

School–Business Partnerships: Understanding Business Perspectives

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Abstract

School–business partnerships have been shown to enhance educational experiences for students. There has, however, been limited research demonstrating the priorities and perspectives of for-profit business leaders on those partnerships. In order to address that gap, the researcher interviewed business leaders in two different areas of Texas. After reviewing interview transcripts, the research identified seven themes that emerged in two distinct constructs. Interviewed leaders reported that relationships, communication, trust, and the future of students are important considerations within a construct of collaboration and common purpose, while return on investment, integrity, and responsibility are important within the construct of results and follow-through.

Key Words: community partnerships, business perspectives, mutually beneficial school–business relationships, collaboration, education, communication

Introduction

The relationships among schools and the communities in which they operate are essential to student learning (Juszczak, Moody, & Vega-Matos, 1998). These partnerships provide many and varied benefits which include increasing school capacity and enhancing educational experiences for students (Abowitz, 2000; Willems & Gonzalez-DeHass, 2012; Ziegler, 2001). There are, however, limited sources of information which clarify the priorities and perspective of for-profit business leaders in the realm of the school–business partnership (Lee

& Abdulghani, 2015). This research is aimed at addressing that gap. Directly stated, the purpose of this research is to explore the definition, form, and scope of what effective school–business partnerships look like from the perspective of business leaders, owners, and managers in two distinct and diverse areas of Texas. The author hopes knowledge gained from this research will support the ability of education leaders at the school and district levels to engage community business leaders in meaningful, mutually beneficial relationships that will ultimately support effective instruction on the school level.

Literature Review

Benefits of School–Business Relationships

MacQueen et al. (2001) asserted that a community is characterized by individuals in a common geographical location connected by social ties who share common goals or perspectives. As members of a community, businesses have both a stake and a vested interest in the local schools' effectiveness. According to Radinsky, Bouillion, Lento, and Gomez (2001), meaningful relationships among community businesses and their local schools add value to both parties.

In order to build such partnerships, it is important to understand what they should look like and how they should operate. Bryan and Henry (2012) assert the relationship among the business and the local school system involves multiple stakeholders operating in a reciprocal relationship which accomplishes mutual goals. That stated, business leaders want to partner with schools in a way that is more meaningful than surface-level sponsorship (Gross et al., 2015).

There are many benefits to such partnerships. According to Willems and Gonzalez-DeHass (2012), school–business partnerships can support the creation of learning experiences which foster students' ability to connect academic content to a real-world context. They maintain these partnerships provide for authentic instruction and problem-based learning that will help students deal with real problems in their lives. As an illustration of this assertion, Ziegler (2001) wrote of student experiences borne out of such partnerships which include (but are not limited to) internships and job shadowing.

Abowitz (2000) affirmed the value of a school–business partnership, maintaining that each partner has a unique role to play in advancing student preparation for meaningful participation in society. She discussed the funding, professional expertise, and practical curriculum often missing from the school context that can be provided through a business partnership. Hands (2005) articulates the benefits of such partnerships as being two-fold. First, these partnerships benefit students by enhancing their learning opportunities. Secondly, such partnerships support high school to career transitions for students.

Additionally, Tracey, Hornery, Seaton, Craven, and Yeung (2014) discuss how such partnerships can fill an emerging gap in community-based support at the school. According to Tracey et al., it has become more difficult to garner parent volunteers at the school. Thus, cultivating supportive relationships with businesses is increasingly important.

Associated Risks

Unfortunately, while there are benefits to school–business partnerships, the literature is also clear there are risks. Risks identified in a review of literature range from benign neglect and ultimate dissolving of established relationships to more destructive circumstances where one partner exerts power over another. Thus, risk in this context can be operationally defined as factors which have the potential to damage trust and hinder relationships among schools and businesses, keeping them from accomplishing shared goals.

Kisner, Mazza, and Liggett (1997) discussed the importance of a standardized process of review and reflection as a way to maintain consistent and open lines of productive communication between the parties of a partnership. Fifteen years later, Bryan and Henry (2012) demonstrated that maintaining momentum in school–community partnerships is still a relevant issue. They held that of all the challenges in sustaining an effective school–community relationship, maintenance is one of the toughest. Bryan and Henry gave special attention to this aspect in their framework for cultivating school–community partnerships.

Another risk addressed in the literature is that of competing interests. In for-profit businesses, the bottom line purpose is easy to ascertain. While for-profit businesses may have numerous goals, their ultimate purpose is to generate profit. This is illustrated in Unilever's takeover of Ben and Jerry's ice cream in 2000 (Murray & Hwang, 2011). While charitable giving was an important cultural element for the original owners, profit was ultimately more important. Murray and Hwang (2011) reported that stakeholder profits ultimately guided the decision to sell the company to a buying interest which did not prioritize charitable giving in a manner consistent with that of the former owners.

