

## Profit and Loss in School-Business Partnerships

**A common vision, long-term goals and mutual benefits are key to successful ventures.**

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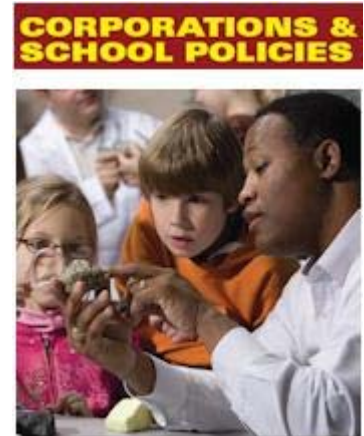
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From national initiatives that aim to broadly reform education to local efforts to pair children with tutors, corporations are increasingly involved with schools. The idea of business-school relationships is not new. However, the confluence of several powerful currents - corporate advocacy on education policy, cash-strapped public schools, privatization of public schools, and the pervasiveness of marketing geared toward young children - has made it a hot-button issue.

A survey by the Council for Corporate and School Partnerships found that 95 percent of schools had a partnership or conducted some activity with business. Such programs include Verizon Wireless' Bridging the Digital Divide Among Hispanic Youth in South Florida, as well as powerhouse partnerships with IBM, Hewlett-Packard and ExxonMobil.



Corporations have many motives for getting involved with schools, including the marketing aspect. But other motives range from concerns about workforce competitiveness from groups such as the Business Roundtable, to the desire of businesses to generate goodwill - and good publicity - in the surrounding community.

Some critics, including Alfie Kohn, author of *Education Inc.: Turning Learning into a Business*, (rev. ed.; Heinemann, 2002), decry the degree to which education has assumed a corporate purpose and ideology. Critics, including Kohn, believe the dominant corporate focus on schools' ability to produce competent workers detracts from teaching that promotes critical thinking and democratic values. Corporate leaders, critics say, advocate running schools like businesses-defining narrow academic standards, measuring them in standardized tests, and rewarding or punishing schools based on those results.

Other critics, such as Alex Molnar and Faith Boninger of Arizona State University's commercialism in Education Research Unit, lament the continuing spread and evolution of marketing to schoolchildren, such as using comics sponsored by the Disney Corp. as part of a reading and writing curriculum. Marketing in venues "previously off limits is coming to be considered 'normal,'" according to the 2006-2007 Report on Schoolhouse Commercializing Trends.

But the key for administrators is determining how their districts can benefit from corporate involvement while avoiding problematic relationships that only benefit the corporation. "When I talk to business groups, my focus is on the benefits for the business - here's why you need to be involved and how the partnership impacts educational achievement," says Jay Engeln, resident practitioner of school-business partnerships for the National Association of Secondary School Principals. For educators, however, "the mission of your school must be first and foremost at all times, and the businesses are partners with the school in achieving that mission."

### IBM

Science- and technology-oriented companies take their educational mission seriously and have invested millions of dollars in projects through philanthropic foundations. IBM says improving public schools is its top social priority and a strategic business investment. IBM can succeed only if it has successful employees and successful customers in successful communities, says Robin Willner, IBM's vice president of Global Community Initiatives. The challenge, she says, is creating both programs that fulfill what students will need in order to be prepared for a different world in 20 years, and narrower programs that deal with today's unmet needs.

IBM's Reinventing Education initiative awarded \$75 million in grants between 1994 and 2004, and many of the partnerships continue. In a 2004 evaluation, the Center for Children & Technology estimated that over 90,000 teachers and millions of students used the educational technology tools created through the program. IBM also recruited and paid the salaries of full-time IBM employees from its research laboratories and consulting organizations to work with educators in classrooms.

Coming early in the Internet age, Reinventing Education focused on helping schools adapt to the World Wide Web. Today, IBM's K12 education initiatives have a different flavor. Reading Companion is a Web-based program that uses voice recognition technology to help children practice reading. So far, IBM has given grants worth about \$5 million to put the program in 497 sites in 19 countries.

Another recent initiative is ¡TradúceloAhora!, which translates Web sites from English to Spanish and allows Spanish-speaking families to trade e-mails with English-speaking teachers and read the district Web pages in their own language. Some 461 schools and nonprofits use the technology, worth \$9 million. "We hear wonderful stories of how schools and not-for-profits are using it to improve services for Spanish-speaking families," Willner says.

## HEWLETT-PACKARD

A once-troubled low-income district in the Silicon Valley, the Ravenswood City School District in East Palo Alto, Calif., has attracted nearby businesses that contribute everything from books to laptops to employee elbow grease for painting and landscaping.

In a district where 90 percent of 5,000 children receive free or reduced lunch, Solomon Hill, the K8 district's director of technology, knows the right kind of assistance can go a long way toward narrowing the digital divide for his underprivileged students. But he also knows that some offers of corporate largesse can bring more problems than benefits.

