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## Partnerships: The Community Education Process in Action

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# PARTNERSHIPS

## The Community Education Process in Action

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By William J. Cirone

**P**ARTNERSHIPS represent such a simple concept, it is amazing that they—and the whole community education process—have taken so long to become widely recognized. The benefits seem so obvious that the real wonder is that we haven't been operating this way all along. Partnerships—and, by extension, community education—are tools that can be used to address many of the problems we face as members of modern society.

We all know intuitively what we mean by community education or educational partnership: involving all members of society in the process of education—business leaders, community members, parents, young people, senior citizens. We cannot isolate education from any other function. It is the first step—and the continuing cadence—of all else that we do. For me, partnerships center around the *process*—a process that promotes and facilitates citizen participation in solving local problems.

In our schools we tend to isolate subject matter and teach it as though it exists in a vacuum—history, science, math, language. We have to do this, to some extent, for logistical reasons. But we all know that, in our lives, subject areas overlap. The journalist must use math to write about budgets; the artist must use chemistry in working with paints; scientists must use language to explain their findings to the rest of us. We all know this. But we then proceed to set up our professions using

similarly artificial compartmentalization. We say, "Here, you folks do the educating. You folks do the entertaining. And you folks do the healing."

The reality, of course, is that every person a child comes into contact with is, in a sense, a teacher, because a child is learning all the time. And teachers can be healers and entertainers, too.

Once the community acknowledges that we are all in this together, and that regardless of whether we have children in school or simply have neighbors' children in school, they

are *our* schools and we all have a vested interest in their success—then we are on the right track. After all, communities are always evolving, and children have a way of growing into adults. It happens all the time. And we all bear the consequences of their knowledge and understanding.

Partnerships are part of the central thread and core values that run through the operating style of all that we do in community education. Through partnerships, the community education process can be used to address virtually any educational or community problem, no matter how large or small. People cannot be told how to be responsible, knowledgeable, or caring citizens. They must be involved in the process. That is the simple concept that makes partnerships sound and valuable: *people want to be involved.*

Estus Smith, a former vice president of Jackson State University in Mississippi and a member of his governor's education task force, wrote in the *Kettering Review*: "The way to do the public's business is to get the public involved. Public schools serve their communities, or they don't serve usefully at all."

Three specific issues can serve as examples of how the partnership process can tackle areas that are crucial to the stability of our society: the problems we face with high-risk youngsters; the issue of civic literacy; and the need to recruit and retain the best and the brightest for the teaching profession.



*As superintendent of Santa Barbara County, California, Schools, William Cirone administers 23 school districts with 50,000 students, and two community colleges.*

*He founded and directed the Santa Barbara Center for Community Education and Citizen Participation for 10 years before winning the elective position of county superintendent in 1982. He was reelected without opposition in 1986 to a second four-year term.*

*This article is adapted from his keynote address to the South Pacific Regional Conference of the International Community Education Association in Melbourne, Australia, last September.*

*Cirone is president-elect of the National Community Education Association.*

**H**IGH-RISK students pose important domestic threats; they account, in large measure, for our growing problems with teenage pregnancies, drug and alcohol abuse, high dropout rates, youth violence, and low voter turnout. Children are educationally at risk if they cannot take advantage of available educational opportunities, or if the educational resources open to them are inherently unequal.

The largest number of at-risk children come from a deprived environment that slows their intellectual and social growth. Although education has traditionally provided an escape for some children from poor families, the data show that poverty does correlate closely with school failure, especially where the family is headed by a single parent. Poor students are three times more likely to become dropouts than students from more economically advantaged homes. And the cycle tends to repeat itself: children from poor and single-parent households are more likely than others to become teenage parents themselves, helping to create another poor, single-parent household.

But we can rescue most of the children who are at risk of educational failure. To do this, we must improve the schooling we offer and reach out to these children and their families in the earliest years. The Committee for Economic Development (CED), whose trustees are mostly chief executive officers and board chairmen from the nation's leading corporations and universities, has formed a partnership with educators, and is working toward a long-term solution for at-risk students.

The CED involvement is an excellent example of the partnership process at work. CED established education as a priority and then spent millions of dollars studying it and disseminating funding for research. It published two major reports, *Investing in Our Children* and *Children in Need*, which detail the problem and propose long-term solutions. Now the group is lobbying for national and state legislation and working with policy makers to try to implement its recommendations. They are working, in partnership with educators, toward long-term solutions.