To contrast, not-for-profit organizations, including schools, struggle with ambiguity in purpose (Young, 2013). However, one can reasonably assert that K–12 education is fundamentally focused on ensuring students are exposed to and able to acquire a reasonable mastery of the knowledge and skills necessary for meaningful participation in the society they will eventually lead. Stated another way, the purpose for schooling can be found at the intersection of a cultivation of knowledge and skills, the development of character and social cohesion, and general human development (Sparzo, Bruning, & Vargas, 1998). That being the case, it is clear the ultimate purpose of K–12 schools is

not to ensure profit for the school or for a business partner. This misalignment in purpose is a clear challenge for sustaining school–business partnerships.

The issue of competing interests can further manifest itself through power struggles. According to Abowitz (2000), the significant power of businesses in school–community partnerships can hinder the autonomous decision-making power of academic members. With power limited, one partner may exert imbalanced influence in a partnership, thus compromising the ability of the collaborative partnership to meet objectives or realize goals important to both parties. While these risks are difficult to altogether neutralize, they can be mitigated. In order to diminish this risk, Abowitz (2000) asserted, “power imbalances...must be acknowledged and reflectively analyzed by partners” (p. 336). She also stated that all parties to the partnership should monitor their efforts and processes in order to ensure a democratic practice so that the more powerful member of the partnership cannot overly influence decision making and governance.

Gross et al. (2015) asserted that trust is a key element in productive, healthy school–business partnerships. According to Kisner et al. (1997), such partnerships are more than just supported by trust. In the presence of trust, schools and businesses can elevate their efforts to work together in pursuit of more complex goals. In addition to trust, ownership and investment are vital to successful partnerships. Bowman and Dawson-Jackson (1994) reviewed a Florida school–community partnership that included a diverse group of contributors. Participants in this initiative included but were not limited to the U.S. Department of Education, the U.S. military, two institutions of higher learning, and local teachers. One of the findings from this study was the importance of a feeling of ownership for each member of the partnership. Bowman and Dawson-Jackson asserted this feeling of ownership was necessary for the initiative’s success. Gross et al. echoed this in their assertion that community investment is critical to student achievement. According to Gross et al., in the presence of invested community engagement, schools have a higher percentage of students who perform on grade level, have an increased rate of parents volunteering, support reform efforts for their school, enjoy higher scores on tests, have a higher attendance rate, and see students more connected to learning opportunities outside school.

Methodology

Purpose of the Study and Data Collection

As previously noted, it was the purpose of this study to develop an understanding of the definition, form, and scope of what an effective school–business

partnership looks like from the perspective of business leaders. A qualitative research design with the use of an interview protocol (see Appendix) was the most appropriate mode of inquiry. Interviewing community business leaders was appropriate because an interview is “a conversation with a purpose...to gather information” (Berg, 2009, p. 101). The researcher typically conducted interviews face-to-face in the subject’s office with a digital voice recording and pen/paper note taking by the researcher, although one participant requested his voice not be recorded. Two of the 18 interviews were conducted outside of the professional setting due to the preference of those being interviewed. In order to control for bias, the researcher conducted the interviews according to the same process without respect for subject or setting. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in one-on-one settings in one session and ranged in time from approximately 17 minutes to just over one hour; however, interviews typically lasted about 30 minutes in length. There was no compensation for participation, and each subject responded to all questions.

Study Design

Having spent his career as an educator working in various capacities including teacher (all levels), school counselor, school and district administrator, and in teacher and leadership preparation, and having invested personal effort in the task of partnership building between the school and community businesses, the researcher wanted to learn more about how to build meaningful and sustained partnerships between businesses and the schools serving communities where those businesses operate. This vested interest in building such partnerships, along with prior successful experiences in short-term school-business relationships but noting they did not last, contributed to the question: What makes a school–business partnership sustainable and mutually beneficial? Recognizing that meaningful partnerships operate as two-way efforts, the researcher sought to learn the perspective of interested business leaders.

The protocol developed for the interviews (see Appendix) was created using emergent themes from a review of relevant literature. Participants ($n = 18$) for this study were chosen through purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling occurs when the inquirer selects participants and sites for the study because they can purposefully provide an understanding of the research problem (Creswell, 2007). This method was particularly important to this research because the researcher wanted to learn generally how business leaders define effective school–business partnerships. Furthermore, because the researcher wanted to learn about business leaders’ perspectives without respect for whether they had a history of being engaged in formal partnerships with schools, prior experience with such partnerships was not a screening factor. Despite the fact

the researcher did not use this as a screening criteria, 10 business leaders who agreed to participate directly discussed some history of partnerships with K–12 schools. With consideration for these parameters, the researcher identified specific participants for the research through cold calling, requesting interviews with business leaders known to the researcher, or requesting interviews with business leaders who were connected to the researcher through a third party. Participating business owners and managers represented a wide diversity of fields including technology, restaurants, equipment rental, construction, radio, accounting, machinery, small business, corporate, and the oil field.

