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Today's district must involve all segments of the community in public education if the future of both school and community is to be a bright one.

One Key to Survival and Success: Making Everyone a Partner in Public Education

by Marvin E. Edwards
Dallas Independent School District

In late 1986, an editorial of nearly half a page ran in one of Dallas' two daily newspapers. The editorial advised the Dallas community and its citizens that "education must become an area-wide obsession" in order to reduce student pregnancy, drug abuse, and dropping out and to "get Dallas moving."

As the editorial stated, "sustained, significant improvement . . . [requires] *all* Dallasites, regardless of whether they have children of their own, or whether their children are enrolled in the Dallas Independent School District, to be supportive and actively involved in an 'education first' effort." (*Dallas News*, Nov. 10, 1986)

This public call for action actually was testimony to the fact that the community's consciousness of the importance of public education to Dallas already *had* been raised. In fact, the Dallas Independent School District's twenty-year-old self-created system of broad community partnership programs itself undoubtedly helped to lay the groundwork for that 1986 editorial; as seen in Table 1, for years the DISD programs had been feeding growing numbers of citizens information about, examples of, and personal experiences with the link between successful public schools and successful communities. Many of the avenues cited by the editorial for citizens to become involved in and supportive of public education were those very school-community partnership programs that the DISD already had in place.

Through foresight and planning, the DISD had put down a strong foundation to encourage and enable the involvement of *all* citizens in the schools. The broad-based design of Dallas school-community partnerships, combined with the DISD's systematic structure for encouraging and enabling diverse community involvement, have made the Dallas school-community partnership program not only

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an unusual arrangement, but an unusually effective one as well.

There is no doubt that such a broad partnership and operating system will be even more valuable in the future as the schools seek to overcome the many challenges to education and to prepare youngsters for a changing world. The schools simply cannot accomplish these tasks alone.

TABLE 1
THE DISD's GROWING SCHOOL/COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM

Category	1969-72	1974	1979	1988
Adopting Partnerships	no record	13 businesses 15 religious groups 6 civic groups	500	2,100
Volunteers	1,791	3,053	8,100	17,217
Schools Served	111	129	155	181
Volunteer Hours	no record		66,215	389,971

The Design of a Partnership Program

From the beginning, the concept of partnerships for the DISD was an ambitiously broad one; the district's administration believed *everyone* in the increasingly diverse, greater Dallas metropolitan area should have one or more avenues of involvement, representation, and communication with the Dallas Independent School District. Among the sectors eventually identified were parents, students, citizens, religious groups, civic groups, social and service organizations, private schools, colleges and universities, businesses, professions, and the city's varied races and cultures. The administration of the '70s correctly believed that only through the cooperation and assistance of people from every sector of the community, could the schools hope to provide quality education and equal opportunity to the urban district's 130,000 diverse students attending nearly 200 schools.

Subsequent research and reports have added great validity to what was then—and still is in many school districts—a cutting-edge philosophy of encouraging everyone to participate in the public schools. Opening their school-room doors to the public is not an easy route for administrators, but the final destination makes it a route well worth taking.

In the more than 350 reform reports since the 1983 "A Nation at Risk," a common thread is evident: "school improvement comes most quickly and profoundly when the school, the home, and the community work together." (*Instructor*, 1986)

Recently, James Coleman, sociology professor at the University of Chicago, studied what he calls *social capital* and its effect on student achievement. In comparing private and public schools, Coleman found that families and communities both embody social capital. "Like other forms of capital," he says, "this is a resource that can be employed to aid . . . the development of youth." Moreover, Coleman found that social capital in the outside community can substitute when social capital is missing from the family. (Coleman, 1988).

It stands to reason that the more broad the social capital available to schools and students, the better. Urban dis-

tricts especially are blessed with a wealth of varied social capital and resources that can be tapped. Like many districts, a large proportion of DISD partnerships initially were with business and industry, but from the beginning other segments also were encouraged to participate. Over the years, the involvement of groups such as the community's senior citizens, medical institutions, private and parochial schools, higher education, agencies, civic and service organizations, and cultural and religious groups also have come to have an enormous positive impact on Dallas schools, students, and community.

Today's thoughtful and informed educator accepts the effective schools research that emphasizes the importance of community involvement. But *achieving* involvement, especially the involvement of individuals and groups other than parents and business, takes great effort and remains a challenge almost everywhere.

