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Partnerships with a Purpose

by Hal Rowe and Lois Merriman
Manhattan-Ogden Public Schools

Introduction

Nationally, the climate is right for developing collaborative partnerships. One writer calls the growing role of business in school problems "enlightened self-interest." Business organizations are beginning to see that cooperation is essential if schools are to turn out students who have the skills business is seeking. Not only that, teacher education programs are increasingly under fire to provide a curriculum that prepares teachers who can work and live in the information age.

There is even a growing business lobby for education. Instead of criticism, the business community is beginning to promote support. Teacher training institutions are more interested than ever before in bridging the gap between educational theory and its application in the classrooms and the schools.

Community cooperation on the drop-out problem is presently seen as an imperative by schools and increasingly so by business. Both society and a productive business community require a reduction in the number of students who leave school without the skills to support themselves. Teacher training institutions can be key players in this effort.

In the Manhattan-Ogden Public Schools, educational partnerships are viewed as one component of the school district's commitment to enhance the quality of life for the community as a whole. The Board of Education and the Superintendent of Schools believe in public school leadership in community and student activities which contribute to this goal. As a result, the school district is viewed not as the recipient of the benevolence of other entities, but as an equal partner well able to contribute significantly to identified goals of the business, institution, or organization involved. From this position as a contributing partner, we are able to develop significant relationships which meet predefined goals rather than to simply request financial or other support for a series of events.

Each school in the district is involved in the IDEA School Improvement model which generates its energy from planning and implementation committees that include parents, community leaders, and school district staff. Two phases of our School Improvement Project have facilitated the development of educational partnerships. As goals and plans are developed, the ideas and opportunities

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for educational partnerships naturally evolve from these broad-based committees. Additionally, the committee work has been a showcase for the skills and talents of district staff. As a result, school people are now more in demand for non-school roles in community activities. These efforts, together with strong Board of Education goals and initiatives, have created an active and open environment for drawing the community into planning and continuing quality education in the community. While strategies for developing a leadership position will vary from community to community, in most situations the critical element will be Board and administrative commitment to the community leadership concept.

Who We Are and What We Are Doing

A visitor from England once said the people he talked to in the Manhattan-Ogden school district were confident without being complacent. Confidence, competence, and change are all part of what collaborative partnerships are about. Acknowledging and sharing these qualities is important in creating an environment that encourages partnerships.

The school public relations component for encouragement of educational partnerships is not a promotional program for partnerships but more a promotion of who we are and what we are doing. This, in turn, can generate the realization that there will be mutual benefit in partnership activities.

A first step has been to regard all staff members as key communicators. As our staff has become more informed and more experienced in communicating to the public, our district publications have become more complex and sophisticated in terms of information we publish.

The School Improvement Project provides opportunities to welcome people into school activities and planning. It has also helped us to be more receptive and less defensive about the criticism and suggestions that accompany outside participation in school planning.

What Do We Want From Educational Partnerships?

Our primary emphasis at this point is *not* money—money is usually not the most critical need. Most often the greater need is for people, information, expertise and involvement. With few exceptions, both business and institutional partnerships are developed for instructional support and for utilization of expertise or facilities not available in the school district.

- *We want long-term partnerships.* One-time involvement does not develop commitment by any partner.
- *We have plans and ideas.* Our partners have skills that will help us accomplish our goals. This approach expands our people, facility, and financial pool.
- *Our partners model educational outcomes and practical application of learning for us.* Students can see that there is a payoff and a purpose for education, that what they are learning applies to activities in the real world.
- *We want the business community to tell us what our students don't know when they begin their work at entry level jobs.* We do not want our students to be like the proverbial worker who was able to find plenty of 30 inch pipes but no 2½ foot ones in the storage shed.
- *We want to break down the barriers into the community.* We want to find new ways to get people into the schools and new ways to involve school people in business and community events.

- *We want to contribute to community service activities.* These activities provide the model for effective and constructive interaction among community agencies and their projects.
- *We want to provide humanities and quality-of-life offerings to all students.* Collaboration with other agencies provides a cost effective way to broaden the field of opportunities for our students.
- *We want to have confidence that we can contribute significantly to every partnership;* we want others to have that confidence in us, too.
- *We want to develop sensitivity to the needs of business and find out what we can contribute to each business we work with.*
- *We do not want to talk about partnerships just because it is "in."*
- *We want to be alert to opportunities for interaction with the business and university communities.* Public agencies also provide rich opportunities for productive partnerships.
- *We want some of the 70 percent of people who are not connected to the schools to know something about us and to possibly get involved with us.*

What Can We Contribute to Partnerships?