Participants led businesses in two geographically diverse areas of the state of Texas. One of those areas is a large, metropolitan area in Southeast Texas with a population in the multiple millions, and the other is a diverse area of West Texas, population of less than 300,000, with a rural history that is quickly becoming more urban due to booming economic conditions. These two areas were selected for their differences in size and location with a hope that findings would be practical in multiple settings. The researcher endeavored to balance regional representation with 10 subjects interviewed from the large, metropolitan area of the state and eight from the more rural area of West Texas. According to data retrieved from Census.gov, each of the respective regional areas are majority-minority with approximately 42% and 50% (respectively) of the population identifying as Hispanic or Latino, 31% and 42% as White-non Hispanic, and 20% and 6% identifying as Black or African American, with the remaining population being distributed among other ethnic and/or racial groups. Because the researcher interviewed business leaders throughout the geographic areas, there was a wide variety of economic conditions represented, ranging from multimillion dollar corporations to a small business owner who has since closed his business.

Data Analysis

In order to develop and present an integrated understanding of the perceptions and priorities of interviewed business leaders, the researcher recorded and transcribed interviews which were then coded with the constant comparative method. The constant comparative method can be used to take information from the transcribed interviews and compare it to emerging categories (Creswell, 2007). The researcher identified themes as one- to four-word expressions categorized under emergent constructs and providing the frame for understanding the collective responses of the business leaders interviewed (see Table 1). This is important because the absence of categorical themes complicates a researcher's ability to ascribe relative meaning to their observations (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Table 1. Themes and Frequencies

General Research Question	Major Themes (at least 50% of interviews and at least 20 references)	Minor Themes (at least 40% of interviews and at least 15 references)
From the perspective of a business owner or leader, what characterizes a school–business partnership which is meaningful and mutually beneficial?	<p>First Construct: <u>Collaboration and Common Purpose</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationships • Communication • Trust • Future of Students 	<p>Second Construct: <u>Results and Follow-Through</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Return on Investment • Integrity • Responsibility

Findings

The first construct can be conceptualized as *collaboration and common purpose*. The overarching theme of this construct suggests that business leaders not only want to support schools, but also that they want to be actively engaged with school leaders for the purpose of improving students' capacity for professional and vocational success. In this context, engagement can be defined as participation in deliberative discussions, interaction, planning, and goal celebration rather than simply playing the role of resource provider. Within this broader idea, each of four major themes emerged in at least 50% of the interviews and were referenced at least 20 times. Those themes included relationships (mentioned by 76% of respondents with 86 isolated references), communication (mentioned by 71% of respondents with 61 isolated references), trust (mentioned by 76% of respondents with 31 isolated references), and the expected impact of the partnership on students' future success (mentioned by 65% of respondents with 22 isolated references).

The broader ideas of *results and follow-through*, while not as prevalent as *collaboration and common purpose*, were also highlighted in many of the conversations the researcher held with participants. The overarching theme of this construct suggests that business leaders place importance on accomplishment of articulated goals. According to respondents, the accomplishment of goals communicates role players are responsible, act with integrity, and provide for a return on investment of time and resources. Within this construct, each of three major themes emerged in at least 40% of the interviews and were each referenced at least 16 times. Those themes included return on investment (mentioned by 59% of respondents with 18 isolated references), integrity (mentioned by 41% of respondents with 17 isolated references), and responsibility (mentioned by 53% of respondents with 16 isolated references). More information related to the frequency of emergent themes is available upon request.

Collaboration and Common Purpose

Relationships

Business leaders want to see success in their local schools. By extension, they want to be involved. One business leader stated, “whether it’s simple phone calls [or a] drive by an office, I mean, most people want to provide an extra service to the community.” Another said, “I really think it comes down to the relationship. I think the relationship is key to all this stuff.”

According to one retail manager, a strong school–business relationship is enhanced by one party’s ability to pick up a phone and call a member of the other party. This leader worked with students in a high school cooperative program. He was able to meet staffing needs and support students because the school would “call me up and say, hey...I have a child that doesn’t have a job. Can you help us out?”

A manager in the services industry discussed the impact of a constantly connected relationship on the success of a school–business partnership. When there is an established relationship between the business leader and a specific individual at the school, it is easier to align needs with each partners’ resources, thereby ensuring a mutual benefit. In the absence of such a relationship, that is more difficult. Illustrating the value of having an established personal relationship with a key school contact, this manager stated that it takes “one phone call, and it’s rolling; [if] somebody else calls me, I don’t have a clue.”

In order to foster these types of relationships, business leaders emphasized several important keys. Schools should be responsive. Business leaders sometimes maintained the busyness of school leaders gets in the way of a school’s ability to respond to offers of support. In one instance, a respondent discussed a school partnership which dissolved due to the school leader’s failure to take advantage of donation opportunities. The message was that if the partnership is important, the school leader must make time for relationship building and be equipped to receive support when it is offered.

A second point business leaders emphasized was that relationships should be cultivated on multiple levels in the school system. Having institutional support at the district level without a go-to person at the school impedes success on the ground. To contrast, excitement at the school was said to burn out in the absence of institutional support in the form of time and fiscal resources from the district level. A commitment to a personnel infrastructure which supports the establishment and maintenance of partnering initiatives is important if these partnerships are going to be meaningful, mutually beneficial, and sustainable.

