



Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver

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Just for the ASKing! is a monthly e-newsletter that addresses the needs of all those who strive to be instructional leaders. In this month's issue, Bruce uses his experience working with the Navy Federal Credit Union while principal of Thoreau Middle School, Fairfax County Public Schools, Virginia, to provide words of wisdom about developing mutually beneficial school-business partnerships.

Picture-Perfect Partnerships



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop

Picture, if you will, a previously unforeseen support system for your school, which could include outside academic assistance for students, mini-grants for teachers, resources for needy families in your community, and the possibility of monetary backing to achieve school goals. This unique platform already exists across the country in the form of school-business partnerships. The success of these alliances has led to close, prolonged associations between schools and businesses that have resulted in mutual benefits for both parties. Reports show that those schools that have forged successful partnerships are extremely enthusiastic about the relationships and they have no hesitation in continuing to invest time in these endeavors.

Although there have been working relationships between schools and community organizations for decades, the current school-business partnership movement increased in momentum in the early 1980s when the White House urged a stronger connection between schools and businesses. More schools were faced with new and complex challenges including public support for reforms and accountability, and a decrease in federal funding coupled with higher per-pupil costs. Businesses felt the pinch as they saw a decline in the skills of entry-level workers as well as competition from foreign markets. According to the **National Association of Partners in Education, Inc.**, "A national consensus supporting partnerships began to grow through the 1990s, supported by community, standards-based, skills-based initiatives. The convergence created opportunities for change and facilitated the entrance of businesses as full-fledged partners." By the early 1990s, the partnership movement had grown significantly, with over 200,000 partnerships across the country.

A school-business partnership is defined as an agreement between two or more parties to establish goals and to develop a plan in order to achieve those goals. Partnerships may be organized following district guidelines or by individual schools and businesses. The two entities then work together for the mutual benefit of students, teachers, business employees and the community, in general. Successful arrangements have been set up across all grades, in schools large and small. *Education World* concludes, "Any school leader who is not taking advantage of potential business partnerships is missing a tremendous opportunity – an opportunity most business are eager to pursue." Moreover, the **Council for Corporate and School Partnerships** sees it this way: "Challenged by budget shortfalls in the face of efforts to have all students meet high standards, and recognizing the link between good schools, student achievement and a prosperous economy, schools and businesses are now more ambitious than ever before in their efforts to work together."

Because many schools are seeking support systems that will keep them moving in a positive direction, we devote this issue of *Just for the ASKing!* to an investigation of school-business partnerships – how they begin, how they are nurtured, and how they can be beneficial to both education and business.

Finding a Partner

In some districts, schools are left to their own devices to locate a business partner while in other places, guidelines have been established to help schools with the process. Howard Johnston and Lew Armistead in the *American School Journal* provide points to help schools navigate the process. They recommend:

- Study potential business partners' websites to learn as much as possible about their mission, philosophy, and potential for working with the school
- Determine if there is someone in the school or parent community who is acquainted with the business and who can provide an introduction. According to the authors, "Cold calls are less likely to be productive."
- Once a potential partner has been identified and introductions have occurred, take the time to establish a personal connection (family, interests, etc.) rather than to move too quickly into a discussion about how the business can help the school. Moving too quickly with a school's wish list can result in a rocky start right at the beginning.

It is important to note that successful partnerships have been formed in many configurations. Nationally known businesses have forged relationships with inner city schools and smaller communities have been pleasantly surprised at the outcomes from pairing up with small, local organizations. An additional option is having multiple small businesses pairing with a single school. Former Washington state principal and current director of teaching and learning Jill Massa notes, "Schools in small communities should not hesitate to expand their reach for business partners to businesses in surrounding communities supported by residents of the town."

Getting Started

Once an agreement has been made that the partnership will become a reality, the next step is to solidify the arrangement with a formal written and signed document often called an MOA (Memorandum of Agreement). The purpose of the document is to clarify the expectation both parties will have for the partnership. Making the collaboration official can be accomplished simply by having a representative from the school (typically the principal) meet with the business representative (often the CEO or manager) for a formal signing. In some instances, the commitment to the partnership is conducted at a school assembly where the purpose of the arrangement is made public to students, invited parents, and business representatives. At Thoreau Middle School, we held an annual assembly on or close to the anniversary date of the original signing to introduce new students to the agreement. Templates are available online for possible MOA documents at www.asdk12.org/forms/uploads/SBPAgree.pdf.

