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A Compass in the Storm

Guiding principles for a new age of business and school partnerships.

By Lamar Alexander and Richard W. Riley

It's only the beginning of the academic year at South Plantation High School in south Florida, but Principal Joel Herbst finds himself

occasionally—and happily—preoccupied by his expectations for the end. Right now he's especially excited about the graduation ceremony set for June 2003, where he hopes many of South Plantation's seniors will, as he puts it, "walk across the stage with a diploma in one hand and something else in the other."

Something else?

"Think of it as a supplementary diploma, proof positive that our students have skills and experience that decisionmakers in higher education and the workplace are really looking for," the principal says.

The list of possibilities Mr. Herbst ticks off sounds like a dream to students and employers alike: Hands-on certification for working with Cisco's operating systems. An understanding of how the *Cotesia*, a newly created species of insect, could help avoid an environmental disaster for the U.S. Sugar Corp.'s Florida crop. The ability to step into a broadcast-editing booth at Video Production Services, a local communications company, with a mastery of both linear and nonlinear tape decks. And firsthand experience—thanks to an ambitiously creative Costco and Coca-Cola literacy initiative—with innovative ways to engage the mothers of newborns in helping their children learn to read from an early age.

This is a sampling of the experiential-learning and achievement opportunities offered to South Plantation students largely through support from local and national business partners. And it's a telling example of how principals like Joel Herbst (and thousands of others) are pursuing these types of partnerships at a time when concerns about excess commercialism in schools are putting such relationships under more scrutiny than ever before.

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[← Back to Story](#)



Just one look at the news coverage around last year's decision by the Seattle school board to excise all advertising from its campuses, and the Los Angeles school board's decision in August to forfeit significant revenues by banning the sale of soft drinks in its schools, shows the pressure faced by many educators who pursue business

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partnerships. And chances are there is more scrutiny to come, particularly around many popular partnership activities that draw mixed reactions from advocacy groups across the spectrum. From advertising in the classroom to support academic programs, to after-school activities that depend on student-led sales of candy and other products, to company-sponsored efforts to shape classroom lessons, negotiating the "right" mix of corporate involvement forces many educators and business leaders to push hot-button issues that often ignite the passions of parents and communities alike.

So what is it that sets Joel Herbst and so many other educators apart? How is it that they have created programs that draw praise from almost every corner of their communities? Is it their unabashed willingness to court—and counsel—business interests that step in to support schools? Possibly. But we believe the real secret of this success is *how* South Plantation has created these partnerships—and in what Mr. Herbst, his students, and the partnering organizations expect in return.

But let the principal explain: "We're a large school, facing the same kinds of financial challenges you might expect in an economically diverse community," he says. "But we've always wanted—and expected—our partners to do more than simply write a check. We want them to demonstrate on a daily basis the industry standards that future workers need to live up to. That means getting every corporate, nonprofit, and public partner that we work with to engage in a dialogue with our students. It means tapping in to their resources to drive and improve our curricula. And it means bringing them full-force into our world at the same time we venture into theirs."

Mr. Herbst and his colleagues at South Plantation High are clearly not alone. With business involvement contributing an estimated \$2.4 billion and 109 million volunteer hours to schools each year, these partnerships have an impact on the lives of an estimated 35 million students. And there is ample evidence that school and business relationships today are very different from past relationships, which were largely philanthropic efforts to generate resources in a one-way stream from businesses to schools, or commercial relationships, whereby schools provided a marketplace for the sale of products and services. Today, the vast majority of educators and business leaders are engaging in true partnerships that build on a shared understanding of values and culture to support mutual needs.

Today, most school-business partnerships are built on shared understanding and support mutual needs.

This is encouraging news to those who believe that businesses play a key role in the "it takes a village" approach to improving the nation's K-12 education system. But it also begs the question: What does it take to form effective partnerships that deliver on the expectations of students and schools over an extended period of time?

With this in mind, a group of educators and business leaders last year formed the Council for Corporate & School Partnerships to identify, create, recognize, and support exemplary

business-school partnerships. To better understand the dynamics of how successful partnerships worked, and why, the council conducted interviews with nearly 300 school board members and educators and more than 50 executives from large, medium, and small businesses. Respondents were queried on how successful partnerships are structured, implemented, and evaluated. To ensure the objectivity of the findings, a third party—the National Association of Partners in Education managed the research. NAPE conducted the project in cooperation with Consulting Research and Information Services, and Kane, Parsons, and Associates Inc. The key findings of the research show that:

Nearly 70 percent of school districts now engage in business partnerships—a figure that has grown by 35 percent since 1990.