In order to ensure shared efforts are time well-spent, schools and school leaders should proactively pair businesses and business leaders with school needs

that are relevant to the business and their market niche. Not all businesses are alike, and they do not all offer the same or even similar products/services. This was illustrated by respondents when they spoke to the types of partnerships they would support and develop. Technology leaders focused on technology and electrical engineering. Service industry leaders spoke about partnerships which cultivate practical skills relevant to their niche. Business leaders who managed industrial equipment were looking for people who had a capacity to support their industry, and so on.

Failure to develop more than superficial relationships can endanger the staying power of a school–business partnership as both partners can begin to look exclusively inward at perceived self-benefits. One participant stated, “If there’s no relationship there, the walls of applying stereotypes [can emerge].” A natural extension to the statement is that it is easy to question the motives of another party when we do not know one another well enough to simply ask about intentions or progress toward meeting commitments.

Communication

The ultimate success of a shared business-school initiative is largely dependent on how effectively the parties communicate. According to one of the business leaders interviewed, “It’s basically going to come down to communication.” In outlining partnership efforts and responsibilities, the respondent spoke on the importance of a shared understanding regarding in “what kind of time frame that those goals need to be met...the tools that they need to create that job...and following up with the results of that.”

Communication, however, is not just a simple conversation with give and take. Rather, it is a deliberative and time-intensive process. In discussing communication over time, one respondent discussed both the process of effective communication and the possible importance of broad involvement:

I have meetings...with community members to find out what they want. It may take a year to do this. You know, find out exactly what they want, have follow up meetings, put their name down, so administrators can keep their principals [informed], superintendents can go around and talk to these people....Send your teachers out who know how to communicate effectively.

The idea of effective communication also implies a shared understanding of roles, responsibilities, and expectations. In the absence of clearly communicated, reasonable expectations, it may be impossible to move forward with shared purpose (Badgett & Kritsonis, 2014). Long-term success is not secured by a one-time meeting or conversation. Sustained success requires communication over time. This allows a continual process of recalibration and supports the

ability of both parties to cultivate an understanding of the needs of the other party. One respondent noted the following:

That [communication], I think, will lead to a mutual benefit, and understanding, by doing that, you're going to be communicating with each other about needs from both sides, from the education system, from the community, and business. And that's really what has to happen; both of you have to see that and see that the other side is engaged and listening and doing something with that communication process over time.

Reinforcing the necessity of shared understanding, another respondent shared the importance that communication between parties includes “painting a clear picture of what would be expected of the candidates we would perhaps hire [in a work/school co-op] and making sure the candidates are aware of the disciplines that they need to succeed in that business environment.”

Other keys to effective communication shared by interviewed business leaders included frequency, source, and respectful persistence. Regarding frequency, one business leader said it is important to “keep each other informed...don't just meet once or twice, but you know, meet a number of times. So you really know what's going on.” Addressing source, a business leader in the restaurant industry discussed the importance of who is doing the communicating. He shared that he's far more responsive to a student who demonstrates the courage and self-assuredness to approach him on behalf of a school or school program than he is to a parent or adult school member speaking on behalf of students. Finally, we are reminded that business leaders' busyness should not necessarily be mistaken for disinterest or a lack of investment. One owner shared, “I think maybe what happens is when something is communicated once, the feeling is ‘well I've already done that, and there wasn't a response.’” Clarifying, he stated “Well, maybe it was just timing.” The message here was that by the school extending a second or third invitation, a business leader may be willing to engage and provide support.

To contrast, business leaders shared that failure to communicate gives rise to deflated interest and can lead to a business leader's decision to redirect time and money. If schools are going to effectively foster relationships with willing businesses, they must be proactive in their communication efforts. Failure to do so can contribute to the collapse of what could otherwise be a long-term beneficial relationship.

According to the leaders who participated in this research, communication includes frequent contact and targeted requests. Schools should be prepared to seek out businesses which fit a specific need and be open to transparent and constant communication. Having teachers, school leaders, and district level

leaders who are knowledgeable about and engaged in specific partnerships and the work of those partnerships will facilitate ongoing communication. Failure to do so can hinder communication between parties and ultimately compromise the sustainability of school–business partnerships.

Trust

Safety drives trust. In the absence of a sense of safety, individuals are less apt to place themselves in a professional or personal position where they could have liability. Over and over again in interviews, respondents discussed institutional limitations on partnerships tied to corporate concerns about legal liability. One subject interviewed shared vague details of a corporate situation where a colleague was discovered as a foreign spy and convicted of espionage. Another participant shared that in light of a reasonable level of systemic defensiveness for both schools and corporations, “it doesn’t take many [troubled situations] for a corporation just to shut it [partnerships] down.” This respondent went on to suggest the key to the development of healthy partnerships comes down to interpersonal connections based on trust. He stated, “I have to talk about me and you. It’s a personal thing.” When trust is established and maintained, he continued, “that is a win-win situation all the way around....once each individual [school and business] has a mutual agreement...it’s just a matter of, once everything’s in place, it all plays out so everybody has a win-win.” To contrast, a lack of trust is a partnership killer. Discussing how to address a potentially failing relationship, one participant shared, “that’s difficult for me to answer because right now there’s not a lot of trust.” Asked how that trust could be rekindled, the participant suggested trust is rebuilt through a shared effort.

