

More Than Money Matters

Establishing Effective School-Corporate Partnerships



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By Nancy Flynn



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Given the financial constraints currently facing U.S. schools and the expense of cutting-edge technology, partnerships between schools and corporations that specialize in technology are becoming more vital in the quest to remain competitive in today's educational market. Schools can benefit from these partnerships by receiving the latest hardware and software, and corporations benefit from increased profits. The exchange for these materials and resources is often financial gain for the corporation, accomplished through advertising, marketing, and promotion. The partnership can also allow businesses to acquire more influence over the curriculum and materials to which students are exposed. When deciding whether to enter into a technology partnership, what criteria should principals and those involved in the decision-making process consider?

To find out exactly what (besides money) matters when principals engage in technology partnerships with corporations, I spoke with nine principals across the United States. Those I spoke with generally agreed that school-corporate technology partnerships are a necessity due to financial constraints and inadequate educational funding. They commonly cited their needs for additional hardware, software, and training as criteria for entering into various partnerships. Whether the need is for assistive technology or to boost test scores, such partnerships give principals the ability to obtain equipment that their schools could otherwise not afford. Although financial reasons dominate the criteria for entering into partnerships, principals need to consider the other aspects as well.

When I asked principals to voice cautions and concerns they would convey to other administrators considering entering into technology partnerships, they provided a variety of responses. I used these responses to generate 10 guidelines specifically for technology partnerships to help school administrators and other decision-makers think more critically about all aspects of school-corporate partnerships that involve technology (See 10 Guidelines for Effective Partnerships on p. 20 for guidelines at a glance.).

Guidelines for Successful Partnerships

1 *Vision.* Develop a clear vision of what you expect to accomplish through the partnership. An elementary principal explained:

I don't think you should just jump into something because there are free resources. Because if you have all these resources and you don't have a plan or a vision, the organization's going to look at you and say wait a minute, we're giving to you, but you're not utilizing the resources in the best manner possible.

2 *Support for Technology.* Ensure the school can support the hardware, software, and staff development to implement the technology acquired through a partnership. One middle school principal cautioned:

We run PCs but we can't support [the software], so virtually, \$10,000 is worthless to us because we have a district-wide network and we can't just put in our building because it won't be supported by our technology department. I think the biggest caution is we have to be very, very sure that our technology department is on the same page. If we would've known what was going to be in the package [the software], and we didn't know that at the time, we would have never bothered. It took a long time to put the partnership together and then to find out what we got was not going to work.

Key questions that must be answered in advance of implementation include:

- By what means can the school support the hardware and software, financially, technologically, and professionally in the short as well as the long run?
- Are the platforms and infrastructure of the school compatible with the hardware and software?
- What is the budget for additional necessary hardware and/or software?
- What professional development will be offered to building staff to enhance the use of the technology?



The partnership can also allow businesses to acquire more influence over the curriculum and materials to which students are exposed.

3 School Curriculum. Ensure that the technology—especially the software—fits the curricular goals of your school. One principal explained how in her school the teachers had to learn a different strategy toward teaching to use a particular mathematics software program properly. Though learning and implementing new teaching strategies can be a positive outcome of a partnership, corporate involvement must support the curricular goals and objectives of the school.

4 Collaboration & Communication. Partnerships need to be collaborative. Determine what makes the technology partnership a collaborative effort between the school and the

corporation. Identify the key people within the school and the corporation who will be the sources of communication for both organizations. One principal noted that communication was critical to the success of the partnership.

Another thing is the communication with a key person within the company. And that person has to be consistent. On the school end of things, you need someone to be consistent as well, so that it's a two-way street.

5 Internal Capacity. Once schools acquire hardware and software through partnerships, it becomes essential to support the technology in-house as well as through

the company. Because of the time and expense of technology training, upgrades, and maintenance, one principal strongly advised building internal capacity as a means of sustaining and improving the use of technology.

...to build capacity within your building you're going to have to have some internal leaders. It's not a partnership if you do a hit and run....You have to learn it and use it in order to carry it out yourself.

While many companies do provide technology support as a condition of the partnership, waiting for or scheduling the company to provide the support may mean that the technology is not utilized to its full potential. By providing in-house support there is less waste of time and resources.

