The Best of ERIC presents annotations of ERIC literature on important topics in educational management. 

The selections are intended to give educators easy access to the most significant and useful information available from ERIC. Because of space limitations, the items listed should be viewed as representative, rather than exhaustive, of literature meeting those criteria. 

Materials were selected for inclusion from the ERIC catalogs Resources in Education (RJ) and Current Index to Journals in Education (CJE).

Clearinghouse on Educational Management 
College of Education, University of Oregon

The Role of Business in the Schools
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University of Wisconsin education professor Michael Apple provides a critical overview of the ideological context surrounding the increasing application of business values and methods to educational problems. Concerned about "the growing pressure to make the perceived needs of business and industry into the primary goals of the school," Apple discusses the "New Right" tendency in educational policymaking that has moved away from the concept of the school as "a common ground in which democracy is hammered out" and toward "the idea of a competitive marketplace."

The current language of educational reform, he asserts, reflects authoritarian and anti-intellectual attitudes and diverts our attention from the root causes of our problems. For example, the 1983 report A Nation at Risk identifies the lack of competency in basic skills among high school graduates as a problem, but "the crisis is reconstructed around particular themes: international competition, capital accumulation, a reassertion of 'toughness' and standards."

Apple fears that reformers, by focusing on education's economic utility, will lose sight of the concept of citizenship as a mix of reciprocal rights and duties. He believes schools should teach people how to coexist within a social context. Also, he suggests, more attention should be paid to "the immense inequalities that are so visible in American society."

denied process should exist for reviewing school-business programs to ensure that they respond to identified educational needs, are consistent with existing educational messages, and are assessed by diverse groups as part of an ongoing review procedure. "In structuring relationships with business," cautions the ASCD, "educators should remember that the state requires students to attend school. This gives educators the responsibility of ensuring that the welfare of their students, rather than the special interest of any particular group, is promoted by school programs." In the past, the task force noted, businesses have supplied materials on topics such as economics, nutrition, and the environment that have proved to be "controversial." The ASCD discourages incentive programs that "tacitly endorse consumption habits" and those that are not related to the school's curriculum message. Awards of pizzaz and t-shirts, for example, "tend to support a simplistic view of teaching and learning in which material reward is tactically accepted as the principal basis for enhancing student motivation."

Although harboring some reservations, the task force is generally supportive of business involvement: "The more business people are involved in making constructive contributions to educational programs, the greater the likelihood that they will encourage the business community to support sound educational practices."


This report summarizes the findings of a commission formed to address the need for tailoring educational programs to better meet changing work force requirements. Broad recommendations include forming a public/private partnership under direction of the Secretary of Labor and promoting increased "human capital investments" by communities, businesses, and governments. Schools and businesses should work together to help students become aware of, and then obtain, the training that is necessary to pursue various career options. Student grades and scores on standardized tests can assist employers in their hiring decisions. Appropriate incentives can inspire teachers, administrators, and districts.

Nationally, the commission urges a public commitment to lifetime learning and creation of "a business environment that
encourages employers to invest more in their workers." To achieve this goal, the commission recommends offering corporate income tax credits for education and training expenses, personal tax exemptions for all employer-provided education and training opportunities, and encouragement of multi-employer training programs. The government can help by building programs to "serve the least skilled and most disadvantaged individuals." This can be done by offering basic skills education for adults, increasing funding for the Job Training Partnership Act and for postsecondary training and education grants, and by forming a cabinet-level committee to coordinate human resource policy. To address home/work stresses, the federal government should support community-based child care, increased subsidies for child care expenses, flexible employment scheduling for workers with families, efforts to match jobs and seekers, and innovative approaches to labor-management relations.


Although the goals of business and public education are different, DeBlois argues that educators can find clues to restructuring schools by examining the characteristics of successful companies.

DeBlois summarizes the basic ingredients of educational reform: higher standards for students, higher qualifications and better salaries for teachers and administrators, more decision-making in the hands of teachers, less rigid administrative structure, better methods for evaluating teachers and administrators, and improved relations among all school personnel. In all these areas, he argues, schools can profit from the experience of those in the business world.