Unsurprisingly, this theme was often contextualized in relationships and communication. This implies trust can be both earned and compromised in the context of relationships. While one respondent asserted “you have to build... trust” and another suggested that trust is only built through communication and a “long-time” relationship, a third cautioned that negative experiences and a lack of quality sustained interaction will often lead to a break down in trust. Succinctly stated, when “there’s no relationship to have trust...the only thing we have is paperwork.”

Impact on Students’ Future

The final of the major themes reveals business leaders are committed to the same ultimate goal for education as educators: Ultimately, it really is all about student success. The tone of student success as preeminently important ran as a common thread through most of the interviews and set the context for many respondent comments. Furthermore, it did not matter whether the business leader interviewed was in metal fabrication, industrial supply, the service

industry, restaurants, or radio. It did not matter whether the respondent focused on elementary, middle school, high school, or post high school. Consistently, the expressed desire was to ensure any school–business partnership made a real contribution to students’ preparedness for professional and personal success at the conclusion of the students’ formal education. While respondents discussed a variety of field-relevant “moving parts” that may be part of the mechanics of each relationship, they consistently maintained school–business partnerships lacked purpose unless they were centrally focused on student success.

Asked about the purpose of community and school collaboration, one business leader simply said that we partner in order to “grow and improve the young people.” In order to accomplish this, respondents were very concerned that partnerships should be designed to provide real-world, relevant skills to students. Sometimes specific skills discussed related to mechanics of transactions in a professional world. Sometimes, discussion centered on “soft” or people skills necessary for a person to effectively self-advocate and, at other times, on future planning and character.

Broadly, one respondent suggested it is “vital that students coming out have some real world basis.” Speaking to employability, another asserted that partnerships should ultimately “yield students who are ready to enter the work-force, who have an understanding of really what it’s going to take once they get out there,” while a third shared the belief, “the end objective is to get everybody in a good position with good employment and be able to grow themselves.”

Business leaders held that partnerships involving high school students should focus on real-world opportunities to apply and practice skills. In addition to providing students with valuable experiences, this also gives students the opportunity to decide what professions are of genuine interest and which they prefer to avoid. A restaurant owner discussed the importance of eye contact. Sharing how he enjoys hiring kids from local schools to work in the restaurant, this business leader talked about how his interaction with students and schools gives him an opportunity to play a life coach role in teaching his young employees the people skills that are necessary for effective interpersonal interactions. In this same vein, another contributor discussed the importance of fostering relationships with schools which ultimately allow his business to identify and work with students who can become career employees within his company. Speaking to his company’s strategic investment in partnerships, he said they build relationships with the educators, “build a relationship with their students, court the students, and when they get ready to graduate...hire them in.”

Regarding future planning and character, one business manager in the services industry discussed the importance of fostering in students a personal

vision for success in life and vocation. This leader described minimum professional expectations he believes will help students reach to maximize their professional opportunity. According to this leader, students are “required to be on time; they’re going to be required to be efficient. They’re going to be required to work in a team atmosphere, be respectful.” This same leader also wants to make sure students experience enough of his business to better understand what they want out of a career. He illustrated this, stating:

We’ll have [a] kid pop in and tell us “hey you know I’m here now, and I’m doing this, and I got this job because I learned I didn’t want a career in a low skill/low paying position.” So, for us, we’re getting our reward from seeing these kids better [off] in the long run.

To accomplish these goals, business leaders discussed working with school representatives to identify students who might be appropriate for given positions, providing those students with multiple and diverse experiences within the businesses, and coaching students on what it means to be successful in that role(s). Business leaders also discussed the importance of working with school leaders and teachers to determine fit for jobs in a cooperative setting.

Discussing benefits for kids was central, but there were differences in context, particularly between industries. This was illustrated by a number of respondents when they spoke of the types of partnerships they would support and develop. As previously noted, each sector focused on aspects most relevant to their area. This reinforces the importance of a clear understanding of what a business can provide (in terms of support) and strategically working with each business in order to tailor an appropriate and productive partnership.

As illustrated, partnerships have many “moving parts” that may be different depending on the type of business; however, there are several major themes which cut across all fields: relationships, communication, trust, and impact on students’ futures. By proposing a partnership with specific goals, understanding what distinct partnerships can offer, and ensuring these key elements are addressed, school leaders can build the framework for sustainable partnerships which have the potential to benefit both parties. Having built that framework, sustainable partnerships require something more.

Results and Follow-Through

Business leaders who participated in this research resoundingly communicated they are concerned with student success and the things that go into establishing and framing a partnership which supports student success. However, their insights and contributions to the conversation did not end there. Beyond the major themes which emerged in interviews, respondents shared

other markers which characterize a mutually beneficial and sustainable school–business partnership. These markers include return on investment, integrity, and responsibility.

