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# WCPS hosts inaugural young entrepreneur competition

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Greenwood High student Cayden Bailey on Wednesday presents an elect classmates worked on for the “The Spark Summit: Igniting Innovation.”

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Starting a business can take years of work and collaboration, but dozens of Warren County Public School students are already well on their way.

High school students from across the county joined business owners Wednesday for the district's first ever "Spark Summit," where teams competed with business pitches in a "Shark Tank" style event.

From artificially intelligent chatbots to designer jewelry and make-up to portable car heaters, students came to Western Kentucky University's Innovation Campus ready to pitch ideas that could very well become reality.

WCPS Director of Secondary Instruction Daryl Woods said each student has spent the school year taking entrepreneurship and computer science classes to prepare for the event.

"Their job this year has been to create a platform or a business idea, then be able to present that idea in hopes of possibly moving forward with founding the company and making money on their own," Woods said.

Woods said the district sought to fill a gap in instruction by marrying technical and business instruction in a practical way. The summit was a chance to both garner feedback from established entrepreneurs and introduce students to people who could make their ideas happen.

“We’re trying to connect them with our Small Business Administration and the Small Business Startup Department at our Bowling Green Chamber of Commerce,” Woods said. “The judges, many of them, do startup businesses as a career, so if they’re interested, they’ll make contact with the students and their parents and help them get that ball rolling.”

Judges awarded:

Most Innovative: “Ethereality” from Warren Central High School

Best Business Plan: “Gambit” from Greenwood High School

Most Sustainable: “KY HS Sports Network (KHHSN)” from Greenwood High School

Best Presentation: “SmartScrape” from South Warren High School

Grand Champion: “Community Candidate” from Greenwood High School

Cayden Bailey, a senior at Greenwood and CEO of Gambit, said he and fellow student Lola Norman have worked on their company since 2021 and have raised roughly \$23,000 in startup funding.

Gambit helps political candidates organize voter information to facilitate door knocking campaigns. Government offices typically provide records in a paper format, Bailey said, but his app allows users to scan documents to automatically plot information on a digital map.

The company won last year's Young Entrepreneurship Show and previously placed third in a Governor's School for Entrepreneurs competition.

"Ever since then, we've kind of been developing," Bailey said. "About a year ago, we got that active demo worked up, kind of a 'MVP' – minimum viable product."

Bailey said their app aims to foster electoral engagement, citing a statistic showing voter turnout increases after local door knocking campaigns.

"The foundation of our democracy is people going out and voting," Bailey said. "If we can encourage voters to get out and help politicians win their election, I see it as a win-win."

He added that the team has spoken to over 100 politicians to better understand their needs with an app like his. Their advisory board even includes U.S. Rep. Brett Guthrie.

His biggest takeaway from the last few years – "it's hard."

“Nothing comes easy. You’ve got to work for everything, I would say,” Bailey said. “A lot of people wake up and they’ve got this idea, but acting on it is probably the hardest thing to do.”

He said Wednesday’s summit offered better insight into the numbers and finances of starting up a business thanks to feedback from the panel of judges from across the Innovation Campus community.

Jeremy Jacobs, a well-established entrepreneur and owner of Eyeconic, a venture studio located at the campus, was one such judge.

He said the students he helped coach Wednesday often reminded him of his own entrepreneurial path, adding that nothing like the summit existed when he was that age.

“Your first ideas normally aren’t going to get off the ground for one reason or another. You go through a couple of different ideas and each time you get a little better at turning an idea into implementation and becoming a business,” Jacobs said. “I feel like they’re all probably years out without mentoring, and they could literally take flight and actually build a business while they’re learning with the proper mentors.”

He added that the Innovation Campus, home to dozens of start-ups, scientific endeavors, marketing companies and more, was the perfect place to host the summit.

“The Innovation Campus is alive, man. It’s vibrant,” Jacobs said. “There’s collaboration here that at this point is even accidental. There’s a lot of purposeful collaboration in the world, but when you finally get a nucleus of this much brain power and excitement and optimistic thinking in a confined space, you end up with accidental innovations and networking and so forth ...

“I’m proud of Warren County Public Schools for that. I’m proud of all these kids for coming in, and I’m proud I got to be a part of it,” he said.



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