



In Brief

PRIORITIES FOR ALLOCATING CORPORATE RESOURCES TO IMPROVE EDUCATION

by Lisa Hood and Melanie Rubin

Introduction

Since the mid-1980's, business-education partnerships have strengthened and focused more on complex, system-level concerns. Initiated by *A Nation At Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) and subsequent educational reform agendas, businesses have worked with schools in a variety of ways to support change and improvement. Reviewing partnerships focused on reform, Rigden (1994) reports businesses often focus on four areas: a) enhanced student learning, b) extended teacher capacity, c) increased innovation in school systems, and d) more effective assessment tools. After at least two decades of business education partnership activities, very little information exists about business-education partnerships. This study attempts to explore business priorities in terms of the time and resources that businesses devote to various types of business-education partnership activities. This study also describes the impact business representatives hope their partnership activities will have on students, teachers, and educational systems.

Employer Participation Model

In the mid-1990's, the National Employer Leadership Council (NELC) developed the Employer Participation Model that focuses on business involvement in business-education partnerships. In the mid-1990's, the National Employer Leadership Council (NELC) developed the Employer Participation Model that focuses on business involvement in business-education partnerships associated with state and local workforce development systems. The Employer Participation Model looks at business-education partnerships from the employer's perspectives: employers working with students and teachers, employers strengthening company practice, and employers building a system (Kaufman, 1998; NELC, 1996).

The Employer Participation Model presents 43 activities that are grouped according to the following categories:

- working with students and teachers
- strengthening company practices to support workforce development systems
- building a system

In the first category, working with students and teachers, employers are focused on three areas: career awareness, career exploration, and career preparation. The second category, strengthening company practices, is exclusively concerned with changes companies make within their own organizations to sustain new partnerships with education. Activities in the third category, building a system, include employers working at the local, state/regional, national, or international levels to promote workforce development systems across industries.

Using this model to explore business involvement, we invited business representatives to participate in telephone interviews to discuss their partnerships with education. We asked the representative to assess their activities with students, teachers, administrators; their priorities for allocating time and resources to partnerships; and their expectations for what the partnerships would achieve. A modified snowball sampling procedure was used to identify a pool of potential businesses as recommended by members of professional associations such as the National Tech Prep Network, Association of Career and Technical Education, and others. After participating in the interview, business representatives were asked to recommend other businesses they believed would have information relevant to this study. Web and literature searches were another valuable source of information. Businesses were sampled from four career clusters: health sciences, finance, information technology, and manufacturing.

Results and Conclusions

Using the Employer Partnership Model as a framework, we collected and analyzed data with the following categories in mind: Working with Students, Working with Teachers, Working with Administrators, and Changing Company Practices. Several important findings emerged from the 28 interviews conducted. What follows are key findings and implications for each category of activities.

Working with Students

Essentially, we found that working with students captured the highest priority for the businesses in this study. Businesses want to work with students to inform them about their opportunities to attend college and obtain employment. They want to spark student's interests in the business' career field. Businesses also believe working with students builds a talent pipeline for the workplace. As a result of the partnerships, businesses hope students will connect what they're learning in the classroom to the workplace, explore careers, be more motivated to pursue higher education, and become highly qualified members of the workforce. Mike Schmidt from the Ford Motor Company summed it up with this statement, "The more contact these kids can make with adults, the better. Adults model certain behaviors; students get exposure to career areas. They see people who have gone to college and what it takes to get there and why it's important." Businesses report that mentoring, assessing student abilities and interests, and serving as guest speakers are common activities when working with students. Each valuable, these activities tend to be less time and labor intensive than activities such as tutoring, cooperative education, and apprenticeships.

Most of the businesses had committed to long-term partnerships with education, though many of the identified activities required fairly low levels of engagement. In their typology on the level of engagement of business-education partnerships, Grobe, Curnan, and Melchior (1993) identified six levels of partnerships in descending order. Our results suggest many activities in which businesses engaged with students are level five partnerships wherein businesses go into classrooms to interact with students as role models and resource persons. The partnerships generally did not delve deeply into the curricular or instructional fabric of the educational system to move beyond the student, teacher, or classroom level.

