

# A new approach to business partnerships

Deeper, more sustainable relationships between schools and local business are more likely to result in systemic change in education.

Public education in California faces a historic challenge that is forcing local school districts to move away from the status quo. More than half the school districts in the state are suffering from declining enrollment and must address increasing competition from charter schools. Local educational leaders must stimulate ongoing growth in student enrollment and revenue through creative means to provide an outstanding education that will attract families to public schools.

Beyond the need for many school districts to pull out of the death spiral of declining enrollment, educational leaders throughout the state must foster a culture of change and accelerate creative self-renewal to provide students with an education for the world ahead.

Businesses demand and expect much more from public education as our global economy has become increasingly competitive. They want public education to provide them with highly qualified employees, and they want to feel confident that their local schools can offer their

employees' children a world-class education. Experience has proven that excellent local public education is critical to a company's ability to attract and retain talented employees.

The heat is on public education to find ways to reinvent schools so they can deliver academic excellence and meet the needs of the global economy while also providing an inclusive education for all students regardless of income, religion, race or ability. This article discusses the need for business and education to work together on a level that goes far beyond traditional partnerships. It describes a deeper and more sustainable interdependent relationship between public schools and businesses.

## The traditional model

Traditionally, good corporate citizenship has been the motivator for business involvement in education. Many companies make education a focus of their

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*By Maurice Ghysels and Kathy Thibodeaux*

philanthropic efforts through employee volunteerism, donation of computers and other supplies, and cash contributions.

While helpful for students and rewarding for many employees, these efforts generally have not resulted in systemic change in education, nor have they established deeper relationships that integrate a public school's services with a company's business plan.

To date, few corporations have gone beyond philanthropy to a strategic collaboration with schools to improve student achievement and increase the company's bottom line.

### **A new approach**

Public educators need to think beyond simply asking for money from corporations. Instead, they should ask this: How can schools obtain more resources from potential supporters such as corporations, and in the process enroll more students and help make the entire community, including business, more successful?

This can only be accomplished through interdependent relationships between schools, companies and community leaders. These stronger relationships require public educators to better understand the needs of companies. This approach involves an unprecedented level of collaboration and a change in how educational leaders think about building relationships with companies and civic leaders.

There is documented evidence that the local public schools are a major consideration for employees thinking about where they want to live and work. One well-known Fortune 100 company moved a large division to a location with a lower performing school district. The move caused the division to lose a significant number of its most talented employees, creating a huge loss in revenue and profits.

The mistake of this company exemplifies the need for educational leaders to realize that they can play a critical part in a company's ability to attract and retain its employees — its most precious assets — in order to thrive.

By aligning local school resources with a company's business plan, educational leaders can help corporate leaders

realize how they can work together toward solutions that will play a critical role in increasing employee satisfaction. This will lead to more qualified and talented employees who are pleased by and drawn to local public schools.

Facing competition for talent, companies currently differentiate themselves with a wide array of benefits and services to their employees, including health care, day care, health clubs, on-site dentists and even car washing. They provide access to many conveniences not only to satisfy employees, but also to keep them productive, offering services that would otherwise distract them from work.

Something critically important is often missing from the list of what companies offer their employees: helping ensure their children receive a quality education. Public educators have the opportunity to help corporations begin to see how they will benefit from a substantial and sustained investment in public education. Sustainable, interdependent relationships between schools and businesses begin with educators realizing that local companies employ people who may or may not choose public education for their children.

### **Helping employers attract applicants**

While employees with school-age children often wrestle anxiously over decisions about whether their local public schools or other educational options fit their needs, employers struggle to find qualified and talented local applicants to meet their hiring demands.

Thus, it is important for employers to realize that the employees they want to attract will expect excellent schools and educational programs for their children, and they want the benefit of attending school close to where they live and work.

Public education must continue to shift its paradigm away from being strictly a government-funded institution that asks for donations without articulating how it will directly meet the needs of its customers. Educational leaders must

shift their perspective toward leading "customer-focused" organizations. They must know their customers and how to meet their needs.

To engage corporations, school districts should start by building strong relationships with local business leaders, and then ask them, "Who are your employees? What are employees' needs



in educating their children? How can we collaborate toward satisfying your employees by educating their children?"

Business has an incentive to invest in the outcome. Thus, business and civic leaders will engage with educational leaders in developing programs that will expand school resources in a customer-centric way, delivering value for the company, the children of its employees, the rich diversity of students in neighborhood public schools and the surrounding community.

A district's approach toward developing this model should include these four steps, detailed below: building strong relationships with companies; researching and aligning with a company's business plan; developing education solutions for all students; and implementing and managing change.

### **Build strong relationships with companies**

Building relationships before asking for resources is a critical first step toward creating a long-term interdependent relationship. Showing an authentic desire

to see the company succeed and recognizing its accomplishments will help establish the respect necessary to begin the conversation about working together.

It is helpful to study businesses' Web sites, to be savvy about their organiza-

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tional changes, and to know the financial ups and downs and other changes they may be experiencing. Building strong relationships with business leaders is the most important part of this process.

Educational leaders will not go far in establishing an interdependent collaboration with business without warm, trusting relationships with its key decision-makers.

**Research and align with a company's business plan**

Once a relationship has been established with a company, the next step is to ask the corporate leaders about their employees. While it's important to be familiar with their business plan in general, the focus should be on the company's employees: How does the company try to attract and retain employees? What kinds of services does the business offer its employees?