The concept that "smaller is better" may be especially applicable. Today's successful schools have been found to share qualities that fall into three areas: "autonomy for those dealing directly with students, accountability of everyone in the system, and effective leadership." When they are working in smaller schools, it may be easier for teachers to demonstrate caring and provide students with individual attention.

Smaller schools promote both autonomy and greater individual accountability. These two goals interact well, DeBlois explains, in an environment where all members of the school are familiar with each other and not buried in bureaucracy and numbers.

The emphasis the business community places on effective leadership is applicable to smaller schools, DeBlois says. "Education, by its nature, is value-oriented, and the principal's actions must exemplify those values." In larger schools, good leaders may become buried in administrative duties and in fighting apathy and bitterness. However, smaller schools with shared decision-making among committed teachers allow principals to delegate authority with more confidence and make decisions that are based on a greater awareness of the needs of individual students and staff members.

involvement, action, and experience: "While business may prod, it does not try to take over the educator's lead role."

Those partnerships perceived as the most successful shared these common ingredients: identifiable leadership, broad vision translated into practical objectives, ongoing structure, and an agreed-upon plan of action. While statewide standards should be established to provide a baseline for individual efforts, the primary impetus for "restructuring" must center on increased decision-making for individual schools, departments, and classrooms.

Englund provides an overview of how business leaders are viewing educational reform issues today. While businesses are allocating more money for precollege programs—up to $52 million or about 9 percent of total corporate spending on education—that total is still insignificant when compared to the $195 billion spent in the U.S. each year on elementary and secondary education. Englund says companies are realizing they can best effect changes by "throwing their influence around more than their money."

"Businesses are seeking better-educated employees who have a repertoire of skills not traditionally emphasized in the school environment. Today's workers need to have highly developed problem-solving skills and be able to cooperate in team projects to develop creative solutions. While "adopt-a-school" programs are still the most prevalent form of business-school interaction, Englund says more and more chief executive officers are getting involved. These CEOs are aggressively committed to major, concrete changes in whole programs rather than in selected classrooms.

Cross the board, business leaders are recognizing that changes cannot happen without investing the time needed to develop trust and gain a realistic understanding of a school's or district's needs. And school administrators must sincerely believe, says Englund, that the partnership will bring about real change. These administrators also should take the initiative in soliciting business expertise where it can be employed most effectively—for example, to redesign incentive systems so they encourage more risk-taking within a district.

Xerox Corporation executive David Kearns argues that businesses should assume a leading role in education. When businesses have to teach basic skills to their new workers, he argues, they are "doing the schools' product-recall work for them." To avoid this, business should "force the agenda for school reform" or "set its own," one "driven by market forces and accountability."

While Kearns strongly supports restructuring efforts, he also advocates free enterprise and local control of schools. According to Kearns, a public school system "characterized by accountability and performance" should include a "free market governed by supply and demand" in which students and teachers alike are free to select their schools. Educators, he says, should model their new schools after "the smartest high-tech corporations in which decision making is pushed down into the organization," with adequate authority given to professionals and managers.

For teachers to have free market choice and autonomy, Kearns reasons, they must be considered "true professionals" who are accorded control over their own materials and methods. Attempts should be made to offset the disparity between schools that are able to afford exceptional programs and schools that can offer only minimal programs that result in more students being locked into dead-end vocational courses. "Every student," he asserts, "has a right to learn the common core of information and skills required by a modern economy and a democratic workplace."

To ensure that these doing the teaching have the most input, Kearns recommends creating magnet systems with district offices as service centers and annual testing programs that ensure performance levels and provide parents with comparative results on all schools. Also, a year-round system would improve students' ability to be absorbed into the work force. Instead of "puttering in the system itself," the federal government should provide for more research that will support educators' efforts.

