

Working It

School districts and local businesses have mutual concerns and goals, but forming partnerships that benefit both parties takes planning, insight, and effort

Naomi Dillon

Without doubt, officials at Florida's Manatee County Public Schools had to make some painful choices over the last several years, slashing some \$60 million from its budget since 2008. But the district was able to avoid the most draconian cuts in large part because of the ties school leaders built with their business community.

"We've been able to keep the arts intact and preserve the core issues at a time when most districts haven't," says Board Chairman Harry Kinnan. "As the economy went down, [businesses] became critical to our success."

Long considered ancillary to school districts' everyday duties and long-term mission, business partnerships have come into sharp focus and sharp demand as public education continues to take a beating from a struggling economy that has yet to fully recover.

According to the nonprofit Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 31 states collectively trimmed \$55 billion from their budgets for the current fiscal year. While it's a smaller figure than in years past—in 2010, for instance, states had to contend with a \$191 billion shortfall—budget deficits still fall disproportionately on school systems, which will have to accommodate 540,000 more students than they did in the 2007-08 school year.

Increasingly, school districts are joining forces with area businesses, who are finding they need schools as much as schools need them to build a successful future.

"Having these partnerships with businesses allows you to fill holes in your budget but also build ties in the community in different ways," Kinnan says. "The closer you are to people, the more involved they'll get in the system, and the more involved they get, the more you are able to build consensus on the importance of good schools."

Building a network

By all accounts, Manatee is an old pro at forming public-private

partnerships. Since 1990, the district and the chamber of commerce have managed the Business Partners in Education Program, a collaborative effort to match local businesses and organizations with schools. For 25 years, the Manatee Education Foundation has done much the same thing, working even closer with the district and leasing office space at their headquarters. And then there's Dawn Allen, the district's coordinator of community involvement, who has a hand in pretty much everything.

"I'm a unique bird; I come from the outside," says Allen, who attributes her private sector experience in marketing and public relations to her ability to understand business needs and speak their language. "Schools just can't have their hand out. You need to see things from the business perspective, too."

And from a business perspective, schools can sometimes appear closed off and impenetrable.

"As much as we like to think schools are welcoming, a lot of times you call and get an answering service that makes you dial by name, but you don't know who you want to talk to," Allen says. "Then if you get somebody on the phone, most likely they're in the middle of something because it's school and it's hectic."

From the school's perspective, Allen often heard how time-consuming and difficult managing these partnerships could be. Allen thought there had to be a better way, especially with all that technology had to offer.

"So I had this idea in my head and I wrote it all out on paper," says Allen, who got the green light to hire a developer to build her thoughts into a Web-based application. Called Electronic Partners in Education or ePIE, the three-year-old site allows businesses to sign up and select the schools they want to work with.

"Once a business registers in the system and makes a partnership request, it notifies the school instantaneously," says Allen. "It's basically like a virtual knock on their door."

While it aims to streamline the process, the site also shifts the power to area businesses and organizations that

can, with the click of a button, create a special connection with neighborhood schools.

“When people get a hold of it and they learn the system, it works for them. It really, really does,” Allen says, recalling a local business owner who was so enthusiastic about his experience that he promised to partner with five more schools every year. “By gosh if he hasn’t done that. He’s probably given \$10,000 this year alone in donations of everything from bicycles and lunches to staff to rewards and incentives for students.”

To date, ePIE has more than 600 partnerships logged in the system. While technology has helped Manatee build school-level partnerships without overly burdening their schools, it still takes someone like Allen to make sure things run smoothly and fairly.

For instance, Allen recently refused to place a \$50,000 fitness track on the ePIE site as one school’s request. “That’s just unrealistic,” she says. But Allen also routinely swats down solicitations from businesses who simply want schools to sell their products.

“I’m sorry, that serves no purpose,” she says. “This is about establishing mutually beneficial relationships.”

Internships

Education provides many things, but most importantly it establishes the pathway to a successful career and livelihood. Savvy schools can capitalize on the investments the labor market is making in workforce development by building natural partnerships with employers. Just ask Virginia’s Newport News Public Schools.

“Tying career pathways and what kids are going to do once they’re out of school has been a phenomenal way for us to engage the business community,” says Patrick Finneran, the director of corporate and government relations for the district. Not to mention engage the students themselves.

Who wouldn’t find it exciting to spend a day shadowing an attorney, touring the shipyards, or talking to the CEO about the direction of his multibillion-dollar enterprise? These are just a few of the opportunities students have engaged in at Newport News.

Career Pathways Supervisor Ann Ifekwunigwe says the district became intentional about developing ties with local employers, which include such titans as Newport News Shipbuilding, Ferguson Enterprises, and Jefferson Labs, after a 2008 breakfast where businesses heard from students about the experiences and insight they gained from internships, volunteering, and job shadows on their sites.

It was a call to action, Ifekwunigwe says, and many of the businesses rose to the occasion. And small wonder: The Peninsula Council for Workforce Development and Thomas Nelson Community College released a study last fall that showed 11,500 advanced manufacturing jobs would need to

be filled in the region by 2016.

For its part, the district has taken that information and used it to launch initiatives like its Career Pathways Program, which helps students navigate the many career options available to them by channeling them into one of eight different paths that are a reflection of the local job market. Before graduating, students have multiple opportunities to pair up with businesses to get an inside view of what it’s like.

