

“Education Is Everybody’s Business”

Involving business in education in Indianapolis led to improved test scores, attendance, and public confidence.



JANEAN G. GILBERT

Janean G. Gilbert is Director of Communications, Partners in Education, Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce, Indianapolis, Indiana.

Recognizing their interdependence, the Indianapolis business community and the public schools joined together in 1979 to develop a way to combine resources and expertise to address the needs of the school system. Managed by the Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce, Partners in Education (PIE) was formed to help prepare students for productive lives.

After three years, results indicate the partnership is more than a good idea. Said one teacher, "My students shared an invaluable lesson in the practical side of the working world. They received basic information and a sense of worth and pride in their accomplishments."

From the business community, a chief executive officer sees it like this: "As long as our society treats our schools with indifference and places its priorities elsewhere, then the education of our youth will continue to decline. I believe Partners in Education can contribute toward reversing the downward trend."

How it Works

School-business partnerships, renewable yearly, match one school with one or more businesses and operate with the following objectives:

1. To bring business people into a school to work with students, teachers, and administrators on projects that staff members feel will be helpful and business people feel qualified to accomplish

2. To give students and teachers a realistic picture of the business world and the preparation students need to succeed in it

3. To supplement learning in the classroom with relevant learning experiences in business and industry

4. To give business people an understanding of the educational system—how it works, its strengths, and its problems



5. To give educators the same understanding of the world of business.

All partnership projects benefit both schools and businesses and are based on the expectations, resources, capabilities, and limitations of each. Partners in Education provides opportunities for businesses to:

1. Become partners in the educational development of youth: (a) Present firsthand the requirements, satisfactions, and expectations of the business world; (b) Alert teachers to the skills job applicants lack and help them develop these skills; (c) Help develop career

awareness and vocational programs geared to specific local job market needs

2. Increase the understanding of the free enterprise system among students and staff

3. Raise the morale of administrators and teachers by demonstrating that respected "outsiders" are willing to help educate students

4. Gain understanding of the school system, whose health is vital for the economic well-being of the metropolitan area

5. Build support for schools among employees

6. Become known as a community-involved company.

The program provides opportunities for schools to:

1. Gain expert assistance that might help provide a more complete education for students or management skills for teachers and administrators
2. Understand and interact with people from the business world
3. Become aware of business complexities, constraints, and concerns
4. Acquire assistance in meeting other special needs beyond the resources of the school
5. Become part of the economic development and decision-making process in the city.

Funding also reflects the partnership concept; monies are provided by the Indianapolis Public Schools, Corporate Community Council, Lilly Endowment, and Indianapolis Foundation. Over 100 businesses and organizations, with 500 volunteers, have been involved in approximately 9,000 volunteer hours. The Partners in Education staff serves on 16 community advisory committees and councils in order to better link the community and the school system.

All student-related projects follow a set of criteria to avoid "activity traps." To be educationally significant, projects must: give information, support or use basic skills, provide participative and experiential learning opportunities, relate directly to and be integrated within the school's curriculum, and place responsibility and accountability for learning and application on students and teachers.

Start Early

Helping students see the value of education and teaching them about the world of work should start well before high

school. Therefore, businesses and civic groups are often paired with elementary schools. In one school, fifth and sixth graders became involved in manufacturing, selling, and managing a mini-corporation within their school. This project was integrated into every area of study, and at the close of the business, their efforts brought in a profit. While learning about the free market system, these students also realized the practical value of math and English.

While some program benefits are intangible, others are more concrete. Working with an architectural firm, students are transforming a neglected pond on the property of one school into a "Land for Living and Learning," to be used by both pupils and the community. Other students built a home in a historic neighborhood with the help of construction industry professionals.

Each partnership is designed to be mutually beneficial. The telephone company assisted advanced computer students in real-world programming problems. In return, students processed telephone bills, enabling these future customers to understand the inner-workings of the company.

On the lighter side, a large pharmaceutical company's employees were entertained by the partnering school's choir during picnics and seasonal programs, and vacant walls were used to display student artwork.

Through special projects, laid-off teachers have identified alternative careers and found job search assistance, administrators have received management training, and the school board has used business and community leaders' expertise regarding school closings, governance training for board members, and a strategic planning process for the school corporation.