Structuring "Win/Win" Partnerships

The key to effective school-community partnerships is the same as that for any other partnership, be it a professional partnership of individuals or a personal partnership such as marriage and friendship: all partnership participants must believe that they benefit from their cooperation and alignment of effort.

The Dallas example shows the many ways in which schools and children benefit from participation of the community and its citizens in their schools. During the 1987-88 school year alone, more than 17,000 volunteers invested almost 390,000 hours in the DISD. This is equivalent to some 275 additional teaching positions. Moreover, 2,100 organizations and businesses adopted schools in the DISD's Adopt-A-School program during this past school year, and numerous other groups and individuals contributed to the district in an advisory capacity. Students have benefited directly from tutoring, mentoring, role modeling, teacher incentives, listening, support systems, speakers, programs, trips, competitions, materials, equipment, internships, scholarships, etc. They also have benefited indirectly from the diversity of ideas and programs that have been brought to the district by members of the community and that have helped to improve the district's operation and instructional programs such as the DISD's excellent collection of special-interest magnet schools (DISD Report, 1988). These benefits accrued to the district and its students have proved well worth the time, energy, and money invested by the DISD to achieve a high level of community participation.

This dynamic participation is evidence that community groups and citizens believe that they also benefit from partnerships with the DISD. Fortunately many individuals, organizations, and businesses look upon such involvement as part of their social responsibility. We live in a time when despite the numerous claims on people's time, an interest in grass roots efforts and voluntarism is on the upswing. People want to make a difference in the world around them. In 1985, for example, volunteers gave more time per week on average to organizations than they had in 1980 (*IS Report*, 1986).

Business and industry also have recognized that effective public schools provide good employees, attract good employees, entice new business to a community, and help to preserve the free enterprise system. According to a Conference board survey released in January 1988, education and the quality of the work force are the issues of most importance to today's businesses, and these are the issues to which the private sector now donates the most time and money (*Education Daily*, January 12, 1988).

Other segments of the community get involved because they view public schools as the key to a better quality of life for themselves and others, to the development of good citizenship and character in future leaders and voters, and to a future of freedom and opportunity for all.

It is up to the schools to address the self-interests of the various community sectors, to communicate with those sectors, and to make it as easy as possible for the members of those sectors to join in a school partnership program.

Organizing for Involvement

Today, the Dallas Independent School District has a well staffed internal organization to recruit, train, and coordinate volunteers and to provide channels of two-way communication with all sectors of the community. In addition, the district contracts with the Dallas Chamber of Commerce and the Dallas Black Chamber of Commerce to assist with public relations, recruitment, and recognition of volunteers in the business sector.

In the beginning, however, the DISD took care to proceed slowly and carefully, building on its successes. The 1976 goal was to line up 20 to 25 successful adoptions without expending additional resources. Surprisingly, the district found it easier to recruit adopters than to find principals and schools who were receptive to the idea. However, once enthusiastic principals participated in the pilot projects and perceived the benefits to their schools, they helped sell the idea to their peers.

One more recent and excellent outcropping of the groundwork done by the DISD to involve the community in its schools has been the emergence over the last few years of community- and business-generated pilot programs. Though these programs operate in cooperation with the DISD, the idea for them and the organization of them comes from outside the district. These programs include "Communities in Schools," which targets the lowering of dropout rate by providing mentors for students, and "I Have a Dream," which surrounds disadvantaged sixth-graders with special support and assures them a college education when they complete their public schooling.

Several factors have contributed to the DISD's success in mobilizing broad community involvement in its schools. These include:

- *Making partnerships a priority.* Board policy was established on the commitment to a communitywide partnership effort. The importance of the effort was noted in the district's official goals statement, and the administration spelled out guidelines and procedures for the staff.
- *Taking it slow and easy but strategically.* The initial focus was on a few workable activities. Then the district built on the successes with a defined marketing strategy. Participants were asked to help sell others, and recruitment efforts always begin with the people at the top of an organization.
- *Employing a communications plan.* An on-going comprehensive effort is made to inform key publics about the importance of partnerships, how they work, and the opportunities available. A variety of tools such as district publications, audiovisual presentations, speeches, and handouts are used, as well as the contracted services of the Chambers of Commerce. One special partnership, the Positive Parents of Dallas, was formed specifically to provide positive communication about the DISD.
- *Establishing a care and feeding system.* Probably the toughest part of the job is keeping the partnership pro-

gram rolling. A systematic maintenance system is utilized that includes assigned staff responsibilities in working with the various volunteer groups and community sectors, training for both staff and volunteers, coordinating volunteer efforts, recognizing partners for their contributions, and operating an evaluation system.

