her education degree. She started teaching math in K-12 schools, and then later taught the Saskatchewan Polytechnic Business Certificate program at Great Plains College for seven years. For the last five years, she's been teaching personal finance, accounting and business education at Swift Current Comprehensive High School (SCCHS), which serves nearly 1,000 grades 9 to 12 students. Lowe believes students are never too young to learn how to balance a budget and save for their futures. A few years ago, she created an extracurricular Business Club to provide experiential learning opportunities that extend beyond the business world. Her goal is to teach what she believes are life skills, such as research and analysis, public speaking, critical thinking and debate. Lowe realizes not all students will become entrepreneurs but, for her, success is providing students with the skills and confidence to manage their finances, while also pursuing their dreams.

[View Cindy's #theteacherproject video.](#)

Read more about the goals and activities in the SCCHS Business Club and why Cindy is so passionate about financial literacy and experiential learning.

1. What is Business Club and what are students learning?

A few years ago, I was teaching accounting when a business case competition came up. I took some students and realized they were underprepared, in terms of what was happening in the world of business education and public speaking. I came back and decided I wanted to start a Business Club to expose high school students to financial literacy, entrepreneurship and business mentorship.

This is my fourth year with kids in Business Club. Students are exposed to mentors, case competitions and public speaking opportunities. We bring a lot of speakers and entrepreneurs into our Thursday meetings. I present information and we do mini-debate sessions. We attend Chamber events. We've hosted provincial debate competitions. We have five local businesses that sponsor

our group and act as judges at competitions. I really want the kids to learn from experts in business and finance. I want them to develop relationships and mentorships. I want them to develop the confidence to participate in a debate or to be able to go up and shake someone's hand at a networking event. I want students to learn the technical side of finance too, so they understand how to manage their credit or save for retirement before it's too late. I want students to learn what it's like to be an entrepreneur because robotics and automation are changing the job market. Our kids need to embrace this entrepreneurial spirit and learn how to create their own jobs. Their future success depends on it. I know not every kid will go into business specifically; some want to be lawyers, doctors, accountants, politicians and financial advisors. All these professions are entrepreneurial in some way. I want to inspire students to carve out their own professional paths.

For me, Business Club is really about the transferrable skills kids are learning. One of the biggest is in public speaking and debate. It teaches confidence, persuasiveness and eloquence. Last year, our business debate club had four members. This year we had five teams of 10 kids, plus a junior debate team. We're really seeing kids step out of their comfort zones. For example, participating in a business case competition is huge and intimidating to most students. They have to perform a case analysis and put together recommendations to present in front of judges. That's gut-wrenching for a lot of kids. You can always teach technical knowledge, but it's harder to teach that experiential learning that comes from being willing to put yourself out there on a stage in front of judges in a debate competition. That's where the real rubber hits the road, when they have to perform and it's all on them. The more financial knowledge and practice I can provide students, the better.

2. What is a case competition?

The Saskatchewan Business Teachers' Association (SBTA), which I recently became president of, has been hosting a case competition for the last five years in Saskatchewan. There are two categories: entrepreneurship and finance. Kids are given "a case," such as a business owner who's facing some obstacle or problem they haven't been able to figure out on their own. A case is written up. It's about two or three pages. The kids have three hours in a typical competition setting to decipher, analyze and figure out all the issues. They do a SWOT analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. They analyze the company and come up with three or four recommendations. They do pro-con analysis and propose a final recommendation. We also have a finance category. It's a similar process but students are given a financial

situation, like trying to help someone save for a wedding or buy their first home, but they're overspending. To prepare for case competitions, we have lunch and learn meetings with mini competitions, training workshops and analyses in the accounting classroom.

3. What are the challenges in Business Club and how are you overcoming these?

Finances have been the biggest challenge. It's expensive to host speakers and attend events. Transportation for one of our provincial debate and case competition events was between \$400 to \$1,100, and a table at a Chamber event is approximately \$800. I can't pass those costs on to the kids, so sponsorship from local businesses has been huge. I have charged the students a participation fee in the past to try to get them to make the commitment to attend.