Even so, businesses were highly committed to the work they were doing with students, seeing it as of paramount importance to building the future workforce, committed customers, and active citizens. A message we heard repeatedly from business representatives was how their work with schools would help to produce a more highly educated citizenry, a better economy and stronger communities. A universal benefit, according to business, was that a more highly

educated citizenry would constitute a more highly qualified workforce, allowing the United States to remain globally competitive and economically secure.

Looking to the future, businesses indicated continued support for working with students. When asked to anticipate the longevity of their commitment, many said they were committed to working with students indefinitely. Unless economic difficulties forced a change, businesses saw no reason to stop their work with students. Their genuine appreciation for students as future societal members and employees bode well for continued partnerships focused on students.

Working with Teachers

We saw an increasing commitment of businesses to placing a high priority on their work with teachers with working with teachers as the second highest priority for businesses. Business representatives said that working with teachers is a high priority because teachers have the most impact on the education system and students. The shift in focus was not to abandon students but to draw more attention to the vital work of teachers. Based on Grobe, Curnan, and Melchior (1993), partnerships with teachers fell under a level four partnership in terms of intensity, making them more substantive than partnerships with students. Illustrative of their work with teachers, business representatives described working with teachers to develop new curriculum, to conceive of new classroom materials, to identify current industry practices and technologies, to integrate industry skills standards with academic standards, and to design project-based learning activities. Business representatives said they engaged in these activities as a way to be a resource and provide support for enhanced classroom instruction, providing knowledge, professional development activities, motivation, and equipment.

One of the most striking reasons businesses gave for their work with teachers was their intent on having a more direct impact on student learning. Some business representatives bemoaned teachers teaching outdated curricula using traditional teacher-centered instructional strategies. As Sandy Dochen from IBM said, "If you have a teacher that is wonderful and sincere, but is teaching a curriculum that is out of date, then the kids are not getting the best dynamic cutting edge education they could get." Businesses that placed a high priority on working with teachers emphasized professional development as extremely important, and they wanted to gain greater access to teachers to bring the curriculum up to date. In doing so, businesses believed the quality of education would be enhanced and student learning outcomes would be improved.

Further, several businesses expressed the viewpoint that working with teachers may be a more expeditious way to influence systemic educational changes than working

with students. Businesses understood the influence that teachers have on students because they design and deliver instruction. They also mentioned a cost-benefit advantage to working with teachers, suggesting that each teacher impacts many students so if businesses can make an impact on teachers, their impact on students is multiplied. With an increasing national interest on teacher quality evident in No Child Left Behind, we believe that businesses are likely to continue to increase the priority they place on working with teachers.

Working with Administrators

The Employer Partnership Model framework did not mention working with administrators, but we included this group because we were interested in whether business partnerships took administrators into account. Our results show business partners were working with administrators, and they viewed such activities as crucial because administrators are the gatekeepers to working with students and teachers. Businesses recognized their need to secure administrator buy-in to access the schools to promote and support their priorities. Peter Joyce from Cisco emphasized the need to establish good relationships so that administrators and educators won't feel threatened by business involvement in their educational systems. Mr. Joyce said, "Folks realize that we're a gorilla in the IT industry. We gain a reputation for our partnerships, and they understand our honest interest in partnerships.... We're not playing a political game.... We have 10,000 partnerships worldwide. We can't be too much of an enemy." Echoing their reasons for working with teachers, businesses believed their work with administrators was leading to systemic change. They also believed their knowledge of organizational management would help administrators in better managing schools more efficiently.

After reviewing these results, we classified these types of business-education partnerships as level four, with a few businesses operating at level three (Grobe, Curnan & Melchior, 1993). In other words, most activities were fairly complex and substantive. Level four activities mentioned by business representatives included professional development, and level three partnerships were focused on working with administrators in managing schools. When businesses engaged in work with administrators, they developed goals for the partnerships, outlining various management activities and delineating partner roles and responsibilities. Often businesses indicated they were educating school administrators about the need for partnerships, assuring them that their intention was to improve education and not criticize or intervene in decisions that should rightfully be made by educators.