6 Commitment. Develop a strong commitment with the school and the company. One high school principal affirmed:

The level of commitment is important. This company is an education company. They show up here twice a month and sit down

10 Guidelines for Effective Partnerships

VISION: Develop a clear vision of what you expect to accomplish through the partnership.

TECH SUPPORT: Ensure your school can support and sustain the hardware, software, and staff development to implement the technology acquired through a partnership.

CURRICULUM: Ensure that the technology acquired aligns to the curricular goals of your school.

COLLABORATION & COMMUNICATION: Identify the point people within the school and the corporation who will be liaisons for the partnership to ensure consistent communication.

CAPACITY: Build internal capacity to sustain and improve the use of acquired technology.

COMMITMENT: Develop a strong commitment with the school and the company.

OBLIGATIONS: Document any and all expectations on the part of both parties, so that everyone is clear about expectations.

PRODUCT PROMOTION: Define what constitutes appropriate promotion in advance and the level of it you are willing to provide.

ASSESSMENT: Outline evaluation and assessment procedures, including determining strengths, weaknesses, and future directions.

LONGEVITY: Define the terms of the partnership, how long it should last, and the expected benefits and costs.

and teach lessons to the kids on things like motivation and writing resumes, so it's got a substance to it that I think everybody likes. If you don't have that [level of commitment] and you just want them for their money or, they'll send you free tickets now and then, the partners don't feel connected. These partners are very connected, and that's why it works.

7 **Obligations.** While the definition of *obligations* is open to interpretation, it can potentially relate to the issue of commercialism. Principals need to be cognizant of any and all expectations on the part of the company and capture them in writing. One principal mentioned that a criterion for entering into the partnership was the school's responsibility for tracking data.

Initially [the company] gave us the licenses and also the training. We in turn were responsible for using it and also keeping data on some of our students as a pre- and post[test] in terms of what kind of impact it had on those students, which we did.

8 **Product Promotion.** Most of the principals I spoke with were proud to discuss the manner in which they "gave back" to the company. While schools were giving back, which is the nature of a partnership, the manner in which they gave back tended to be in some form of product promotion. Product promotion is directly related to schoolhouse commercialism and can be mistaken by principals as a mere presentation. For example, one principal explained how he presented the company's product at a technology conference.

At the state technology conference, [equipment] is one of the items we showcase as being a tool that is IT [instructional technology] as well as AT [assistive tech-

Ensure the school can support the hardware, software, and staff development to implement the technology acquired through a partnership.



nology], and [the company] usually will provide us with a complimentary [piece of equipment] at the convention so that we can do the show and tell, so to speak.

Another principal discussed how her students were keynote speakers at the company's conferences, and other principals discussed how they also presented their company's products at workshops and encouraged other schools and districts to purchase that company's products.

Are these examples of presentations, or is it product promotion? The line between the two is not often distinct, and principals must consider whether or not their actions contribute to commercialism.

9 **Assessment.** Effective partnerships should outline evaluation and assessment procedures, including determining strengths, weaknesses, and future directions. When I asked a high school principal if he would recommend his partnership to another administrator, he admitted that he should have known more about how well his partnership was working. He replied: "Probably before I did [recommend the partnership], I'd do a little more research, you know, just to make sure that what I think is true is true."

10 **Longevity.** One area of concern that a middle school principal raised related to the longevity of the partnership.

She felt that it was very important to weigh the benefits and costs of the partnership to determine whether it is working and worth the resources being put forth. This principal cautioned that if the partnership is not working, it should be discontinued.

The benefits do not outweigh the amount of work and the costs to support what we got. It just doesn't work. We won't do it again. We haven't even gotten this year's stuff, but it will sit in the boxes for a long time. That's disappointing.

Conclusion

Financial constraints, coupled with the need to continually upgrade and support technology, will continue to fuel the need for school–corporate technology partnerships. These guidelines are intended to help ensure that partnerships work and that the interests of business coincide with those of public education. This means balancing public school objectives with business objectives, questioning hidden agendas, and maintaining the integrity of the public school system.



Nancy Flynn is a principal in the Saint Paul (Minnesota) public schools. Her article is based on the conclusions from her doctoral dissertation, Politics, Economics, and Ethics: Thinking Critically about School–Corporate Technology Partnerships.