Educators consider student development to be the most valuable outcome of partnerships, with 72 percent saying that improving student motivation and 60 percent saying that providing direction for future education are extremely or very important.

Business leaders believe school partnerships benefit businesses and educators in four key areas: human-capital development, community development, student achievement, and financial impact in terms of earning revenue for the business and providing needed funding for schools.

Nearly 100 percent of the educators surveyed say they intend to continue their business partnerships.

While many advocates for business partnerships may cheer such findings, the council was reminded by NAPE and other sources that many of the benefits schools, businesses, and communities are so proud of did *not* occur overnight. In general, businesses and schools operate very differently, and the unfamiliarity of one side with the other can become a significant roadblock if time isn't invested by both partners to understand the unique operational elements of the other.

Without this critical step, business people seeking to effect changes in schools have been thwarted by their lack of awareness of the challenges faced by schools. Likewise, educators have not always understood the expectations of business for meeting set objectives and goals. Mentoring and tutoring programs have been sparked by explosive growth and effectiveness, but have often faded away because of volunteer burnout. Ambitious programs involving significant investments of money, energy, and time have led to disappointing results and a realization that the school and business partners had very different visions for what the partnership was expected to achieve.

How do we structure partnerships that are a real 'win-win' for all parties?

And yet, the council also found ample evidence that many partnerships continue to deliver remarkable benefits to students, schools, and business partners alike. One common theme echoed in the research is that partnerships in general have come a long, long way from the days of simple sponsorship of a scoreboard or an ad in the school newspaper. In fact, many business partners, in the words of Principal Herbst, already want to do more than simply "write a check." Most want to add practical expertise that goes far beyond philanthropic support.

This is particularly true among several of the larger companies queried in our research.

According to fellow council member Carlton Curtis, who works with many of the education partnerships formed by the Coca-Cola Co., "Corporate contributions shouldn't be shaped only by the old adage that it's important to 'give back' to the community. Today, most of us want to form real working partnerships that support schools' core missions and have a demonstrable impact on the overall learning experience. And it's certainly inspiring to know that our efforts may have a significant impact on our future workforce as well."

Building on the extensive research about the qualities that business and education leaders attribute to successful partnerships, the Council for Corporate & School Partnerships has now moved into a second phase of its work. Our goal: to incorporate the knowledge gained by our opinion research into a series of "guiding principles" for such collaborations. In addition to detailed case studies based on interviews and words of advice from many who have been on the front lines, the "Guiding Principles for Business and School Partnerships" report offers step-by-step guidelines on how to structure relationships that are a real "win-win" for all parties.

The report addresses what we consider to be four key elements of partnership-development. Beginning at the *Foundation* stage, the guiding principles demonstrate the importance of both parties' working together to develop the partnership's core values. In the *Implementation* stage, the principles show how these values can be translated into action. In the *Continuity* stage, there are principles for sustaining partnerships over time. In the *Evaluation* stage, the focus is on addressing strengths and weaknesses so that partnerships can be improved, and expanded, to meet evolving needs.

Taken together, the recommendations form what the council believes will be an effective resource for schools, businesses, and communities across the nation.

To give educators a firsthand view of how these principles can be used at the local level, the council, working with the National Association of Secondary School Principals, has appointed an award-winning high school principal as its "resident practitioner" for business and school partnerships. Jay Engeln, formerly the principal of Palmer High School in Colorado Springs, Colo., and the 2000 NASSP Principal of the Year, will spend the next several months visiting with educators around the country and describing his own challenges and successes in establishing and integrating more than 100 business partnerships at Palmer High. He credits these programs with helping transform the school from an institution slated for closure due to a 45 percent failure rate to one that is now a flagship of the district.

Which comes as little surprise to Joel Herbst, who continues to find many businesses "ready and willing to jump in and get involved" in schools. And although some conversations still begin with an offer to write a check, he is quick to counsel, "That's the easy part." What most educators want, he explains, are partnerships that bring their schools brainpower. They want to make sure that the "something else" their students gain is a step toward a brighter future.

Lamar Alexander served as the U.S. secretary of education during the first Bush administration. Richard W. Riley was the U.S. secretary of education during the Clinton administration. Both are members of the Council for Corporate & School Partnerships, which

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Vol. 22, Issue 6, Pages 36-37, 48