In California, the California Roundtable, which includes the chief executive officers of 90 major corporations,

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was an influential supporter of a major state educational reform bill. It also recently published a new report, *Restructuring California Education*, which makes bold recommendations for a total remake of the educational structure. It is clear that such long-term, global approaches have the potential to yield the most lasting results. And they will be achieved only through partnership.

The partnership process can also be used for developing short-term, stop-gap measures that will support long-term solutions. Toward this end, and using educational partnerships, we are continually convening groups, establishing forums, and participating in coalitions in Santa Barbara County. A group composed of the superintendents of schools of the major districts in the county, the presidents of a local private college and a local community college, and the chancellor of the University of California at Santa Barbara meets regularly; together, we represent educational levels from kindergarten through college, and we approach our problems in terms of a unified effort, sharing resources and expertise.

We can also point with pride to our adult education programs, our recreation programs, and our adopt-a-school programs.

With all of these groups and projects, the message is loud and clear: *our problems are our responsibility*. We don't point the finger of blame; we work together to solve the problems. We use the language of shared values and responsibilities. And this method works. So far, using this partnership process, we have developed several programs that have made some real differences. We have school-age parenting programs for pregnant minors involving community-based agencies, school districts, and churches. We have alternative community schools, with involvement from the probation and welfare departments and from nonprofit organizations. We have numerous drug prevention and intervention programs that reach youngsters from the early elementary school grades through high school. We have counseling centers, youth employment projects, teacher training and effective-school models, and self-esteem projects for youth and teachers alike.

These partnership programs offer short-term solutions, reaching thousands of kids while we work in the other partnerships on long-term solutions. But they do something else, equally important. Because they involve partners, they widen the circle of those who are knowledgeable, involved, and concerned about high-risk kids—and those who are willing to work on the long-term solutions.

**C**IVIC LITERACY may be defined as the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to participate productively in a democratic society. The primary mission of our schools is to prepare young people for this participation. All institutions of government are affected by citizen apathy, public distrust of institutions, and the success of narrow interest groups. But educational institutions, with their mandate to teach civic literacy, must pay particular attention to such obstacles.

The knowledge of civics, government, and history becomes most meaningful when it is taught in a context that gives young people an opportunity to experience what they

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have learned. And this is where educational partnership enters the picture. Through a partnership, every high school student in our area had the opportunity to vote in the "Super Tuesday" primary election. We used actual county voting equipment and simulated regular election procedures. More than 12,000 students selected presidential candidates and voted on five ballot measures chosen by their peers on such subjects as AIDS education, military spending, and mercy killing.

This "dress rehearsal for voting" as it was described in local news accounts, was made possible through a partnership that included our county clerk-recorder, who is responsible for the election process; the League of Women Voters; our local high schools; the student governments; and the vendors of the voting machines. Polling places at nine public high schools were manned by students trained as precinct workers. Real voting materials were donated by companies that supply our county elections office. Members of the League of Women Voters were on hand to register students who were old enough to cast real votes.

Community service is also an excellent vehicle for developing civic literacy in our youth. In one of the school districts in Santa Barbara County, the superintendent recently proposed a program that would require all students, elementary, junior high, and high school, to volunteer 60 hours of community service in order to graduate. This corresponds with the recommendations of Ernest Boyer, former U.S. commissioner of education and current president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Boyer has urged that our high schools develop a unit on volunteer service to, in his words, "provide students with an opportunity to reach beyond themselves and feel more responsibly engaged." He said such a program would "help break the isolation of the adolescent, bring young people into contact with the elderly, the sick, the poor, and the homeless, as well as acquaint them with neighborhood and governmental issues."

Exactly. It requires a partnership of efforts between the schools and community organizations—but just think of the benefits reaped for the students and the community!

**A**LL OF US in the education community share a concern about the quality of teaching and the prospect of teacher shortages. At times, the problems seem so large that we shake our heads and conclude that the issue has to be tackled at the national or state level.

We took a different approach to the issues of retention and recruitment of quality teachers in Santa Barbara County, using the partnership process once again to make something happen. First, we held a series of meetings with teachers to get their views. They told us, in essence, that they feel isolated, even at times from their own colleagues, and that they get little recognition for their accomplishments. Next, we convened a series of meetings with business leaders to discuss the problems of recruitment, retention, and—as the teachers pointed out, the two greatest occupational hazards in the teaching profession—lack of recognition and isolation. We told the business leaders that there are many excellent teachers already in our system who quietly go about their duties, performing daily acts of heroism. We reminded these leaders that in the business community one of the keys to success is the ability to identify and recognize outstanding employees. This is something we have not done well in education.

