



Win, Win, Win: How Business/Education Partnerships Work for Students, Schools, and Businesses

Business has been involved in K-12 education ever since the founding of the public education system in the US: In fact, after legislators in Massachusetts denied Horace Mann’s appeal for a free and public system, he turned to the business community for help, and their appeals brought the system about. They were also instrumental in creating the vocational education system in the 1920s as work became more specialized. The relationship remains strong, particularly in the area of Career and Technical Education (CTE), where businesses are supporting thousands of programs through advisory board service and in many other capacities.

Business needs CTE, and CTE needs business; this paper explains how they benefit one another, and how students are the ultimate winners from such relationships.

The Challenge – Lack of Student Engagement and Readiness

U.S. employers regularly indicate that many youth are not ready for the workplace. Even students who have a bachelor’s or associate’s degree are often cited for not having an appropriate work ethic or problem solving, communication, and teamwork skills.ⁱ These skills are not routinely developed in the classroom, but they are essential for success in the workplace.

Engagement is also a major challenge, in both school and the American workplace. Gallup’s research demonstrates that student engagement drops from 76 percent for elementary school children, 61 percent in middle school, and 44 percent in high school.ⁱⁱ

Similarly, Gallup’s research on workplace engagementⁱⁱⁱ shows that only 29 percent of U.S. workers are “actively engaged.” 52 percent of workers are “not engaged” and another 19 percent are “actively disengaged,” meaning they create a negative influence on their workplace. Disengagement from school and work seems to be a learned behavior.

The Harvard University “Pathways to Prosperity” report calls for sustained work-based learning opportunities for youths as a way to change the dynamic between education and employers and give students more motivating and engaging learning experiences. Career Technical Education programs in New York typically ask employers to be involved in an advisory committee that meets once or twice a year. That kind of minimal employer involvement is not sufficient to ramp up the quality of a CTE program and create a win-win-win equation for students, schools and employers. Rather, true

partnerships with real opportunities for interaction between students, schools and employers will create benefits for all involved.

What Is a Partnership?

The term “partnership” is used loosely in education, covering even the most basic interaction between schools and their constituents. In CTE, we have a narrower definition: An active and collaborative working relationship in which the key partners have shared and/or complementary goals, and each partner has a voice and a role in how those goals are achieved.

This is distinct from a sponsorship, in which the schools set the goals and decide how they will be achieved, and the business partner is asked to simply provide the resources to make it happen. Sponsorships have their place in K-12 education, but they are not the same as partnerships.

As an example, if a CTE program and its business partners design and implement a job shadowing program, that is a partnership: Both parties have their interests represented (the program can better prepare students, and the businesses can introduce themselves to future prospective workers), and both have a hand in structuring and managing the initiative. In contrast, if a program starts a student competition and asks its business contacts for prizes, that is a sponsorship, since the businesses didn't play any role in designing or structuring the program.

For partnerships to be strong and sustainable, every party involved – including your business partners – must have their interests represented in order to secure that “win.” If they don't see some kind of benefit, in terms they care about, their support will be limited and fleeting.

Partnerships: Good for Students

The most important beneficiaries of any community/school partnerships are the students. Of course, benefits to students are also thought of as indirect benefits to teachers since they want their children to succeed in school and in life.

While there are many types of partnerships and implementations vary significantly, the benefits to students of employer partnerships have been well researched^{iv} and can be considered in eight general categories:

- **Make Learning More Enjoyable and Interesting.** A richer array of direct experiences, particularly in areas students have expressed interest, draws students in and makes learning more fun.
- **Increase Motivation to Do Well at School.** Working directly with prospective employers provides students with a greater incentive to do well in school, and helps them understand the relevance of the work they're doing. Students who participated in activities with employers were noted to spend more time on coursework and homework, and paid more attention and were more enthusiastic during class.

