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## Mike Feinberg: From Aiding Ethiopian Refugees to Co-Founding Texas School Venture Fund



by The FINANCIAL — June 28, 2024 in Personal finance

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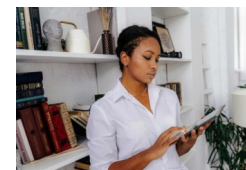
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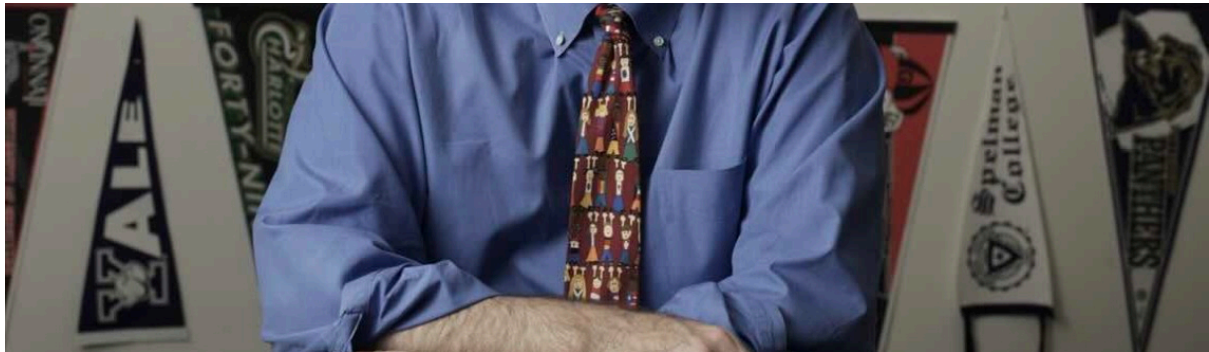
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Today, **Mike Feinberg’s work** involves facilitating trade-oriented instruction for Texas high school **students** and adults, but his start in the **education** sector occurred far from the Lone Star State.

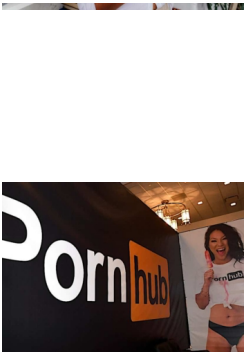
After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania in 1991, Feinberg heard Israel — which had recently flown 14,500 Ethiopian Jews into the country amid a civil war in Ethiopia — was looking for volunteers to help the refugees acclimate.

“The people they airlifted out had been living in the countryside for thousands of years,” he says. “Beyond Israeli culture and the language being new, basic things like lighting and electricity and plumbing were new. I was assigned to basically be a camp counselor for the kids — and had an absolutely amazing summer experience.”

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## Mike Feinberg Leading the Class

After returning to the U.S. and interning for Senator Paul Simon in Washington, D.C., Feinberg decided to apply for the Teach for America program, which selected him to serve as a bilingual elementary teacher in Houston.

“I thought that would be a fun two-year adventure,” Feinberg shares. “That two-year adventure was 32 years ago.”

Following what he describes as a six-week crash course to become a teacher, Mike Feinberg faced several challenges in the classroom. He wasn’t truly bilingual, he says; the fifth grade students in his class ranged in age from 9 to 15, and half didn’t speak any English.

The experience propelled him to learn everything he could about how to teach. Midway through his second year, he realized a number of students from his initial class were failing, dropping out, and/or becoming parents



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had to look in the mirror,” he says. “I decided I [was not leaving this job] until I really figure this out and make a differen

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## Achieving Educational Change

In 1995, Feinberg and a fellow teacher co-founded a college prep-focused middle school in Houston. Its success led the duo to create a network of dozens of high-performing public schools throughout the U.S.

Despite the program’s success, Feinberg says he had a second education epiphany when the Houston-based school reached an impressive milestone: a 50% college graduation rate.

“I remember celebrating for about 15 seconds then thinking, ‘What about the other half?’” he says. “I was close with the kids and their families; I knew a bunch of alumni who wound up in the trades, the military, and being entrepreneurs — and they were all doing just fine.”

Some former students who’d graduated from college, however, were a hundred thousand dollars in debt.

if you want to be successful in this world, you have to go to college,” he says. “In the ’90s, if you had to take

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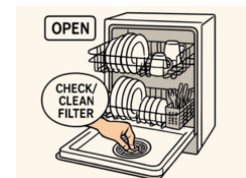
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out a loan, it was [the size of] a car loan. Now it's a home mortgage.”

In response, Mike Feinberg co-founded WorkTexas in 2020.

The Houston-based secondary and postsecondary program gives students a chance to learn — at no cost — the specific skills needed to perform certain jobs, while simultaneously earning a high school degree. Adults can also take courses to obtain welding, HVAC maintenance, and other proficiencies and certifications.

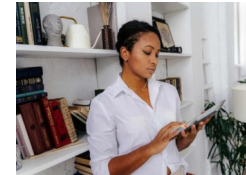
The nonprofit program's curriculum has been tailored to meet current industry needs using input from the more than 100 employers in various industries with which WorkTexas has partnered.. A number have hired WorkTexas participants after they completed their program.

“The cornerstone of what makes WorkTexas unique is that we are employer-focused,” Feinberg says. “Our mission is to help people get jobs, keep jobs — and advance in careers.”



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