Teachers who attended these meetings talked about their love of teaching, their feelings of isolation, and the exciting things they were doing in their classrooms despite that isolation. The depth of their caring and sincerity shone through.

Out of that process we developed an Impact project, in which more than 100 local companies joined in funding mini-grants—hard cash—for outstanding teachers who use innovative techniques or programs in their classrooms. Mini-grants were later extended to adapters—colleagues who put the good ideas to work in their classrooms. The awards are made at wonderful dinners held three times a year at some of the nicer places in our county—sometimes by candlelight in a museum, for example. The corporate sponsors attend personally to present checks to the winners. Political leaders also attend, often to present state and local certificates of recognition to teachers. The local media cover these

events in a major way. The net effect is a high-quality community recognition program in step with corporate models.

Out of this partnership, we have devised a way of sincerely, publicly, and warmly saying "thank you" to some of our finest teachers. And it has become common to hear teachers with 20 years' experience say that this is the first time they've been thanked.

Beyond saying "thank you," we publish their good ideas in a catalog that goes to every teacher in the county. Then, through the Impact partnership, we make the small "adapter grants" available to any teacher in the county who adapts these ideas for his or her classroom. Thus, we've set up a system of peer-to-peer training that cuts across district lines. It also enables the excellent teachers within the county's 23 school districts to form a network and partnership of their own.

Fired by our success, we decided to extend this concept to help recruit teachers, so we asked the teachers in the Impact program to share their enthusiasm and love of teaching with our high school and college students. This Tomorrow's Teachers program is now completing its second year, and more than 60 percent of the student participants who responded to our follow-up survey indicated that they will seriously consider teaching as a profession.

**A**LL of these examples illustrate that *we at the local level are not powerless*. We can address major state and national issues and have an impact locally; partnerships help us make a difference.

David Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation, has written: "Success in improving education is homegrown . . . communities fix schools." He said this notion is "both an educational and a political idea — and a powerful one. It understands the interdependence of schools and communities."

How does one start a partnership? There are as many ways as there are groups to call upon. David Mathews again sheds light on the issue: "In one city I saw the leadership coming from a banker, in another from a superintendent, in another from a civic leader. What seems crucial are the

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coalitions that are created by these initiatives. The best coalitions are not just business-education or university-education or labor-education coalitions; *everyone* is involved."

Mathews continued: "New community coalitions, often called citizen alliances, are springing up across the country. They are the vehicles for the people's crusades in education. Usually the alliances are independent of the local or state government, although some of the best have been created by governors. . . . If alliances have any one guiding principle, it has been that 'communities fix schools.'"

In Santa Barbara a few years ago we developed a project called "Responding to the Challenge: Public Education in America's Future." It was designed to promote broad citizen dialogue and participation in education policy issues. This was extremely important in Santa Barbara County, since 78 percent of the adult population does not have school-age children. We invited every organization and club in Santa Barbara County to make the discussion of education issues the number one program priority during that year. Leaders from all walks of life, age groups, and interests were brought together and asked to discuss education within the organizations they represented. They were asked to have their groups develop a capsule answer to one important question: If you could send a message to education decision makers, what would it be? Throughout the county, clubs, service organizations, and discussion groups accepted our challenge. We merely facilitated and coordinated the process that supported the dialogue. At the end of the year, all the messages were compiled and presented at a town meeting on education. The

upshot was a renewed sense of the importance of education and the need to be involved in making critical decisions. The ideas—and the frustrations—were passed along to decision makers at local, state, and national levels.

The project has continued with a growing group of participants and greater involvement from the business community. It is a perfect illustration of how the *process* of community partnerships leads to *programs* for solutions.

Partnerships appeal to a community's higher instincts in addressing the issues of the day. As community educators, we carry the message that shared values and responsibilities are the lubricant for local action. *Success in improving education is home-grown.*

In a society in which participation is intrinsic to the system, we need to ask ourselves what kind of nation we would become, and what kind of government we would have, if people no longer participated. Then we must do all we can to provide the incentives, the support, and the leadership to make sure we never find out. □

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