

Corporate Influence  
in Schools

# Guidelines for Business Involvement in the Schools

The following document resulted from the work of an ASCD task force, which met last summer at ASCD headquarters.

## Preamble

ASCD believes that it is important for schools to develop clear guidelines to govern their relationships with business.

In structuring relationships with business, educators should remember that the state requires students to attend school. This gives educators the responsibility of ensuring that the welfare of their students, rather than the special interest of any particular group, is promoted by school programs.

In the United States businesses are powerful institutions that are well organized to promote their own interests. Sometimes the interests of business coincide with those of public education, and sometimes they do not. In some instances both the interests of a business and the welfare of students may be well served by establishing a school-business relationship. For example, a business that wants to provide tutors for a school may be interested in "improving public relations in the community," while the school may want to "improve student performance in reading." However, in every instance, business goals and programs must be reviewed with care to ensure that "public relations," for example, does not translate into advertising products or the presentation of a corporate bias.

This statement is intended to help educators establish guidelines to as-

sure that potential school-business relationships are based on sound educational values, serve clear educational purposes, and unambiguously promote the welfare of students.

## Establishing the Ground Rules

Any proposed business involvement with schools should be reviewed to assure that it is consistent with ASCD's educational values (see sidebar). Then

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a well-defined process should be put in place at the district level to ensure that the proposed involvement:

- is consistent with the values, goals, and objectives of the educational program;
- responds to a clearly understood educational need;
- supports and does not undermine either implicitly or explicitly an existing curriculum and instruction message;
- has been considered and assessed by groups with different views.

In addition, the process should provide for an ongoing review of all school-business relationships.

## Structuring Business Involvement in Policymaking

Schools are evolving institutions. The challenge for educators is to identify and promote those changes that are educationally valid. Businesses, as institutions, are perhaps the largest and most powerful interest group in our society, and they can exert considerable influence over social and educational policy. Given that potential to influence educational change, either positively or negatively, it is important that educators attempt to structure business involvement in educational policymaking in ways that best promote student welfare.

Policymaking may sound abstract and distant. However, as the reform

initiatives of the 1980s have shown, policy decisions at the federal, state, and local levels reach into virtually every classroom and school in a variety of tangible ways. Schools can benefit when people who have a strong influence on social and educational policy understand, on a firsthand basis, the problems and possibilities of public education.

Involving business people does not mean that the business agenda can or should become the school agenda. It does mean businesses have people with knowledge and expertise that can be of great assistance to schools. Involving business people as tutors and mentors, for example, provides good opportunities for educating them about public education. These activities not only offer the possibility of immediate benefits to school programs, they provide long-term benefits by being, in effect, inservice programs for people who influence educational policy. The more business people are involved in making constructive contributions to educational programs, the greater the likelihood that they will encourage the business community to support sound educational policies.

### Reviewing Material Resources and Incentive Programs Offered by Businesses

The area of materials and incentive programs offered by businesses is controversial. An increasing number of noneducational businesses that market products and services ranging from hamburgers to mouthwash to candy bars to automobiles to electrical power sponsor a variety of promotional materials such as "learning packets," wall posters, "news" broadcasts, computer programs, games, stickers, and the like, for school use. Many of these businesses also offer incentive programs that purport to en-

courage desired educational behavior on the part of the students.

Businesses usually make their materials available to schools free or at nominal cost. These materials are often attractively packaged, easy to use, and take up topics of current interest. However, attractive packaging, ease of use, topical interest, or apparently inoffensive content are not sufficient jus-

tification for using such materials. Nor should business-sponsored materials be used because they are, in a time of budgetary constraint, free and readily available, or because there is a reward in the form of money, equipment, and so on, for using them.