In this two-part report, Dale Mann cites results from a survey of superintendents that show the most formal school-business partnerships are occurring in urban areas. In these cases, their primary value is in "reconnecting" schools with the city's power base—business and community leaders who have moved to the suburbs and shifted their attention accordingly. Such partnerships, Mann has found, allow for the kind of dialogue and substantive interaction that promote marked improvement in inner-city education.

In suburban/rural areas, business involvement tends to be less structured because businesses are often regional or very small, making "awkward targets." Also, smaller districts simply may not have the "leadership resources" to organize formal partnerships, or they may prefer not to muddy their funding strategies by drawing on resources from new channels.

In situations "where interaction takes place person to person," Mann reports that "business leaders want to be reasonable." Major, sweeping reforms are not reasonable goals, but a computer lab might be. Typically, assistance takes the form of practical responses to stated needs. Mann sees a need for greater involvement by teachers and principals to better utilize the expertise of small neighborhood businesses.

Looking at 700,000-plus students who drop out each year, Mann has little hope for "interim solutions" but does he see business partnerships as "levers of reform." Typically, he says, "relocating plants, de-skilling jobs, and purchasing training are more frequent responses by businesses to the need for school reform than is working on that reform." Instead, Mann sees high value in the less tangible long-term result of enhanced sympathy for education's plight.

According to Merenda, the executive director of the National Association of Partners in Education, school-business "partnerships" have their roots in the volunteer programs of the fifties and sixties. Today, the most common form still is locally driven by volunteers who serve in classrooms under the supervision of school staff. Typically they are not focused on vocational education. Rather, they are aimed at providing "a sound general education" that will generate better educated workers.

At the policy level, leaders from business, education, and the community at large are engaged in public and political debates to
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The lengthiest of several National Alliance of Business (NAB) reports on the experiences of business-education partnerships in twelve cities, this document describes each project and analyzes what was learned.

The most significant lesson businesses need to understand, according to the NAB, is that the magnitude and implications of this country's educational problems are greater than most people realize. To make best use of their potential for helping with educational reform, each community's business leaders must orchestrate their efforts in a formalized institutional structure. A new organization may be created for this purpose or an existing organization, such as a chamber of commerce, may be utilized. For such an effort to be successful, the business group must also include highly committed educators and elected officials. Cooperation among these three groups is, the NAB has found, essential.

Once an interest is clearly identified and initial steps are taken toward solving immediate problems, the next stage is commitment to long-term involvement. Crises may be resolved relatively quickly, but genuine reform requires ongoing momentum—"partnerships take time to evolve; trust among the parties takes time to grow." Business leaders, the NAB asserts, must be involved with school governing structures at both state and local levels, but they also must clearly acknowledge the lead roles of the educators. Reform issues are complex. Local participation is necessary to help business people fully understand the challenges. Similarly, educators must be willing to work with them to hasten their learning process.

The importance of clear definition throughout a program is also stressed in the NAB report. "All parties involved must develop agreed-upon measurable goals which clarify intent, focus commitment, and permit periodic assessment. Development of measurable goals builds trust." Finally, the NAB did not find that substantial funding is needed in every case. More important than financial support, it asserts, is the gathering and sharing of information and assistance that can encourage and guide program participants over extended periods.


The business community can benefit directly from this manual developed by the staff of the St Louis, Missouri, Public Schools to help those responsible for school/business programs in St Louis. Onuska cites examples of successful programs and explains the rationales and principles behind various types of business involvement—such as individualized programs, communitywide efforts, specialized assistance, and the adopt-a-school method. The handbook presents together in an accessible format virtually every action that might need to be considered or taken to ensure a program's success. Specific information is included for the CEO who is contemplating involvement, the manager charged with initiating contact with a school or district, and the employee asked to assist with procedural details.

Step-by-step guidelines help define specific roles, strategies, and techniques from an educator's point of view. The emphasis throughout is on identifying levels and types of commitment, maintaining clear and open channels of communication among all participants, and agreeing on detailed plans schedules and activities. Also addressed are staff development, career education, classroom activities, special services, evaluation/promotion issues, and special programs such as junior Achievement and Future Business Leaders of America.

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