In addition to probing for the true needs of the company through dialog with senior executives, the aim of the research is to understand

employee attitudes, beliefs and perspectives on the education of their children. Focus groups and surveys can be used to gather the following data:

- What kinds of educational choices employees made for their children and why;
- The key drivers that might cause them to choose your school district, whether or not they live within the district boundaries;
- How employees view education in relation to choice of employer;
- The percentage of employees who have school-age children;
- Where the employees live and where their children attend school.

**Hold strategic conversations with partners**

Once this data has been collected, the next step is to hold strategic conversations with the partners. These facilitated meetings should include educators, company representatives and city government leaders. From these conversations, solutions can be identified for further discussion and development.

Alternatives can be generated that will deliver a return on investment for the company and drive systemic change in public education. This change will deploy a public education solution that company employees will perceive as a value associated with working for the company. In turn, the company will invest in improving public schools not only for the benefit of the company and the children of its employees, but also for the benefit of students in neighborhood public schools and the community at large.

These solutions will encompass certain expectations on the part of the district: the solutions must be inclusive to all students, not just the children of the employees; the curriculum must be standards-based; and state tests and other quality continuous improvement methods and measures must reflect results. Beyond these conditions, innovation is highly encouraged and valued.

Additionally, the companies must recognize that educational leaders' core business competency is educating kids. Just as a company would not dictate how an eye examination would be conducted for their employees, the companies need to recognize that educators are the subject-matter experts in this link of the supply chain.

The Mountain View Whisman School District has established this kind of relationship with two global and highly successful companies. These companies enthusiastically embrace this approach.

**Education solutions for all students**

In building these relationships, educational leaders must be clear with business leaders that public education is for all students. Students whose parents are not employees should not be excluded. Any solution that is designed to satisfy employees must be shared with students beyond the company – neighborhood children who are from all socio-economic levels and ethnicities, and with varying needs.

This is a positive point to make to any company, and is a powerful nexus to corporate citizenship. In a sense, the solution a company and public education creates can become "two for the price of one."

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Some specific examples of possible solutions in which local companies could be significant investors include class size reduction; extended school days; coordinated resources for student, teacher and parent learning; establishing smaller schools on the campuses of large companies; and creative uses of technology for curriculum and instruction.

### Implement and manage change

Preferred solutions will be selected based on the formal collaboration with each company. This will include refinement of specific objectives, identification of resource requirements, development of timelines and accountabilities, and methods for evaluation.

This approach can be standardized in communities that seek deep, lasting interdependent relationships and success. These positive and productive interdependencies will involve not only companies and schools, but also cities and community groups in working together toward multiple success stories:

- Public schools shifting their reputations from being bureaucratic and compliance-centric to being "customer" or student and parent centered, thus enabling true collaboration and systemic changes leading to world class delivery of education services;

- Students from high and low socio-economic backgrounds attending the same schools with greater resources;

- Parents from wealthy backgrounds and those in poverty having their needs met;

- Corporations that contribute materially observing tangible improvement in local schools;

- Corporations recognizing an increased bottom line and recognizing the benefits of attracting and retaining talented and loyal employees; and

- Cities providing support realizing school and community improvement and financial benefits.

### Inspiring parents to choose public schools

While the concept of creating deeper interdependent relationships with companies may be uncomfortable for some and new to many, the practice allows

educational leaders to create ongoing organizational growth that flourishes in a culture of innovation.

In Mountain View, we strive to provide academic excellence and a strong community for all students. Moving away from the status quo, we possess a broad worldview to support and inspire parents to choose public education.

We are changing the way we think about how we work with companies in

our neighborhoods for the benefit of all children. ■

*Maurice Ghysels is superintendent of the Mountain View Whisman School District. Kathy Thibodeaux is a vice president with Standard Pacific Homes. They welcome further discussion of this topic, and invite readers to e-mail them at [mghysels@mvwsd.k12.ca.us](mailto:mghysels@mvwsd.k12.ca.us) or [kThibodeaux@stanpac.com](mailto:kThibodeaux@stanpac.com).*

ACSA and NTC offer

## Becoming a School Leadership Coach

ACSA, in partnership with the New Teacher Center's School Leadership Development Division, offers a variety of workshops that focus on the development of effective instructional leadership. These research-based programs are aligned with California's Professional Standards for Educational Leaders and have a documented success rate in meeting the needs of today's school leaders.

Coaching Leaders	Coaching Leaders to Attain Student Success: A Training for Coaches of Site Administrators 3 days	Oct. 10-12, 2006 May 22-24, 2007	ACSA Office Burlingame, CA
		March 6-8, 2007	National University Costa Mesa, CA
	Coaching Leaders to Attain Student Success: CLASS Network of School Leadership (For Continuing and New Coaches) 4 days	Sept. 27, 2006, Nov. 14, 2006, Jan 11, 2007, April 17, 2007	ACSA Office Burlingame, CA
Sept. 28, 2006, Nov. 7, 2006, Jan. 18, 2007, April 24, 2007		National University Costa Mesa, CA	
Improving Supervision Practices	Improving Student Achievement Through Supervision for Quality Instruction of English Language Learners 2 days	Jan. 30-31, 2007	ACSA Office Burlingame, CA
		To be scheduled in 2007	National University Costa Mesa, CA
	Improving Student Achievement Through Supervision for Best Teaching Practices 2 days	Jan. 23-24, 2007	ACSA Office Burlingame, CA
		To be scheduled in 2007	National University Costa Mesa, CA

If you have any questions about the content of the workshops, please contact Betsy Warren at [bwarren@ucsc.edu](mailto:bwarren@ucsc.edu).

To register for any of these workshops, please go online to [www.acsa.org/events](http://www.acsa.org/events) or call the ACSA Educational Services Dept. at 650.692.4300 or 800.672.3494.



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