

Partnerships:

Getting a Return on the Investment

School/business partnerships may not produce the results that businesses or schools want in the time they expect.

Funds are flowing from the private sector to public school districts in ever-increasing amounts. A decade ago, the ARCO Foundation contributed practically all of its education dollars to colleges and universities; last year, it gave over half of its contributions (which totaled \$11.5 million) to pre-college programs. The Amoco Foundation now gives 15 percent of its \$22.5 million outlays to pre-college education. The new BellSouth Foundation announced last September that it was giving \$1.63 million to pre-college education, and the Firestone Trust Fund has given a \$3 million grant to help at-risk students in and around Akron, Ohio.

Much of the money given to school districts is for "partnerships" between the donor and the districts. Most of these partnerships are aimed at programs to help districts with management problems, projects for pre-kindergarten ("head start" endeavors), and attempts to achieve greater parent and student involvement. Some partnerships are directed at helping a par-

ticular subset of the school population, such as projects to keep at-risk students from dropping out or to help minority students go to college.

While publicly stated rationales for school/business partnerships are often

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mired in dense terminology, the main reasons for the involvement of businesses are clear: the "growing public awareness of the connection between good schools and a prosperous economy . . . a shortage of entry-level employees with sufficient job skills."¹

A January 1988 survey by the Conference Board, a New York-based business group, reported that two-thirds of 130 major corporations listed primary and secondary education as their top concern, up from 42 percent just two years earlier.² The companies feel they benefit from school/business partnerships in many ways, including:

- greater consumer understanding of the company's products, services, and policies;
- improved public image through direct involvement in socially responsible activities;
- fewer problems with employee job training, equal employment opportunities, and readiness for entry-level positions;
- improved morale in the workplace;

- creation of a means for measuring the impact of business's involvement in education.

Schools see even broader benefits from these partnerships, including:

- new resources, ideas, and commitments with which to pursue the goal of improving schools;
- a broader base of support from influential leaders and the public;
- improvement in morale as teachers experience a closer relationship with the community and a new dimension of community support;
- greater opportunities for students to learn about careers, the economy, and real-world applications of academic subjects;
- raising students' aspirations through interaction with adults who serve as positive career role models;
- job experiences and opportunities for students.

In short, school/business partnerships seem to be a match made in heaven. But are they? Can the specific goals of businesses be reconciled with the more general goals that schools expect from partnerships? This is the question that school/business partnerships must answer in the long run.

The Boston Compact

The preliminary answers are, for a variety of reasons, not encouraging. Let us look, for example, at one of the most ambitious school/business partnerships yet undertaken, the Boston Compact, which aims to stem the dropout rate. The Compact, "an agreement between the Boston Public Schools and area businesses [that] promises jobs in exchange for better attendance," includes almost all of Boston's major employers. These businesses help tutor students, provide summer employment, make in-class presentations, provide mentors for at-risk students, and are "on call" to meet the needs of the Boston schools.

Unfortunately, even though the Compact has placed hundreds of high school graduates in jobs and there have been modest gains in attendance, the dropout rate has not improved.³ In fact, "studies found that 43 percent of 9th graders in Boston schools leave

Tips for School-Business Partnerships

Here are some general guidelines that schools and businesses might find helpful in establishing partnerships:

- Focus on a part of the curriculum or a topic that makes sense to the company. Businesses feel much more comfortable supporting areas of the curriculum that are of interest to them and their employees. Organizations aiming to change the entire curriculum wind up changing nothing.
- Use an intermediary agency to help bridge the gap between the expectations of business and the realities of school. Choose an agency that is familiar with both your school and the subject matter. National organizations that specialize in a particular discipline and those with local offices tend to work best. College- or university-based intermediaries, however, can assist directly in teacher training programs.
- Make certain that the program you choose to implement is objective and balanced and that the goals of the businesses and the schools in the partnership are compatible.
- Concentrate on teacher development as well as on materials. Businesses sometimes buy materials for schools and feel their job is done. It is better to design the program, if possible, so that teachers can expand their knowledge of the subject matter and explore new ways to teach it.
- Make certain that all parties agree upon the objectives of the program and ensure that those objectives can be measured. Measurement of the success of students, both cognitive gains and attitudinal changes, should be an important element of any school/business partnership.

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before graduation" (*The Boston Globe*, February 10, 1988).

The Compact's budget, which has grown from \$3.5 to \$15 million, has yielded one positive outcome: academic achievement has risen slightly.⁴ However, most students are still well below the national norms in reading and mathematics.

But could that \$15 million be spent more effectively to improve the schools? The answer is probably yes,

for two reasons. The first is the scope of the Compact. It simply tried to accomplish too much. The broad goal of school reformation through the incentive of jobs is admirable but can be realized only in the very long run. The second reason is even more basic. The Compact was a top-down phenomenon with little linkage between those who planned and led the initiative and those responsible for implementing it.⁵ Many of the teachers participating in the program did not see it as affecting their classrooms or what they taught in any way. Ironically, the Compact became an autocratic imposition with teachers seen as workers—the antithesis of shared governance with teachers as professionals and decision makers, the culture school reformers advocate.

Can Business Wait?