We anticipate businesses continuing to work with administrators because of the necessity for businesses to gain access to teachers and students. With administrator support, businesses can more easily reach their ultimate goal of working with students and teachers.

Changing Company Practices

Our study revealed businesses with a solid commitment to working with students and teachers, possibly so focused that their own internal company practices had not reaped much benefit from participation in the partnerships. We speculate that the weak internal focus reflected their diffuse and varied approaches on partnering with education. With a myriad of goals and a host of different groups involved, businesses found it difficult to systematically integrate ideas and make changes in internal functions, including such human resource development functions as employee recruitment and training and development. Unfortunately, when lacking, businesses miss the opportunity to feed information back into their own organizations and make improvements in their own human resource processes.

Promising Developments

Over the course of this study, the character and complexity of business-education partnerships became readily apparent. Businesses participating in our study had supported partnerships for several years, with many reaching large numbers of students and teachers. Many companies had partnerships in different divisions, different locales, and some in different countries. Business representatives talked of multifaceted corporate approaches that sometimes became disjointed and were occasionally unknown to other parts of the company. Recognizing this concern, some businesses were building linkages among their different partnerships to enhance coherency. Many were focusing on particular educational issues such as academic achievement or technical skill preparation and certain target populations such as female, minority, or first generation college students for whom they saw an acute need for improvement or for which they believed they had sufficient resources to make a difference. Many believed that through collaboration, their company's efforts would lead to systemic change in the nation's educational system.

We saw another promising development in that we saw several instances of business-to business collaboration to form councils or associations to improve education. Examples of these organizations include the Semiconductor Executive Councils of Austin and Dallas-Ft. Worth, TX, and the Manufacturing Technology Advisory Group (MTAG) sponsored by Boeing. In these organizations, businesses partner with other companies in their same industry and with schools and colleges. These collaborative groups serve as advisory councils to assist educational partners to develop and revise curriculum, advice administrators and teachers about academic and technical skills needed by students, and provide work-based learning activities such as internships for students and teachers.

Finally, a few businesses joined national organizations to encourage other businesses to get involved in improving educational systems. For example, several companies

are members of Achieve, an organization that works on state educational policy issues. Businesses that join organizations such as these agree on goals and strategies for improving education, and they work to persuade policymakers, educational administrators, and teachers to make improvements. Grobe, Curnan & Melchior (1993) categorize these types of partnerships as level one or level two, the most broadly impacting and complex partnerships. Through these types of partnerships, businesses combine to speak with one voice about their preferences for improving the nation's educational systems.

Future Research

Additional research is needed on partnerships between business and education. Our review of the literature suggests little is known about the focus, shape and character of existing partnerships, and even less is known about what impact they have on educational systems. Since this latter goal is articulated so frequently by business, it seems incumbent to evaluate more carefully the effects of these activities on all levels but particularly on student learning outcomes.

Partnerships in Action

Business representatives provided us with rich descriptions of the partnerships they believed were models for other business and education organizations to learn from and replicate. In the full report, we present the vignettes based on categories consistent with the Employer Participation Model: working with students and working with teachers. Although business-education partnerships often involve multiple stakeholders and priorities (e.g., working with students and teachers), we categorize the vignettes based on the stakeholder the companies prioritize most. Hence, the model partnerships illustrated in the vignettes are presented for students and teachers the focus areas where we found the preponderance of activity:

- Working with Students
 - TechKnow Education—Texas Instruments
 - Design Your Future—Autodesk
 - Plano Independent School District—EDS
 - TechReach—Manpower
 - Financial Fitness for Life—Bank of America
 - Semiconductor Executive Council and Destination: Digital—AMD

- Working with Teachers
 - Manufacturing Technology Advisory Group (MTAG)—Boeing
 - Reinventing Education—IBM
 - Intel® Teach to the Future—Intel
 - TWIST—3M
 - State Farm Learning and Teaching Exchange (SLATE)—State Farm

A full copy of this report can be downloaded at OCCRL's website: <http://occr.ed.uiuc.edu/Publications/projects/be.asp>.

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