Thinking Symbiosis

Symbiosis is defined as a mutually beneficial relationship between different people or groups. From the outset, it is important for both parties to view the arrangement as an investment that will benefit both organizations, and this viewpoint should be kept at the forefront of everyone's thinking as the partnership continues. The formation of a steering committee consisting of both school and business representatives who will carry on and oversee the work of the alliance will better guarantee that this type of thinking will endure. If the school enters the agreement with the primary focus on what and how the business can help the school, the arrangement can turn sour and even deteriorate. While most business partners fully want to provide support for their educational colleagues, it is important for the school to likewise investigate ways the business can benefit from the affiliation. Les Potter, a former principal from Florida, sees it this way: "A partnership cannot be a one-way street with the school always asking. You might have a clear idea of what you can offer them, or you can ask the business partner what the school might offer in return."

Creating Successes

As partnerships begin, steering committees may find themselves in a "blind leading the blind" mode since they have no idea of the possibilities that exist that may be in place in other partnerships. The **Council for Corporate**

and School Partnerships suggests that “partnerships should be defined by mutually beneficial goals and objectives.” They further suggest that partnerships should:

- Clearly define short and long-range goals
- Collaborate to determine activities that meet the goals of all involved
- Be aligned with education goals and board policies of individual schools and/or districts

Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia has a long-standing school-business program that began in the 1980's. The district has set up a website which focuses on the roles of the school and business coordinators in a partnership. Of special significance are two pages, one entitled “What Schools Can Do For Their Business-Organization Partners” and another called “What Partners Can Do For Schools.” Among the many suggestions for business involvement are serving as tutors, mentors, and readers with individual students; providing grants for teachers; being guest speakers at school programs; providing space for school events; and assisting youth with special needs. Businesses have benefitted from a range of interactions such as honoring partnership employees at receptions or dinners; providing art shows or music programs at the business site; giving complimentary tickets to school events; and strengthening the image of the business in the community. For a complete list of programs/activities go to www.fcps.edu/cco/bcp.

Realizing Benefits

At the outset of the partnership both partners should agree that “both of us are in this alliance for the long haul.” At times, the partnership may feel stalled, because results of efforts put forth are not showing the expected results. Do not despair! Creative thinking, the right inspiration or a “what if?” suggestion can cause a partnership to flourish. Many partnerships that have lasted for decades have reported that they had no realization of what direction their relationship would take back at the early stages. It is important to note that monetary donations from the business should not be an immediate expectation and should not be one of the first agenda items. In a number of situations, as the partnership strengthens and the players become more comfortable with one another, financial contributions may be forthcoming. Overall, it is the investment of human capital that is the greatest benefit to the school.

Staying Connected

In many coalitions, schools can readily recognize the way they benefit from the arrangement. A recent survey has concluded that “more than 80% of administrators surveyed believe that teachers, students, parents and community leaders consider the partnerships to be moderately or strongly favorable.” Equally important is to ensure that businesses view the relationship the same way. There are advantages for businesses that can result in the business's desire to maintain the agreement. These advantages include:

- Boosting employee morale and productivity through their successful work with the school
- Preparing future workers for challenges in the world of work
- Improving the academic achievement of students
- Positive feedback to the business indicating that they are making a difference

One of the most significant findings is the importance of the principal staying involved in the partnership. Taking a back seat and turning over the leadership role to another school employee can send the wrong message to the business that the principal is just not that interested. It is well worth the investment of time and energy, even when the principal's plate is full, since the ultimate benefits can be so great.

Wrapping Up

As California principal Allan Weiner concludes, “The biggest factor in getting businesses involved is the asking. The worst that can happen is that they say no. Usually businesses are eager to help, and the work begins.” Ohio principal Tony Pallija agrees. He advises, “Sometimes principals have to walk around the block and say hello. They might be surprised to find how many people are out there to help.”

Resources and References

www.asdk12.org/forms/uploads/SBPAgree.pdf

This online template from the Anchorage School District provides a framework for drafting a Memorandum of Agreement.

www.cisforegon.org/resources/documents/How-To%20Guide%20for%20School-Business%20Partnerships.pdf

This PDF by the Council for Corporate and School Partnerships provides a step-by-step process for school officials to engage in partnerships with businesses.

www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin323.shtml

This article by Education World, titled “School-Business Partnerships That Work” showcases the successful partnerships of schools and businesses of all sizes.

www.fcps.edu/cco/bcp

The home page for the Business and Community Partnerships department in Fairfax County Public Schools, Virginia, offers resources, videos, and other examples of best practices in school-business partnerships.

www.fcps.edu/cco/bcp/about/schoolscando.shtml

Fairfax County Public Schools, Virginia, provides these twenty-four suggestions for what schools can provide their business-organization partners.

www.fcps.edu/cco/bcp/about/partnerscando.shtml

This page provides thirty-three suggestions from Fairfax County Public Schools, Virginia, on what business-organizations have to offer their partner schools.

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