- **Do Better in School.** School leaders report that students who participate in activities with employers get better grades and demonstrate increased job and work skills, better attitudes and behaviors, enhanced employability and higher initial wages rates. Research on individuals with adult mentors shows that students also are more likely to advance to higher grades. Further, no research has ever shown a negative impact on student performance for employer involvement with students.
- **Go Into Better Paying Jobs.** Students working in employer-connected initiatives get a head start on employability skills, job-specific skills, and networking with future employers. For example, students who participated in a career academy with strong employer involvement saw an 11 percent increase in earnings versus non-participants eight years later, and for young men, the earnings differential was even higher -- 16 percent. Other research concerning a manufacturing partnership program found that participants in the employer-connected program earned 25 percent more than non-participating peers two year after they finished participating in the program.
- **Become More Employable/Get Access to Better Opportunities.** Students who connect with employers demonstrate key employability skills include such as “self-management, thinking and solving problems, working together and communicating, and understanding the business.” They also see the real-life applicability of other skills such as “using numbers effectively, using language effectively, and using IT effectively.” For these students, communication, math, and technology skills are not just abstracted skills useful in college studies; they have direct applicability in the workplace. Students who develop these capabilities and see their importance are more ready for college and careers than students with only a classroom-based experience.
- **Make Better Career Decisions.** Students working in activities with employers learn about careers and career paths through conversations with real people, rather than just from a web-page or booklet. Because of the personal perspective on careers they gain, these students express confidence in the career decisions facing them at about twice the rate of students who did not have experience interacting with employers.
- **Increase Aspirations.** Students who interacted with employers see their “future self” in a particular career setting more readily than do students without this experience. For students of similar academic talent, connection to professionals is one of the critical factors in whether students persist in a challenging field of study.
- **Enhance Social Mobility.** Students from poor neighborhoods where work prospects are limited have very few, if any, relationships with people from higher social strata. Work-based learning and meaningful connections with employers can offer students new contacts and mentors within a profession. These contacts come into play when students enter the job market. It also provides greater confidence for students to move into a different economic and social culture than the one in which they were raised.

Partnerships: Good for Schools

Of course, schools (and CTE programs in particular) “win” when they see improved student outcomes as outlined above. But they also see direct benefits from working with business partners, such as:

- **Better Market Information.** Schools, and CTE programs in particular, can only truly succeed if the education they provide to their students lines up with the realities students will face once they leave school. By working with the business community, educators can gain an ongoing “reality check” of current industry needs, allowing them to better shape curriculum.
- **Improved Access to Resources.** In a time of flat or declining budgets, the support that partners provide can make a huge impact on school operations and student services. This includes not only financial support, but gifts of time (volunteers) and goods and services.
- **Improved Employee Morale.** Teachers and administrators who are connected to the community through partnerships feel more confident and better-supported in their work; when they become involved in industry work through training and externships, their morale and confidence (not to mention knowledge and skills) improves further.
- **Better Staff Support and Development.** There are many partnership programs in which teachers receive externship and training opportunities, allowing them to stay connected to the industry and keep up with current information and practices. In other cases, CEOs have served as executive mentors to new principals, helping them learn time, facilities, change, and culture management.

Partnerships: Good for Businesses

In general education, schools often assume that business partners are only in it for PR purposes; in CTE, we assume they’re only interested in workforce outcomes. In truth, however, businesses can benefit in a great many ways from working with schools. These include:

- **Customer Benefits.** Business working with social institutions (including schools) can generate community goodwill; see increased pricing power for premium goods; see an increased rate in positive word of mouth; and boast a stronger reputation among key stakeholders such as the media, financial analysts, and industry experts.
- **Human Resource Benefits.** Current employees who participate in partnerships see increased morale and retention; even those employees who do not actively participate see improvements in these areas, though not as great. Some companies use partnerships as an opportunity for employees to develop new skills at little risk to the company itself. Companies also have an easier time attracting talent based on their reputations.
- **Operations Benefits.** Particularly in fields that are regulated (financial services, utilities, healthcare, telecommunications), companies that work with schools and other nonprofits have

better relationships with industry regulators; they also report improved relationships with key stakeholders such as vendors and unions.

- **Market Environment Benefits.** Building a strong labor pool and workforce pipeline falls within this category; it also refers to having a market in which to test new offerings in the field, and to improving infrastructure in the markets in which they operate.

In short, while businesses benefit in the long term by ensuring a stronger pipeline of capable workers, remember that they can also generate a number of immediate “wins,” and that those should be considered when designing your partnerships.

First Steps

If you’re interested in building strong and sustainable partnerships with local businesses, consider the following first steps:

- **Read.** The Technical Assistance Center is publishing a series of resources on building effective business partnerships, including guides, articles, and case studies. Review these materials to learn or revisit the principles of partnership development.
- **Start, or reinvigorate, your advisory board.** If you don’t have an advisory board, start one; if you do, maximize its value by fully engaging your board members. Never stop learning about the industries in which you operate, and never stop asking how your program can better align with their current and future workforce needs. By finding out what their “win” is you’ll be able to build partnerships that truly engage them, which will greatly boost their enthusiasm and support.
- **Connect with other programs.** As you connect with other CTE program teachers and directors, ask how they’re working with industry, and what kinds of results they’re getting from it. There’s nothing better than practical examples to expand your thinking and help you avoid reinventing the wheel.
- **Measure.** As you design your partnerships, talk with your partners and decide on concrete ways to define your goals and how they can be measured as you track progress along the way. For example, you may decide to measure a mentoring program by the improvement in students’ grades, attendance, or participation in extracurricular activities; the key is to agree on tracking some hard numbers so you know you’re making a real impact.

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^{iv} These benefits for students are drawn from a comprehensive review of research on the topic, based on studies in the UK and the US.

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