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**—Solomon Hill, director of technology, Ravenswood City School District,  
East Palo Alto, Calif.**



A few years ago, a powerful Silicon Valley company "dumped" used computers on the district's doorsteps, but Hill says maintaining the outdated computers was costly. "Sometimes board members or administrators or members of the community get approached with ideas about products that don't fit with the goals of the instructional leaders, but they find it very hard to turn them down," Hill says, both because of the corporation's influence and because of the district's cash challenges. "At times, we've had to accept those resources, and ultimately it was for political reasons. Instructional leaders know that's not what they really need, and even though you think it's free, it costs tens of thousands of dollars of wasted opportunity by putting time into teaching with something that's not beneficial."

But the Ravenswood City School District found a successful long-term partnership with Hewlett-Packard. The "East Palo Alto Digital Village" project was a \$5 million communitywide project that included a \$1 million "1-to-1 e:Learning Project" at the district's Belle Haven School. HP provided laptops for 45 teachers and more than 400 students in grades 4-8. The five-year project ended in 2006, but since then the district's relationship with HP has evolved. Last December, HP invited Hill and



others from the district to show off the program's success as part of the company's "employee giving program." HP offered a 3-to-1 match of employee donations, resulting in over \$40,000 in computers on Hill's wish list.

## Great Expectations

HP's philanthropy arm had been working for several months with the district as part of the Digital Village Initiative, which was designed to help underserved communities join the digital age, when Hill joined the district.

At first, Hill found the company's demands daunting. "They were tough to work with in the sense that they really wanted us to have a good solid vision for the project," he says. "They had some pretty big demands that I wasn't used to in terms of getting donations. They were asking what are you going to do and how are you going to evaluate it. Over the years, that rigor made us really good at getting money and proving we can do good things with it."



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Hill attributes the success of the relationship to more than just technology. He receives advice on how to best use technology from HP grant program managers, who visit schools nationwide and share best practices. HP also had a Stanford University professor teach school and community leaders about effective evaluation processes to measure progress against their goals in technology programs.

## The Downside

A downside of such corporate involvement is that technology becomes obsolete after three to four years and business partners are unlikely to continually provide state-of-the-art equipment. But Hill says that does not diminish the benefits. "We were able to do a lot with the 1-to-1 e:Learning Project," he says. "It gave students opportunities they wouldn't otherwise have."

The company and district have found new ways to work together. In three of the last four years, teams of Ravenswood educators have won HP Technology for Teaching grants that put laptops and projectors in the hands of teachers, who stream video clips tied to the curriculum. This resource has helped all students, but especially the English Language Learners, who benefit most from visual learning.

## Leveraging Support

The company has also helped the district leverage the initial 2001 grant to get funding for other business projects. "We call HP and say 'Can you write a letter of support?' and they always say yes," Hill says. "That's been invaluable."

HP's relationship with Ravenswood reflects a changing tide in the company's educational philanthropy, which initially focused on increasing the company's products in schools. "The problem with 'access' was a lot of technology companies were going into districts and schools and dumping technology when what was needed was a partnership so everyone is learning about best uses and best practices," says Sid Espinosa, director of HP's philanthropy programs. Many companies continue this approach, Espinosa says, contributing to the skepticism about not just corporate motives but the value of educational technology.

"The goal here is we want districts to be successful. We want teachers to be successful, and we know that just putting a computer in every classroom is absolutely not the solution," Espinosa says. "By doing it the right way we've seen success, and, frankly, it's incumbent on the district to create a technology plan that recognizes that and moves the agenda forward."

## EXXONMOBIL

ExxonMobil felt compelled to address the growing drought of interested students in math and science. When the 2005 national blue-ribbon panel report *Rising Above the Gathering Storm* recommended improving student performance in math and science, the corporation contributed \$125 million to launch the nonprofit National Math and Science Initiative (NMSI) in March 2007.

NMSI is scaling up two successful programs mentioned in the report: UTeach and Training and Incentive Programs for AP and Pre-AP Courses. UTeach, modeled from a Texas program, focuses on encouraging college math and science majors to enter the teaching profession. The AP-focused program involves teacher training as well as incentive programs for students to take AP math, science and English and to pass the exams. Implemented by the nonprofit Advanced Placement Strategies, the training and incentives program includes formal and informal teacher training and financial incentives based on students' academic results. NMSI plans to expand the Texasbased AP program to 150 districts in 20 states. The goal is for 60,000 more students nationwide to score 3 or higher on AP tests in the next five years.

### Teachers Academy

The Mickelson ExxonMobil Teachers Academy is another worthy program. The five-day training seminar for third- to fifth-grade teachers focuses on math and science skills. Districts in major Exxon-Mobil work locations, such as Houston and Torrance, Calif., nominate five to 10 teachers to attend the academy. About 600 teachers attend each year.

While ExxonMobil funds these programs, "we don't try to impose curriculum changes on schools," says Mark Boudreaux, manager of corporate citizenship and community investments. For its national programs, ExxonMobil partners with the respected organizations Math Solutions Professional Development, founded by Marilyn Burns, and the National Science Teachers Association, which designed the curriculum and manages the day-to-day activities for the teachers academy.

ExxonMobil also sends trained employees as "science ambassadors" into K12 schools to discuss how they use science in their work.