Return on Investment

Some kind of return on investment (ROI) was a common theme within at least 40% of the transcripts from interviews. The idea of an investment and a need to perceive a real return was important to business leaders who participated in this research. One clear implication of this message was the financial return on investment. As one participant stated, “Businesses don’t want to waste their money.”

Discussing new partnership ideas, one respondent suggested a partnership of interest to his business was one where “every student participates, every parent...I [would be] most interested [in] some way to drive more and more and more people to my business.” In that way, the leader suggested, the business would ultimately benefit while providing a benefit to the school. This is important because business resources are not limitless and cannot be infinitely offered or diversified. When school leaders are willing to work with a business’s advertising efforts to drive traffic, it supports the business’s ability to structure partnerships which benefit the school while also ensuring any financial investment generates what one leader called “the most bang for the buck.” As businesses see an increase in traffic and an increase in volume of sales, they are consequently in a financial position to be more charitable. This also underlines the reality that businesses are not nonprofit and a school–business partnership should occur among parties who share a mutual concern for the well-being and goal attainment of one another.

Although the fiscal bottom line is a part of a return on business leaders’ investments, ROI was said to be more than that. The idea of ROI also included relevance to a market’s needs. When asked why we need partnerships, one respondent stated, “we should be [partnering] to make sure what our education system is producing is folks with the skill sets needed for businesses, for our country, and to move forward...[toward] producing folks that are going to meet the employment needs.” This has already been illustrated by the respondent who spoke of building relationships and courting students who will eventually be hired. A business leader who provides oil field-related industrial supplies discussed welding needs and hiring a student who interned for his company as part of a cooperative. This was a return on an investment of time and skill building in a student who would become a significant professional contributor to the company’s success.

ROI also comes in the form of a cultural contribution to education and to students as individuals. This was illustrated in one restaurant owner's commitment to expanding student horizons and providing opportunities to students who may not otherwise experience going out to eat. The restaurant owner works with schools in an area that is home to many students identified as economically disadvantaged. He noted that students raised in difficult economic situations often lack the opportunity many of us take for granted to simply go to a restaurant and enjoy a meal out. By partnering with schools to incentivize good grades, this business owner challenges students to perform well academically and rewards those grades with free meals. He stated it is not unusual to see a family come to the restaurant and have only their children eat. The parents are taking their children to enjoy free food they have earned with good grades even if the family cannot afford to purchase additional food. In this leader's opinion, ROI existed here because this experience broadened the horizons of the students and gave them an opportunity to experience something new they may not otherwise have experienced. The business does not necessarily gain any financial incentive through this type of partnership, but the owner believes he is able to make an investment in the kids. He shared he feels that this makes the investment worthwhile.

Responsibility and Integrity

While integrity and responsibility emerged distinctly in the interviews, these themes are closely related. The theme of responsibility communicated that each party has a part to play in developing the definition of roles and ensuring the success of a collaboration. The school's responsibilities were said to include but not be limited to ensuring students have a productive learning experience which demonstrably requires students to think critically about their experience and not simply chase grades. In this context, it was stated that the school should be able to articulate how the partnership will make a positive impact on the school's capacity to provide that type of education. Furthermore, schools are said to have the responsibility to understand the business leader's perspective. Given that partnerships should be endeavors where two or more parties are mutually invested in an initiative, schools cannot reasonably expect to set all the parameters of a partnership. Rather, one leader asserted, "I think the school should definitely listen to some of the things I say...actually find out how businesses run, because a lot of them don't know."

Responsibility extended beyond role definition into how those roles were executed. Ultimately, even if a business leader perceives a social or moral responsibility to support a school, that leader still wants to see good stewardship in the way that money is spent. In order to demonstrate how the school carried

out their role in the partnership, one respondent suggested the school should be prepared to “show them evidence at the end of the year.”

Being invested in a partnership with schools and the good-faith use of contributed resources go hand in hand. Concerning his perception of the importance of business investment in schools, another leader shared, “I think it is an obligation; it is a good investment for the community to spend money on the school.” However, the leader added, “the school has to provide documentation—evidence that they are utilizing the money given to them—and be accountable for the money.” Not only will this demonstrate responsible stewardship, but such transparency and responsibility may open the door to future additional funding.

Integrity follows an understanding of responsibilities because, once set, each party in the partnership knows their mutually developed and agreed upon goals. Stated one way by a participant, integrity is simply “doing what you said you were going to do and, if not, explaining why.” In the absence of that kind of track record, it is difficult to build trust, as another respondent suggested.

In addition to the idea that integrity contributes to the development of trust, participants asserted that integrity is also characterized by honesty and ethics. Failure to demonstrate honesty in the way funds are managed will damage trust. One leader stated that if “we see no value in investing a lot of money into a company or into a school,” that funding will stop. In this particular situation, a school lost support over time which equaled \$1,000,000.

If the school can demonstrate commitment through integrity and progress toward goals, a company may be willing to invest even if ultimate success is not achieved by a current leader. One leader highlighted the reality that ultimate success may occur under the stewardship of the “successor’s successor’s successor.” Because the school demonstrated integrity relative to their commitments, a continuing relationship could thrive and bring about the success that was borne out of a vision shared by members of the partnership over time.