Business-sponsored materials may be biased. Special care should be taken to review materials provided by

### ASCD Values

*This statement was prepared by the ASCD Executive Council and reviewed in March 1989 by the Board of Directors. It will be presented for final action by the Board at the Annual Conference in San Antonio in March 1990.*

ASCD's mission is developing leadership for quality education for all students. ASCD believes that students are more likely to receive a high-quality education when the learning environment reflects these values and beliefs:

- **Balanced Curriculum.** We believe that all students should have a well-planned educational program with opportunities to study the full range of school subjects. A balanced program reflects the nature of knowledge, the needs and interests of individual learners, and the nature of society and the world.
- **Self-Direction.** We believe that students should become responsible for their own learning. Schools should emphasize self-discipline and teach students how to learn and how to think for themselves.
- **Leadership.** We believe that leaders make better decisions and achieve group and individual goals more fully by developing collective vision and practicing shared leadership. Many educational goals can best be achieved through collaboration.
- **Equity.** We believe that all individuals should be treated equitably. Schools should demonstrate, and foster in their students, respect for the dignity and worth of all persons.
- **Cultural Pluralism.** We believe that cultural diversity in schools and in the curriculum helps prepare students for life in our multicultural society and interdependent world.
- **Education for Democracy.** We believe that for democracy to survive, students must learn democratic values and practices. Educators should model democratic values and practices in their interaction with students.
- **Responsible Citizenship.** We believe that the future of our world depends on citizens who are well informed and willing to work for civic improvement. Schools should foster a sense of social responsibility in their students.

a business or business group on topics in which the business or business group has a financial interest in advancing a particular point of view. This is especially necessary when differing views are not presented because other groups lack the financial resources to present them or because the teaching staff is not well enough informed to be able to identify bias and present alternative views. Business-supplied materials on topics such as economics, nutrition, energy, and environmental issues have been especially controversial in the past. Whenever business-sponsored materials are used, they should be carefully reviewed for bias, and any bias they contain should be clearly identified for students. If students are too young to understand the bias, the material should not be used.

Some business-sponsored materials may do little more than provide a pretext for product or corporate advertising. Outside of school, children and their parents can choose not to subject themselves to certain commercial messages by, for example, turning off the television. However, in school, students are not free to refuse to subject themselves to advertising messages presented on wall posters, as part of materials used to supplement the curriculum, in television broadcasts used instructionally, or the like. Therefore, educators should be especially painstaking in assuring themselves that the power of the state is not

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misused to create a school environment in which students are, in effect, being forced to view or listen to commercial messages.

Incentive programs that encourage school performance by rewarding children with a product or service should be carefully reviewed. If the products or services offered as incentives imply that by participating in the program, the school is tacitly endorsing consumption habits that contradict important parts of its own curriculum message (in health and nutrition, for example), the program should not be used. An additional danger of incentive programs is that they tend to support a simplistic view of teaching and learning in which material reward

is tacitly accepted as the principal basis for enhancing student motivation.

Since business-sponsored materials and incentive programs are susceptible to abuse, it is always preferable for schools to develop their own supplementary materials and programs. In developing these materials and programs, schools can involve business people and other community members where appropriate. This approach averts the dangers of using corporate-sponsored materials and programs, provides the opportunity to encourage progressive curriculum-making practices, and offers a principled way to build closer, more cooperative relationships with the business community.

Before any business-sponsored material or incentive program is used, it should first be reviewed according to the established procedures for selecting text materials as well as according to the ground rules established above.

## **Using the Human Resources Offered by Business**

The business community represents a large pool of talented and civic-minded people. These people are in a position to contribute positively to school programs in a variety of ways; for example, by serving as mentors, by providing staff development activities, by helping to find job training opportunities for students, and through demonstration teaching, to name a few.

To use the talent available in the business community in an educationally sound way, it is important to provide a carefully structured program. Both parties should understand the goals and objectives of any such involvement. A process should be established by which school and business people participate in designing the program. Business people who take part in the program should receive any training necessary, be recognized for their contributions, and be made to feel welcome and valued. In every instance, the ground rules described above should be used when considering the nature of the program and what it is to accomplish. □

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