Some schools have as many as 21 projects in operation within the partner-

ship during the school year, targeting such needs as:

- Improving attendance
- Acquiring real-world work attitudes, expectations, and responsibilities
- Developing job seeking and keeping skills
- Understanding application of academics to the work place
- Decreasing the number of dropouts
- Reducing drug and alcohol abuse
- Raising student aspirations
- Identifying career opportunities
- Gaining marketable work, communication, social, and problem-solving skills
- Encouraging mentoring and one-on-one relationships
- Creating challenges for the gifted and talented
- Enhancing good citizenship and much more.

Significant Results

Results are essential. Although each partnership can show results in meeting specific objectives, three significant and overriding themes emerge:

1. *Raising Students' Test Scores.* Said one principal of a school with a significant increase in scores, "Partners in Education provided a wide variety of experiences that otherwise would not have been available. These experiences increased the broad field of knowledge students were able to bring to their standardized curriculum and, specifically, to the Iowa test."

2. *Increasing Attendance and Reducing Tardiness.* Another principal states, "We have seen many of these students change their attitudes toward school, toward classmates, and toward the community because of the business leaders' involvement. These changes in attitude have been demonstrated by improved



attendance, a reduction in referrals to the office for discipline, and, very much appreciated, better manners when dealing with adults."

3. Meeting the School's Curriculum Objectives. Said one science department chairperson: "Fifteen out of 17 performance objectives were met by our school. The other high schools averaged about three out of 17. The Partners in Education program influenced our success greatly because the partnering activities supported the objectives and brought additional reinforcement to what was being taught." And a student commented, "I spent four years at school in data processing and computer programming, so I thought I knew it all. My experience in this program made me realize how much more training I need, how much more I have to learn."

In addition, bringing people into the schools increases public confidence. They better understand the schools' strengths and weaknesses and become credible outside sources with local media. Upon completion of a project, one businessman commented: "I had some prejudices against our schools, and I think a lot of the others had the same feeling. This experience has been good for me. I gained great respect for the school system." That can only mean payoffs when it comes to financing the public schools.

For these projects to be successful,

several major principles must underscore the partnership concept. It is important that both parties, school and business, understand prior to implementation that the business partner be viewed as an important part of the school, that a system for information-sharing be developed, and that pairings be based on matching school and business needs with available resources. The participants must always avoid using the relationship for publicity purposes or as a recruitment scheme and must not make promises they can't keep.

Most important, business people have to recognize that the educator will maintain the sole authority in the classroom and carry the responsibility for curriculum design, discipline, and goal attainment. On the other hand, educators need to recognize that the business volunteers are an essential component in the planning and implementation process.

The development of a partnership is complex. To clarify the process, five major stages have been identified:

1. Initial design and coordination. The role of the Partners in Education and the school administrative staff in development of the partnerships.

2. Delineation of institutional roles. The identification of needs and resources, as viewed by each partner. Task forces from both business and school coordinate planning and future implementation.

3. Matching of needs with resources. The establishment of a dialogue between the partners to clarify program purpose. A step-by-step procedure develops this relationship.

4. Development and implementation of programs. The translation of program needs into tangible projects, as defined by teachers and business resources. This includes an evaluation component for each objective.

5. Establishment of support/communication networks. Up to a point, the Partners in Education staff's role is primarily that of initiator of the partnership concept. This role shifts to one of a provider of technical assistance when and where needed.

Training workshops for all individuals involved, materials consisting of program ideas and guidelines for success, and a process for parent and student input are also important. And evaluation should take place informally at every step of the process, with a complete evaluation at the end of each school year. Based on the results of these evaluations, the partnership planning process begins again—priorities are redefined and new objectives set.

Partners in Education exemplifies citizens of the business and education communities volunteering their time, energies, and expertise to improve the quality of life in their city. Does it work? We think so, and so does the governor of Indiana. Chosen as a model program, Partners in Education was recognized by the Governor's Conference on Citizen Participation in two categories: the overall program concept and the planning process. In addition, Partners in Education won the Governor's Award for outstanding overall community impact. The program works because it makes education "everybody's business." **EL**

Copyright © 1982 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.