

CAMBRIDGE DAY

☰ | 🔍 SEARCH

Home | **Business + Money**

Tech desert lies '2 Blocks' from Kendall Square, where educators and kids are innovating change

By [Susanne Beck](#)

Wednesday, December 7, 2022



Michael Dawson, founder of 2 Blocks, at a Thursday discussion with innovation economy leaders and others at Ideo Cambridge in Kendall Square. (Photo: Susanne Beck)

When Harvard professors Michael E. Porter and Mark Kramer published a 2011 Harvard Business Review article on “Creating Shared Value,” they probably never imagined it would be local teens taking the lead in championing the cause.

But the **Innovators for Purpose’s “2 Blocks”** program has Cambridge youth doing just that – calling for, in **the words of Porter and Kramer**, policies and practices that make an industry more competitive while “advancing the economic and social conditions in the communities in which it operates.”

News to your inbox. [Subscribe to the Cambridge Day newsletter.](#)

Innovators for Purpose is the brainchild of Michael and Donna Dawson and a group of his Cambridge-based friends and fellow educators who looked around the Kendall Square neighborhood in March 2014 and saw a glaring disparity: Just blocks from the area’s renowned innovation district, there were schools – and kids – where exposure to, and opportunities in, fields related to science, technology, engineering and mathematics simply did not exist.

With that as a motivator, iFp launched its first program at Fletcher Maynard Academy in The Port, one of the most economically challenged neighborhoods in the city. There, students used iFp’s design process to ask “How might we be part of the changing neighborhood?” The organization took off from there, engaging more middle and then high school students in a series of youth-led programs – including 2 Blocks – that focused conversation and activities on issues of equity, diversity and access in those missing fields.



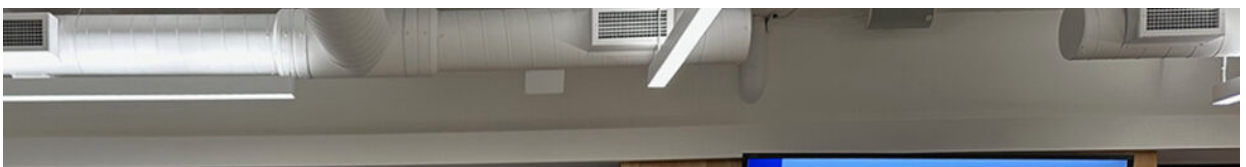


CRLS students Jennat Jounaidi and Hermela Shimelis host a “2 Blocks” podcast. (Photo: Susanne Beck)

Students have already developed a call-to-action [video](#) appealing to local leaders to step up. And Cambridge Rindge and Latin students [Hermela Shimelis](#) and [Jennat Jounaidi](#) created a [podcast](#) called “2 Blocks” in which they query – and challenge – Kendall Square executives about their role in realizing truly shared Stem-related values in the community.

Most recently, 2 Block convened discussions at Microsoft (in November) and the design firm Ideo (on Thursday) with leaders from the schools, universities, Kendall corporations and city government, among others, to begin imagining how Porter’s and Kramer’s concept of shared value might be applied locally. The nonprofit [Someone Else’s Child](#) helped sponsor the events with shared-value authority [FSG Consulting](#) executive Erin Sullivan as facilitator.

“I really believe these sessions could spark an uprising of new innovators, especially from untapped groups, who are primed to lead our next innovations,” Dawson said recently.





The Thursday 2 Blocks discussion included Cambridge City Manager Yi-An Huang, second from left. (Photo: Susanne Beck)

The first session was largely educational, defining how creating shared value compares with the more commonplace principle of corporate social responsibility. “Being a good corporate citizen is what CSR is all about – trying to give back to the community,” Dawson said. “But one of the things that we learned in the [first] workshop was that creating shared value is different ... [CRV focuses on] policies and practices that enhance the competitiveness of a company.”

Thursday’s gathering was purposefully more dynamic, with attendees defining what Dawson calls a way to make progress together on “an equitable and systemic approach to career-connected learning.”

Dawson said there were two critical questions framing the discussion, based in part on iFp research showing an almost complete lack of data on CLRS alumni who have also graduated from college and are now working in Kendall Square in high-tech jobs. “We’re sure there are some out there,” he said, “but we assume that since there are so few, there are even fewer students from underrepresented background that are part of that ecosystem.”

The first question: Does the limited number of alumni in Stem jobs, locally or not, matter – and why?

The second: What needs to change over the next three years to make a noticeable difference?

Jounaidi and Shimelis, the CRLS students, raise those same questions in podcast episodes. They couch the issues against the context of the relatively generous level of per-pupil spending in the city – more than \$35,000, according to the [state’s Department of Education](#) – wondering

aloud: Where does that money go, and to what end, when it comes to access to Stem?

“Right now, a lot of businesses are seeing the school and the community as a corporate social responsibility kind of benefactor, in a way. You throw money at certain issues or only help once, and kind of back off,” Shimelis said. “What’s being given and what’s being taken out of it isn’t as systemic as we’d like it to be.”

Reflecting on the recent sessions, Shimelis said she hoped dialogue can be moved forward and we can start creating action.”

Jounaidi agreed. “We’re at a roadblock where obviously we don’t know what the next step is to be, to be quite honest. We want policy change. There’s a lot that we want, and we can ask for, but we don’t see that mirrored back,” she said.

The teens admit that change, particularly systemwide change among large and often unwieldy bodies, takes time.

“I’m not saying by the time I graduate next year this is going to be in the book,” Shimelis said. “No, there’s still so much work to be done. But we’re going to be on that forefront no matter how long it takes.”

👉 [Education](#), [Kendall Square](#), [The Port](#), [biotech](#), [class](#), [kids](#), [race](#), [science](#)

Submit a Comment

You must be [logged in](#) to post a comment.

A better **Cambridge Day**

Please consider making a financial contribution to maintain, expand and improve Cambridge Day.

[DONATE](#)

Powered by  Blink