

The Yazoo City Experience

Mississippi Chemical Corporation's financial support of the Yazoo City schools benefits the community as well as the students.

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The Mississippi Chemical Corporation (MCC), headquartered in Yazoo City, Mississippi, draws heavily on the city's population for its plant employees. It has faced difficulties in recruiting and keeping higher level personnel, such as research chemists, tax specialists, and accountants. According to employees, one of the major disadvantages of the community has been the quality of the public schools.

MCC recognized that supporting community projects, and the local schools, could ultimately benefit everyone; but MCC's initial offers of financial assistance to the school board were not particularly successful. The board did not want to compromise its autonomy nor invite interference in its financial management. MCC employees, many of whom had children attending school in the district, could not understand the board's reluctance and became more and more vocal as their questions appeared to receive less and less attention.

At MCC's urging, I agreed to discuss the problem with representatives of MCC and members of other Yazoo City businesses and industries. Accompanying me to these meetings was another consultant experienced in directing corporate-public school interactions. We became convinced of MCC's sincerity and willingness to cooperate with school officials for the benefit of all. We agreed that our first step should be to conduct a needs assessment of the local schools.

We stressed to the school board and to MCC that we would document the good things that were happening in the local schools as well as recommend improvements in areas that needed strengthening. This decision later proved to be of utmost importance: it helped establish the credibility of the entire study.

We presented proposals for separate

studies of grades 1-6 and 7-12 to the school board for their approval. While we were to conduct the studies under contract to the school board (and at the superintendent's invitation) MCC assumed financial responsibility for the studies and funneled its support through the local Chamber of Commerce.

We decided to use an approach similar to that of a self-study team. We began by asking the school faculty and supervisory staff to recommend experienced, professionally respected, personable educators to serve as members of two visiting committees; we nominated additional members ourselves. The superintendent then invited each committee member to participate in the study and specified the terms of payment for consulting and travel.

The first phase of the study, grades 1-6, was conducted by 14 members of a visiting committee consisting of teachers, administrators, state department specialists, and university faculty members. All elementary school content areas and special areas were represented by the members of the visiting committee.

The committee spent three or four days in the schools observing classroom activities, materials, and organization in order to document strengths of the present instructional program as well as identify areas of need. They also interviewed teachers, supervisors, parents, and students.

The study of grades 7-12 was similar. Of the 26 outside consultants on this visiting committee, several groups of three assumed responsibility for the major content areas while the others focused on exceptional education, administration, counseling, and extracurricular activities of the junior and senior high schools. Each committee member observed for three to four days before making any recommendations.

Each committee member was asked to prepare a report including evidences of quality, observed needs, and recom-

mendations for improvement. These initial drafts were edited and compiled to produce a report for grades 1-6 and another for grades 7-12. After editing, I gave copies of these reports to the school board and recommended that they be made available to the public. The report for grades 1-6 was presented to the board and released to the press the following day. An open meeting was held for release and discussion of the study of grades 7-12.

Many committee members suggested changes in the school district's organization and operating procedures that could be implemented with no additional financial support. Specific recommendations for improvement in subject matter areas, however, required financial assistance. Each report ended with possible "next steps" to be considered. As mentioned earlier, the reports were delivered to the school board and superintendent; no recommendations were made as to what assistance the school board should request from Mississippi Chemical Corporation. I hoped that board members, central office staff, and school faculties would carefully study the conclusions and recommendations and suggest additional means for improving instructional programs.

We also made a number of specific recommendations to both the school board and MCC, which provided the impetus for the following steps:

1. Creating and filling a position of Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, directly supported by MCC
2. Forming task forces within the schools for making specific recommendations to the superintendent
3. Organizing a community relations program sponsored by MCC
4. Establishing an MCC-supported foundation to fund community and school improvement projects.

These four steps are community-based in scope and call for the continued cooperation, partnership, and growth of the school board and MCC. Once implemented, they will lead to more specific and detailed changes.

Lack of cooperation between the business segment of a community and its public schools may very well signal serious problems. However, the kind of partnership demonstrated by MCC and the school board in Yazoo City is just as likely to become commonplace if all parties recognize the mutual benefits in working toward a common goal, albeit for different purposes. **EL**

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