### Houston Independent School District

ExxonMobil officials say their company's involvement with schools is not designed to promote the company line on energy issues. "Certainly we want credit for our good work, but we're not promoting gasoline," Boudreaux says.

One of the beneficiaries of Exxon- Mobil-sponsored programs is the Houston Independent School District's West Region. For 15 years, 22 elementary schools have been involved in a K5 math program in which a math specialist provides on-site support in each school to deepen teacher and student knowledge and to improve instruction. Last year ExxonMobil provided an additional \$840,000 to expand the program in four middle schools.

ExxonMobil funds the math specialist program through Houston A+ Challenge, a nonprofit public-private partnership that develops and funds school programs, professional development, and leadership issues in districts throughout the Houston area. Formerly the Houston Annenberg Challenge, Houston A+ has seven major funders, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and smaller donors such as banks, supermarkets, airlines, sports teams and local foundations.

The partnership acts as an intermediary force to connect the schools with private and public ventures that haven't been working directly with districts, says Superintendent Scott Van Beck, a 23-year veteran of Houston ISD.

While individual schools and districts still maintain partnerships with businesses, "this really takes the conversation and the strategy to a regional level," Van Beck says, allowing corporations to have a broader impact.

## LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS

Other partnerships take a different approach in which a local business forges a close relationship with a single school.

For example, the partnership between Ockerman Middle School in the Boone County (Ky.) School District and Schwan's Global Supply Chain in Florence, Ky., aims to improve academic achievement on state assessments through a literacy program. Small groups of students read and write e-mails to a Schwan volunteer.

Another example is the partnership between the high school in Northwestern Regional School District No. 7 and Northwest Community Bank in Winsted, Conn. With a \$72,000 state grant, the high school developed an honors-level money, banking and business course and established a bank branch inside the school. Bank employees lecture in class, and the school branch is overseen by a bank employee but staffed by students. The students must undergo an interview and then spend 25 hours learning the ropes with a mentor in a regular bank branch.

The bank branch in school is open from 10:30 a.m. to 12:15 p.m., and the 12 students enrolled take turns working. The student bankers open real accounts for students and faculty, accept deposits and make withdrawals—all of the routine bank activities. Several students also have after-school jobs at other branches.

"This was a chance for kids who want to go to work and take business courses to earn honors credit," says Kathy Deasy, the high school's business educator. "And the bank loves it because they have a ready pool of employees."

The program was the brainchild of the late Superintendent Roberta Ohotnicky. She suggested the idea to bank executive John Ursone, who is now president, and the bank opened in April 2006.

Such a large undertaking provides lessons for other partnerships, Deasy says. For example, a contract would be useful to ensure that the program would continue even when the people involved changed jobs. Bank employees also should receive training in working with students to avoid, for example, relationships that become too chummy.

"We can't anticipate every issue, so when we have a question or a concern we just communicate with the bank," she says. "It's worked out great that these kids have an employment opportunity at the bank."

### What Makes Success?

Research conducted by the Council for Corporate and School Partnerships found that many school-business partnerships fall apart or don't provide much benefit mainly because they have different goals, poor planning, or a lack of buy-in from stakeholders, Engeln says. So for many district leaders, it's important to understand what makes partnerships work effectively for student benefit. "You don't sacrifice the mission and vision of your school for a corporate sponsorship," says Engeln.

Engeln was principal of William J. Palmer High School in Colorado Springs (Colo.) School District 11 in the mid-1990s when half of the ninth-graders were failing, enrollment was declining, and teacher morale was at rock bottom after a three-year salary freeze. The district chose to sell advertising space on school buses and in school gymnasiums and hallways to raise money. The revenue allowed the district to buy books, lab equipment and other supplies it couldn't otherwise have afforded. While the advertising was controversial, within three years, the high school had 110 business partners that generated \$186,000.

A domino effect occurred, where teachers felt appreciated, as did students. "When kids felt the community cared about them, they started caring about the community and their grades," Engeln says. "The number of kids on the honor roll almost doubled in five years."

And taxpayers responded by passing the first bond issue in 27 years. "The school-business partnerships must fit with the values and norms of your community," Engeln says. "If you try to implement them without getting input from the stakeholders you'll have a disaster on your hands."

Engeln travels the country helping schools and businesses understand how to make partnerships work and spreading the best practices identified by the Council for Corporate and School Partnerships, which offers a how-to guide.

"When you can get business involved to help students become better educated and to complete their education, that impacts the economy and that's good for business," Engeln says. "But you have to be careful about your business partners. You are not there to be at the whim of the business."

*Leslie Werstein Hann is a freelance writer based in New Jersey.*

#### **Resources**

The Council for Corporate and School Partnership

[www.corpschoolpartners.org](http://www.corpschoolpartners.org)

ExxonMobil [www.exxonmobil.com](http://www.exxonmobil.com)

HP [www.hp.com](http://www.hp.com)

Houston A+ Challenge

[www.houstonaplus.org](http://www.houstonaplus.org)

IBM [www.ibm.com](http://www.ibm.com)

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