The other challenge is logistics. I feel like I'm event planning every day, every week. It takes a lot of work to line up speakers. I could probably delegate some of this to the students and the other teacher advisors, but I feel like we're still in the development stage, trying to define what our club is doing and what we want to participate in.

The communication piece is also challenging because people don't always respond. For example, I've got a workshop coming up and only nine kids have responded and I've got 50 in the club. Now I have to follow up to confirm who's coming. And sometimes when students tell you they're coming, they don't. This isn't a class they have to attend so I always tell them, "You get out of it what you put in. If you come, you learn more. If you don't, you miss out." But it is still a bit of a logistical headache. I put in hundreds of hours on extracurricular activities. I even wake up in the middle of the night and email myself stuff I might have missed. It's almost a full-time job. I started with six members and now I have close to 50, and 20 to 30 kids attending any given event. I do it all for the love of this program we're building for our students. The success and growth we've seen makes all of this worth it.

4. What do you hope students take away from their time in Business Club?

I get a huge source of pride when I see these kids go on to be successful. Business Club is a community. I've got students I taught five years ago coming back for co-op terms at local businesses, thanks in part to the learning that started in our business program. Kids email me all the time to be a reference.

I must be a reference on 100 resumés. We're also finding the skills students learn in Business Club are transferring well to university. Case-based learning is huge in university, so we're rolling it out more in high school so they'll have a good foundation. And for kids who aren't sure what to do, business provides so many opportunities. They can go into marketing, human resources, finances, accounting; the door is wide open.

5. Why are extracurricular programs like this so important?

Some schools teach entrepreneurship classes but not all because you need a certain number of students enrolled to run a class in a school. I do see this as a gap in business education in our schools, which is why I took this on as an extracurricular program. Extracurricular programs are the lifeblood of the school because it provides experiential learning and a sense of community. We have 1,000 kids at our school and everyone needs to feel a sense of belonging, whether it's on a sports team, the business program, Students Against Drinking and Driving or other groups or clubs. Everyone needs to feel part of some community. That's what Business Club provides. This sense of belonging is so vital for students to feel engaged in their learning. I really felt that sense of belonging when I got to university and connected with other kids who were business-minded like me; they "got" me and were interested in finance and business like I was. That's what I'm hoping Business Club provides to our students at the high school level.

6. Do you have any advice for teachers who want to create a similar program?

Growing business education in our province is a goal of mine. We know there are business education teachers teaching across the province, so let's connect and work together. My ultimate goal before I retire in the next 10 years is to have finance taught everywhere in the province and for it to become a requirement for graduation. Every Saskatchewan child should have to learn about personal finances. No matter what career you choose, you need to know how to manage your personal finances.

To do this, business teachers and the SBTA recognize we need to train teachers to teach this. I would be more than willing to help if there's an appetite amongst Saskatchewan teachers. I am so passionate about financial literacy and business education; it's all I know and I want other teachers to know it too because it's a big deal and very important for the future of our students. I believe that all of society will benefit if we have a financially literate population. I've been asked by a couple of schools in our division to help them start extracurricular business

clubs. I'm more than willing to share. Teachers can contact me at clowe@chinooksd.ca. The [SBTA](#) is another great resource. We have tons of resources on our website and Facebook.

For a program such as this to be successful, you need to build relationships with local business leaders. Contact your local Chamber of Commerce, or your local mayor and council; they're always willing to help. Your own school board is a good place to start. Many school board members are often business people in the community. In fact, presenting to the school board was how I got one of my sponsors. Many local businesses have human resources staff who might be willing to talk about their business. If you have a lawyer in the community, you could ask them to speak about being an entrepreneur and what it's like running a law office. But do go to your Chamber if you can. I can't say enough about our local Chamber here in Swift Current. It's made up of businesses in the community and ours has been so supportive.

There's also a big entrepreneurship group in Regina that's hoping to help high school business teachers called [Audacity](#). They approached our Saskatchewan Business Teachers' Association and said, "Tell us what you need and how we can help in your classrooms?" They really want to develop a thriving business community. So there are entrepreneurs out there willing to help, you just have to make those contacts and ask people to be a part of your program. The reception from industry, business and the overall community has been extremely positive for us; everyone wants to see the students thrive and learn about business.