Over spring break, for instance, a handful of students from Denbigh High School’s Aviation Academy spent the week at NASA’s Langley Research Center hanging out in the hangar, helping the maintenance crews, and engaging with the engineering director.

“From the business perspective, it was great because kids didn’t just say I want to do this, but I want to do this here,” Ifekwunigwe says.

Lest you think students are the only ones having fun in the field, you’d be wrong. NASA not only invited teachers to get hands-on training in their wind tunnels and labs, but paid for some to take engineering courses at the University of Virginia. Meanwhile, groups of teachers will spend two weeks with Newport News Shipbuilding over the summer, shadowing employees at the shipyard’s trade, production, and administrative office.

“The goal is to open the teacher’s eyes to different career pathways, so that when they go back to the classroom they can share it with their students and say, ‘Hey, when I visited Newport News Shipbuilding I learned this, let me show you,’” Ifekwunigwe says.

On the flip side, local businesses and employers also come to schools to share their knowledge and insight about their professions. Riverside Health System helped middle schools launch health clubs, where students learn about the dynamic field of health care and then get to see it in action. A steady stream of career fairs throughout the year exposes students to a wide array of jobs and their required qualifications, some of which can be very enlightening.

“I know a lot of students were shocked when a person from the financial services sector told them that if you have a blemish on your record for any type of crime, you can’t work in that field,” Finneran says. “He even gave some examples of kids he would have liked to have hired but couldn’t. That was eye-opening.”

Ultimately, such exchanges are eye-opening for both sides.

“We could ask businesses to do a 1001 things, but asking them to do something that not only benefits students and teachers, but comes back to help them in the long run? It’s a no-brainer,” Finneran says. ■

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Career Academy for Educators

Samuel A. DePaul and Shannon Batchelor

The Career Academy for Educators, or CAFÉ, is a partnership among North Carolina's Stanly County Schools, the local community college, and the chamber of commerce. In its fourth year, it has become a model for how educators and the business community can collaborate in preparing students for the post-high school world.

Stanly County, located northeast of Charlotte, has 23 schools divided into four high school districts. CAFÉ, open to educators who work in grades pre-k through 12, is a three-day summer education workshop for teachers and counselors. More than 100 have participated in the program since it began.

The chamber of commerce's motto is "Shop Local"—keeping local dollars working in Stanly County for the prosperity of the community, businesses, and schools. "Together we can make a difference" is the shared vision of the school district, community college, and the chamber.

The partnership's mission statement is "Serving by leading the business community as an advocate for economic growth, positive change, and consensus building."

Along with the chamber, the district, and the community college, the Centralina Workforce Development Board has been a regional partner and supporter of this annual event. This board covers seven counties and advocates for economic growth and development.

What participants do

The CAFÉ program evolved from a collaboration called the Stanly County Career Readiness Task Force. This group, comprised of educators, professionals representing various trades, and industry leaders, provided the foundation for its development. In 2009, CAFÉ won the North Carolina Community College Adult Education Association Innovation Award for innovation in programming and man-

agement of continuing programs.

At the fourth annual CAFÉ session, participants toured various businesses and industries and learned about the skills, education levels, and training required by local companies in existing jobs for high school graduates. Educators also heard firsthand from business and industry representatives about the challenges they face when trying to hire personnel who struggle in math, reading comprehension, and soft skills.

Participants also took part in speed networking sessions, an opportunity at which several business and county representatives answered educators' questions about the local workforce and the opportunities available to recent graduates. Participating teachers earned continuing education credits.

Recent and past guest speakers have included the directors of the Centralina Workforce Board and the Stanly County Economic Development Commission, the chamber's chief executive officer, and the Southwest regional coordinator for the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. The chamber works with Centralina to fund the annual program, engaging local businesses and financial institutions to provide support for materials, gifts for drawings, and tours.

What participants say

Participants have given CAFÉ rave reviews, and the program has a waiting list each year. In her program evaluation, a veteran educator wrote that she would be able to take local economy knowledge into her classroom and teach students about options and possibilities. A high school counselor called the program "a gold mine of pertinent information that can easily be passed along to students, teachers, and other stakeholders who are involved in career and or economic decisions in Stanly County." She said she was grateful for the

chance to learn about the local economic impact for various careers.

Another educator said he would incorporate the information obtained, "at every opportunity ... to help students in the classroom, before school, during clubs and during lunch." Additionally, the chamber CEO stated, "I don't believe there is any other workforce development program which can reach this amount of educators each year and make an impact in such a way. The experience gained in CAFÉ will impact so many students, teachers and parents each year."

The chamber has been a key player in Stanly County's success, working closely with its partners to coordinate annual legislative breakfasts where residents meet and hear updates from our district, state, and U.S. Congressional representatives. The chamber also sponsored a legislative trip to Raleigh, the state capital, and arranged a meeting with a group of business leaders, private citizens, school officials, community college officials, and elected state officials.

The groups also collaborated on an Economic Development Outlook Summit, which provided an opportunity for the same audience to hear state and regional economics experts speak on ways to make more informed planning decisions at the local level.

As you can see, Stanly County is very supportive of its schools and the county as a whole. Our partnerships strengthen the district and our local economy.

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