- *Building a support system in the community.* The district has been able to make partnerships with the schools a tradition among many community and parent groups. Once such groups are identified, staff members work with them on an on-going basis to build a self-renewing mechanism.
- *Involving all school staff and departments.* Partnerships don't belong to one department, program or school. They help everyone, and everyone must be involved in making them work. By making partnerships a priority of the Board and top administrators, staff cooperation is built both horizontally and vertically.
- *Utilizing the public relations value of community involvement.* Community partnerships are used to transmit information and get feedback on overall school programs, plans, progress, and problems. A special "community network" system is part of this effort; representatives of the key community sectors—from racial groups to realtors—meet regularly for two-way communication with the superintendent.
- *Continual reassessment of school and community needs.* The DISD pays close attention to the changing needs of schools and students and to the changing interests of the community and its citizens. Then refinements are made to existing programs, new partnerships are formed, new types of volunteers are recruited, and new types of training are provided. For example, such on-going assessment recently resulted in a number of new "win/win" partnerships, including:
 - tutoring of DISD youngsters by private school students.
 - the adoption of a Dallas high school by a hospital for crippled children. The hospital needs more young people to go into health care, and the students need more information on career opportunities and preparation.
 - pilot programs in character education. Religious and other groups came forward with proposals to supplement the standard curriculum.
 - plans for a "middle college" to be operated jointly by the DISD and the Dallas County Community College District that will link the last two years of high school with the first two years of college for career training continuity.
 - a partnership with East Texas State University to provide alternative certification training for college graduates wanting to help meet the district's great need for additional bilingual teachers.
 - the development of numerous new partnerships to target the new education/community priority of serving at-risk youngsters. A whole new genre of needs, volunteers, and partners has been developed in this area just over the last few years.
 - a whole new set of guidelines and training of DISD volunteers and partners. Some of the more recent student needs and volunteer interests mean that community partners are working closer to areas traditionally handled only by professional school personnel. These include psychological, emotional, and legal arenas. Not only must volunteers now be totally familiar with the limits of what they can do

and be very well trained in what they will do, but they and the district also must be protected from liability problems. In this sense, voluntarism has become a "profession" requiring new programs of training and development.

The Bottom Line for Public Schools

Public education is facing some tough challenges that are not going to be resolved quickly or easily. In addition to the societal problems that impede the learning of youngsters such as poverty, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, crime, and apathy, our schools already have come head-to-head with financial shortages and shortages of teachers in certain key areas. According to all we know, these shortages of dollars and teachers will grow well into the future.

A primary hope for our public schools to meet the challenges ahead and fulfill their charge of providing educational opportunity to all youngsters is to involve more people in our schools on a volunteer or partnership basis.

Traditionally, our volunteer support has come from parents. With changing demographics, however, public school parents are comprising a smaller and smaller percentage of our urban population. Today in Dallas, three-fourths of our community no longer have children of school age. Thus, our challenge is to reach more non-parents, to communicate with them about our schools, and to involve them in the educational process. The business sector has been a logical and effective starting point; private enterprise will remain our largest source of time and money.

Many other sectors of society have a vested interest in educating today's young people—even if they are not yet aware of it. They can provide not only additional resources but a wealth of social capital that can enlarge and improve the minds and lives of the young people in our communities.

Administrators cannot afford to overlook any potential partners for their schools and their children. They cannot afford to sidestep the planning, work, and money that must be invested in order to reap the many rewards of school-community partnerships. Such an investment is multiplied yearly, and it can make a difference in whether we move forward or backward in our mission to educate all young people.

Our youngsters need all the hearts and hands we can recruit, and they will benefit immensely from all that our citizens have to offer. It is up to the schools to open their doors to community partnerships and guide our friends in the community in helping to see that all youngsters receive the education they deserve.

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