Discussion and Implications

Radinsky et al. (2001) highlighted how meaningful relationships among local schools and community businesses add value to each party. The current research has identified characteristics of such relationships. As illustrated by emergent themes identified in the transcribed interviews, meaningful and mutually beneficial relationships are characterized by a complex interconnectedness wherein two or more parties can cultivate an intuitive ability to appreciate and anticipate one another’s needs, wants, and expectations. This type of interconnectedness can foster in each party a desire to proactively ensure the other party accomplishes its goals.

In the context of a mutually beneficial relationship, those goals are mutually inclusive if not always the same. This type of relationship does not just happen; rather, it is intentionally built. If the school leader is committed to establishing such relationships with community business leaders, there are a number of valuable considerations. A school leader's first consideration should be to determine whether or to what degree they believe in the value of relationship-based shared efforts. In doing so, it is important for school leaders to be mindful that the idea of relationship is packed with more than kinship and attachment. Business leaders are discerning and will know if school leaders want a partnership or only want their money. Consistent with findings made by Gross et al. (2015) that business leaders want to be more than a name on a stadium billboard, respondents in the current study were clear they want to be involved in more ways than that of fiscal and/or material resource provider.

In our efforts to secure the support of community businesses, it is far easier to put a hand out and request resources; however, even resources budgeted for charitable giving have limits, and businesses are not typically established with the success of the local school system as a fundamental priority. Business leaders want to play a role in the creative process. One leader shared it is important that school leaders "treat me like an equal" and that the school asks for "some of my ideas." By purposefully fostering relationships which allow business partners to participate in developing how a partnership will operate in terms of roles, responsibilities, resources, and processes, school leaders can better ensure the eventual success of the partnership.

This research echoes findings by Tracey et al. (2014) that business leaders want to make a difference for their community. However, this current research also found that business leaders may not know where to start and so offers implications for schools seeking partnerships. Using a school's improvement plan or another strategic planning tool may support the education leader's ability to identify and articulate specific needs. After developing an understanding of community businesses and their corresponding purposes, the leader can align school needs to an appropriate business and approach the business leader(s). Then the school leader can present a clear but flexible proposal for how the business can meet a school need relevant to the focus of the business and also show how the business will benefit from such a partnership. By making targeted requests, school leaders provide prospective business partners with a vision for how a given business's mission and resources fit specific needs in that school.

Respondents also offered a two-fold caution related to approaching their businesses. First, local schools should seek the support of local businesses. One small business owner discussed a cold call from a school hundreds of miles away. In that case, he declined to provide the requested support. Gross et al.

(2015) provide a helpful context for understanding the importance of local connections. They briefly describe the satisfaction felt by a small business owner who saw the impact of their contribution to the local school. While it is not impossible for a business owner to see impact for contributing to a school in a far-away locale, the connection may not be as personal as seeing one's impact on the local community. Second, particularly in the area of retail and restaurants, partnerships should drive traffic to the business. Partnerships with local businesses can better support accomplishment of this goal. These additional considerations should be part of determining which business(es) a school leader may approach for a proposed partnership.

Interviews also indicate that the execution of the shared efforts should be cooperative and characterized by regular, two-way communication. This type of engagement will support the ability of each role player to monitor, assess, and redirect their actions as necessary to support goal accomplishment. Furthermore, regular, two-way communication can help lessen the danger of each partner applying what one respondent called "stereotypes" in their impression of the other partner which may damage trust.

Partnerships which align school needs to a business's purpose should also be characterized by shared accountability to mutually agreed upon tasks and responsibilities. As previously noted, "businesses don't want to waste their money." Holding one another accountable in good faith—where each party is genuinely striving to fulfill their commitments—allows for celebration with success and recalibration when efforts are not producing desired results. This type of accountability also has the ability to foster trust because it requires routine communication and transparency.

In addition to implications related to the mechanics of a partnership, thought should be given to the school's capacity to establish and maintain mutually beneficial partnerships with businesses. This is relevant at both the district level and at the school level. As illustrated previously, school-level efforts can burn out if district level vision does not extend to partnerships which emphasize the importance of deliberative engagement between school leaders and business leaders. A district-level point person with access to fiscal, material, and time resources can support school efforts to establish a framework and normal processes for effectively engaging local businesses. To complement district-level resources, schools should consider articulating specific responsibilities related to community engagement and assigning those to a named person or role. This individual may be an administrator, a counselor, someone who directs school-work cooperatives, or another appropriate person who can act as a constant point-of-contact for business leaders.

Finally, business leaders want to see kids benefit. Money is important, but business leaders interviewed were more concerned with stewardship than with the amount of money spent or even the projected financial ROI. The overarching concern was to build real-world capacity in the students. Largely, this was in a practical sense rather than an academic sense and echoed the findings of Tracey et al. (2014) that student mentors desired to make a difference for the students with whom they worked. Therefore, any proposal should clearly address the expected practical value for students should the partnership form.

