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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT INFORMATION

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Can Businesses Befriend Schools without Compromising their Mission?

Businesses and schools may seem like strange bedfellows. But both have needs or desires that can serve as seeds for mutual attraction and involvement. Many administrators are faced with tight budgets and may perceive commercial involvement in their schools as a relatively painless way to obtain additional resources, such as computers or revenue generated from soft drink vending contracts. Similarly, businesses are perpetually seeking to attract new customers, whose purchases are responsible for keeping them afloat.

Although factors contributing to the formation of business-school partnerships are diverse and complex, it is important to recognize at the outset that aside from possible academic benefits that could accrue to students as the result of such an alliance, financial considerations are often a motivating force, prompting both schools and businesses to want to tango.

In human relationships, the mere fact that two people are attracted to one another doesn't necessarily mean the relationship is healthy or in the best interest of either or both the individuals. The same holds true for business-school arrangements. A partnership between schools and businesses may be the equivalent of a "bad marriage" or a "good marriage" depending on the specific nature of the relationship.

In the Fall 2001 Policy Report, *Business Partnerships with Schools*, Kirstin Larson examines several facets of school-business partnerships, including corporate sponsorships, school-to-career activities, commercialism on the Internet, and student privacy and other legal and ethical issues. Pros and cons of school-business alliances are discussed and guidelines for creating and sustaining mutually beneficial partnerships are provided.

As Larson notes, "Over the last two decades, the business community has significantly expanded its involvement in public schools. From 'adopt-a-school' programs and school-to-career partnership to lobbying for national education reforms, business leaders are taking on an increasing share of the responsibility to educate America's youth." Some local firms and national corporations become involved with schools for altruistic reasons, motivated by a sincere desire to serve their communities by investing funds and other resources in schools. However, other business leaders have a "blatant profit

motive” and “view their involvement in education primarily as a way to conduct market research and advertise in schools.”

Marketing their products and maintaining and expanding their customer base are of utmost importance to commercial enterprises, for without a sufficient number of consumers purchasing their products or services, they will cease to exist. Businesses that gain access to students (through marketing surveys, direct product promotion strategies, and other efforts) can reap significant financial rewards. Students are a coveted segment of the consuming public, and, as businesses are keenly aware, they will soon become adults, with full-time jobs and even more discretionary income.

As school-business partnerships have proliferated, so has concern about the effects of such partnerships on students’ learning and purchasing behavior, as well as on the potential for breeches of student privacy. If schools elect to partner with companies that provide online resources to students, they should be aware of the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA). Effective April 21, 2000, this act applies to the online collection of personal information by commercial web sites from children under thirteen years of age. In addition, if schools are to be in compliance with the spirit of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), designed primarily to protect the privacy of students’ educational records, they should also obtain parental consent before allowing students to provide any personally identifiable information on web sites accessed at school.

Of course, school officials must be knowledgeable of the laws regulating school-based commercial activities in their state, since variability exists across states. Currently, nineteen states have statutes or regulations but in most of these states the legislation is not comprehensive, but only addresses certain types of commercial activities.

To ensure that educational values are not distorted or diluted within the context of a school-business partnership, eight principles for corporate involvement in schools have been jointly developed and adopted by the National Association of State Boards of Education, National Parent-Teachers Association, American Association of School Administrators, National Council of Social Studies, and the National Education Association. By adhering to the following principles, educators will be able to do a better job of protecting the welfare of students as well as the integrity of the learning environment:

1. Corporate involvement shall not require students to observe, listen to, or read commercial advertising.
2. Selling or providing access to a captive audience in the classroom for commercial purposes is exploitation and a violation of the public trust.
3. Since school property and time are publicly funded, selling or providing free access to advertising on school property outside the classroom involves ethical and legal issues that must be addressed.
4. Corporate involvement must support the goals and objectives of the schools. Curriculum and instruction are within the purview of educators.

Programs of corporate involvement must be structured to meet an identified education need, not a commercial motive, and must be evaluated for

educational effectiveness by the school/district on an ongoing basis.

Schools and educators should hold sponsored and donated materials to the same standards used for the selection and purchase of curriculum materials.

Corporate involvement programs should not limit the discretion of schools and teachers in the use of sponsored materials.

Sponsor recognition and corporate logos should be for identification rather than commercial purposes.

The two most common types of school-business partnerships are *school-to-career activities*, where students are viewed primarily as future members of the work force, and *corporate sponsorship programs*, where the role of students as consumers is stressed. The ultimate goal of school-to-career activities is to ensure that students possess the requisite skills to successfully transition from school to the work force. As part of this process, businesses may hold career fairs; offer paid work experience, internships, or job shadows; conduct mock interviews, and offer workshops for students and teachers. In corporate sponsorship programs, the emphasis is on providing “schools with money, goods, or services in exchange for the opportunity to advertise or sell products to students.”

It is critical for school personnel to be able to distinguish between educational partnerships and business deals, for if that line blurs, ethical boundaries blur as well. When there is not a clear and direct educational benefit to students, the arrangement is not a genuine educational partnership. For example, allowing businesses to advertise on school buses in exchange for funding would constitute a business deal, not an educational partnership, since children do not derive any legitimate academic benefit from the arrangement.

Prior to making a decision about entering into a partnership with business, schools should consult their constituents, including parents and the larger community. If they ultimately decide to proceed, before finalizing the arrangement school officials should identify the specific educational goals that will be achieved by the partnership and design a district policy that addresses ethical and legal issues.

Although the potential exists for businesses to contribute to the learning experiences of students, it is critical for educators to proceed cautiously, honestly weighing both the advantages and disadvantages inherent in such a relationship. To do less would be to compromise their commitment to students, which must remain educators’ highest priority.

To order *Business Partnerships with Schools*, see [How to Order](#)