An additional component in the development of creative partnerships is to know and believe that school people can contribute significantly to all partnerships. Staff, as well as a community, often must be convinced of this. In order to be a productive partner and in order to develop productive partnerships, we must promote our assets:

- *We have both long-term and short-term goals at the building level as well as at the district level.*
- *We know how to develop long-term and short-term goals for our current projects.*
- *Schools are often the biggest business in town.* In Manhattan we are the second largest—a \$22 million corporation.
- *The Superintendent is CEO of one of the largest corporations in town.*
- *The Board of Education sets policy for one of the biggest corporations in town.*
- *Principals are managers of million dollar facilities with big budgets.*
- *Teachers are feeder sources for the workers and citizens of the future.*
- *We plan well.*
- *We organize well.*
- *We are efficient and we are effective.*
- *We are sensitive to the value of equity in the opportunities made available for each child and between schools.*
- *We lead children; we can also lead adults.*
- *We teach children; we can also teach adults.*
- *We are flexible; we can make adjustments quickly and smoothly.*
- *We consider mistakes as a part of learning.*
- *We are able to see situations from multiple viewpoints.*

- *We are well-educated.*
- *We are articulate.*
- *We are "people" people.*
- *We have a "good name" and a good reputation.*
- *We are not opposed to lending our good name for appropriate activities.*
- *We believe in equity and equal opportunity.*

What Kind of Partnerships Are Needed and Desirable?

A further consideration is to know what kinds of partnerships are needed and desirable in this school district. Partnerships in the district flourish at both the building and the district level. We have five general types of partnerships:

1. Long-term support for *curriculum-related* activities.
2. Long-term support for *instructional improvement* activities.
3. Long/short-term support for *community service and community involvement* activities.
4. *Projects* which provide opportunities for professionals to work/interact together. These kinds of projects extend and broaden the perspective of participants into a healthy and productive environment.
5. *One-time contributions* of money or in-kind materials for advertising, school carnivals, or celebrations.

We assess our needs and approach businesses, institutions, or agencies with our ideas for a project. Restructuring of the district decision-making procedures to emphasize site-based management generates more opportunities for schools/school improvement teams to begin partnerships in a timely and effective way. District-wide initiatives for instructional improvement, working with high risk students, and enhancing teaching as a profession have provided incentives to develop partnerships with KSU and neighboring school districts.

We feel that partnerships are best developed for outcomes identified as important to the various partners. Outcomes are clearly defined and understood by all partners at the outset of the partnership. This causes us to think clearly about our goals and also allows us to spotlight the role played by the school district. Strategies and evaluation methods for each partner are developed in the planning stage.

How to Make It Happen

A final consideration is to develop a plan that leads to educational partnerships in a way that ultimately translates into improved educational opportunities for students. Getting to the leadership point requires commitment and planning at all levels of operation. Each district or entity will have unique aspects in a plan, but most will include many of the components of our plan.

- Our *publications* have taken on a more corporate look—by intention and design.
- *Key appointments* are made to community committees. Those appointed plus already community-oriented staff are encouraged to invite and involve other staff members in community activities.
- The *Superintendent* and other administrators help people view the district as a corporate entity with the capability to effectively contribute to each partnership.

- The *School Improvement Program* continues to involve parents and community leaders in building-based school improvement. As people work with us, they begin to appreciate our talents.
- We have *goals* and hold to them—we do not compromise unnecessarily for money we may need for a project.
- *Board members* and *school administrators* continue to promote themselves and the district as the **biggest undiscovered talent pool around**.
- We have at least one person who is alert to possibilities and available to *broker partnerships*. This is not a full-time "job" in our district because the partnership managers are the people who are most directly involved in the partnership.
- We encourage people to be *visible* in the business and university community through Chamber of Commerce memberships, teaching, consulting, or any community activity compatible with personal interests.

Implications and Outcomes

The implications and outcomes of partnership in school districts can be succinctly stated:

- If we expect to train and educate students to be effective and productive citizens in the new century, neither schools nor businesses can operate in isolation in this new age of interaction and involvement among formerly separated entities.
- If we expect to develop a clear view of how to get at what schools need to teach in order to prepare graduates for a lifetime of learning, we must collaborate with both teacher training institutions (trainers of the work force for schools) and members of the business community (beneficiaries of both the successes and the failures of the educational system).
- If we expect our graduates to be contributors to rather than just consumers of the society in which they operate, all these institutions must work together toward this common goal. The blend of perspectives from each entity is essential in order to create a shared purpose that will generate this kind of success for all students.
- If we expect to take an active rather than reactive role in this process, we must create a delivery system which (1) recognizes the needs of a new kind of student and (2) identifies the skills required by a new kind of teacher who will operate in a new kind of work place and who must prepare for a new kind of future.