Implications for Businesses

This research also bears out considerations for businesses as they consider whether and to what degree they are interested in partnering with schools. Business leaders might consider establishing guidelines for the types of efforts their business will support or even the role(s) the leader expects to play in any partnership. In doing so, the business leader can lessen ambiguity and better ensure business resources are strategically directed from the very beginning of a partnership. Furthermore, such guidelines can inform the nature of the business leader's involvement throughout the shared effort, including the contribution of fiscal, material, human, and time resources.

Depending on their own interest in partnering with schools, business leaders may also consider their organization's systemic capacity for establishing mutually beneficial partnerships with schools. By assigning responsibilities relevant to building and sustaining partnerships with schools to an individual within their organization, the business leader can create a more effective framework for and ability to respond to opportunities for such partnerships.

Limitations

While this information will support the school leader's ability to strategically plan and propose partnerships with community businesses, it is also important to note some of the limitations of this research. One limitation is the lack of an ability to generalize without qualifications. Though the author endeavored to include a diverse mix of types of businesses, there are many types of businesses not represented by the group of leaders interviewed.

Participants for the research were identified through cold calling, requesting interviews with business leaders known to the researcher, or requesting interviews with business leaders who were connected to the researcher through a third party. Given there were more leaders who declined to participate either directly or through a failure to respond in the affirmative than those who agreed, it would seem there may be a wider range of opinions than those captured through interviews for this research. Individuals who agreed to participate

had a lot to share about education and the role they want to play in it. It is possible those who agreed to participate have a particular interest in education and, therefore, may have had a different perspective than those who declined. Because a leader typically declined without offering a clear reason, it would be difficult to arrive at conclusions about their perspectives and priorities.

The sample for this research was selected from two areas: one metropolitan, and one from an area which is more rural but experiencing oil-related booming economic conditions. It is possible business leaders in other economies, regions of the country, or community types may have very different perspectives. One would need to be cautious about attempting to apply lessons learned from this work in another situation.

Scientific or Scholarly Significance of the Study and Implications for Future Studies

Having identified very little work in the current literature about business leaders' perspectives on what characterizes a mutually beneficial and sustainable school–business partnership, the researcher believes this work addresses that knowledge gap, thereby adding significant new information to the literature. Moreover, the researcher believes this information provides practicing K–12 leaders with a greater ability to strategically seek out partnerships which address specific school needs. Additionally, providing the findings of this research to practicing school leaders will foster knowledge related to what business leaders find most important. It is the hope of the researcher that this will support the creation and maintenance of school–business partnerships which are long-term, effectual, and mutually beneficial.

Additional research is warranted. Having considered the perspective of business leaders in the for-profit world, learning the perspectives of leaders in the not-for-profit world would complement the knowledge gained here. Other partnerships which warrant exploration include but are not limited to churches and other faith-based groups; community interest groups; city, state, and federal government; and health providers. It would also be of interest to explore how business leaders in other parts of the country or world perceive school–business partnerships. Finally, it would be beneficial to learn if there are certain types of partnerships which are predictive of student achievement in K–12, higher education, or vocational pursuits.

Conclusions

Schools and businesses have shared interest and shared responsibility to the community they serve. Both entities are impacted by outcomes of schooling which provide students a learning experience and support their ability to make

a measurable contribution to and receive meaningful benefits from the society they will join and lead in the future. The good news is that business leaders interviewed perceive a shared responsibility for and show eagerness to support the work of educating students.

Business leaders interviewed during this research were animated and articulate when sharing what they can do to provide students with experiences, skills, and personal vision. However, they do not want to be passive partners who serve as little more than an ATM for initiatives that are altogether school-designed and executed. Rather, business leaders desire to be active partners in the process of equipping students for life. This includes participation in the design and implementation of initiatives they support. Having made personal and sometimes emotional investments in successful and failed initiatives, the participants pulled from personal stories and shared ways to ensure partnerships are both meaningful and mutually beneficial. School leaders who are interested in approaching businesses to establish partnerships should consider how themes identified in this research can support the development of a framework for the shared endeavors they pursue with those business leaders.

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Appendix. Interview Protocol

1. In your opinion, what is the purpose of community and school collaboration and cooperation?
2. What is the role of the school in engaging community businesses in cooperative, mutually beneficial relationships?

3. What conditions are present when a business initiates partnership with a school?
 4. What is the role of community businesses in supporting student achievement?
 5. If you could describe a process by which schools should engage you for support, what might that look like?
 6. If you were able to design a unique cooperative initiative, what might it look like?
 7. What do you perceive as the two major barriers which hinder effective partnerships between your business and the local school system?
 8. How does your business determine whether and which school initiatives to support?
 9. What conditions are present when your business is responsive to a school request(s) for support?
 10. Question: Research has demonstrated a recurrent theme of the need to maintain relationships between community organizations and the school. Two questions follow this thought. First:
 - a. What constitutes a meaningful and mutually beneficial relationship between school and your business?
- Second:
- b. What do you perceive as the biggest challenge to maintaining meaningful and mutually beneficial relationships?
11. How is trust between the school and your business cultivated and maintained?
 12. How do you cultivate an organizational sense of ownership in the success or failure of the local school system?