As the Boston Compact story makes clear, partners need to consider the time interval between investment and results. American companies may want faster returns on money invested than

schools can produce.⁶ Traditionally, corporations have given donations primarily to colleges and universities, for specific purposes. The results of such giving can be measured in terms of new engineers or managers hired, new products developed, or new basic research furthering the company's potential product line. In many instances, corporate contributions are tied directly to recruiting: those colleges and universities that produce new managers for companies receive the grants, and a cycle ensues. Many of these graduates later become advocates for the alma mater within the company, perpetuating the university's tie with the corporate giver.

High school graduates are far removed from such a cycle; at most, they may provide an employer better-trained entry-level employees for some jobs. Helping the public schools produce a better educated populace will, in the long run, help business; but the return business gets on its investment in the public schools may simply not be immediate enough or tangible enough to keep investors interested.

Reforming School Management

The few partnerships with the greatest potential have the longest turnaround times and are, therefore, the riskiest: partnerships to reform school management. Based on the pathbreaking work of Goodlad and Sizer, these ef-

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forts include shifting students from traditionally passive roles to active roles as learners. Programs supported by the ARCO, Exxon, and Honeywell Foundations are cases in point. But partnerships as extensive as these can build expectations that may not be met, and if they fail, corporate interest in the schools may diminish.

Another factor limiting the value of partnerships is that schools often place higher value on the survival of the partnership than on the success of their students.⁷ This confusion of priorities is understandable given the novelty and, in many instances, the tentative nature of these partnerships.

Making an Impact

Those school/business partnerships that offer the most fulfillment zero in on specific areas of the curriculum in which the business's involvement makes sense. These partnerships tap the expertise of the individuals in a company who want to share their interests in science, mathematics, economics, English, writing, art, or civics. By helping impart subject matter to teachers and students and by treating teachers as professionals, these partnerships can produce bottom-line results: improved student learning. By linking subject matter to what a business does, what the community values, and what the country aspires to, these partnerships can stimulate student interest in practically all subjects. And these efforts often produce results that are measurable and relatively immediate. (But a word of caution: programs that simply present businesspeople as role models are not likely to produce significant returns for the dollars invested.)

Discipline-based partnerships also offer businesses a more immediate return on their investment, for these partnerships enhance students' skills in communications, math, and decision making—the same areas where new employees presently are weak. In addition, such partnerships enable schools to bolster specific areas of the curriculum that may be relatively weak. In short, partnerships between business and schools can dramatically improve education when they focus on the instructional core of schooling.⁸

Instead of trying for general school reform, businesses and schools should concentrate on specific curriculum subjects in which they have expertise.

Successful Partnerships

A number of partnerships that focus on particular portions of the curriculum have had remarkable impact, including:

- discipline-based art education sponsored by the J. Paul Getty Trust and numerous local art institutes and corporations;
- the Triangle Coalition, a consortium of businesses and educators, dedicated to science and math education and coordinated by the National Science Teachers Association;
- the University of Chicago School Mathematics Project, designed to upgrade the mathematics ability of average elementary and secondary students, and supported by the AMOCO, GTE, and GE Foundations, as well as the Carnegie Corporation and the National Science Foundation;
- the Joint Council on Economic Education, a combined effort of business, labor, and education that trains teachers in economics and provides them with materials to help students better understand the basics of our economy;
- City College of New York's "Select Program in Science and Engineering" for 480 10th graders from Suffern, New York, high schools, developed with support from the Westinghouse Talent Search;

• the Standard Mid-Peninsula Urban Coalition, in California's Silicon Valley, which teaches electronic and computer skills, science, math, and English in mini-schools, and is designed to serve potential high school dropouts;

• Economics and Entrepreneurship Education—a program developed in Philadelphia by the Pew Charitable Trust, area universities, the Joint Council on Economic Education, and the Philadelphia public schools—which selects economically disadvantaged children to take courses leading to a summer internship with a local business. Businesspersons who support the program also serve on a committee that selects students to receive scholarships to local colleges.

Start with Curriculum Reform
School/business partnerships are expanding rapidly, but they may not produce the results that businesses or

schools want in the time they expect. Today, instead of trying for general school reform, businesses and schools should concentrate on specific curriculum subjects in which they have expertise and interest and in which the results are measurable. If these curriculum reforms work, the partners can use them later as a lever to address structural reform. □

¹ David A. Zacchei and Jill Mirman, (1986), *Business-Education Partnerships: Strategies for School Improvement* (Washington, D.C.: The Regional Laboratory Office of Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education), 6.

² Anne Lowrey Bailey, (February 10, 1988), "Corporations Starting to Make Grants to Public Schools, Diverting Some Funds Once Earmarked for Colleges," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, A28.

³ Eleanor Farrar and Anthony Cipollone, (1988), "After the Signing: The Boston Compact 1982 to 1985" in *American Business and the Public School: Case Studies of Corporate Involvement in Public Educa-*

tion, edited by Marsha Levine and Roberta Trachtman (New York: Teachers College Press), 89-120.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ William Woodside, chair of the Institute for Educational Leadership, (May 19, 1988), from the transcription of the Committee for Economic Development's annual board meeting, session titled "The CED and Education, National Impact, and Next Steps," New York City.

⁷ "Dear CEO: Don't Shut Out Needy Kids," (May 1988), *American School Board Journal* 175, 5. A review of *Allies in America*, vol. II (Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures, 1988).

⁸ Theodore L. Gross, (1988), *Partners in Education: How Colleges Can Work with Schools to Improve Teaching and Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass), 8.

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