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## Maximizing Community Partnerships

The old African maxim, “It takes a village to raise a child,” is true of schools as well as families.

Schools aren’t islands, and in order for students and staff to thrive, they need the support of those around them. Community partners play a key role by providing resources, opportunities and support that students otherwise might not have.

Everyone benefits when schools and communities work together to support learning. These relationships not only provide tangible benefits to the schools but also help to strengthen ties between the schools and local partners and create a community that is invested in providing a quality education for its children.

While most schools love the idea of community partners, they often don’t know how to find them. Some schools are lucky to have partners literally walk in the door. But most need to cultivate and grow partnerships, much like they do their school gardens. They must plant seeds with local organizations — make presentations to local civic groups or talk with the director of a nearby senior community — to let them know how a partnership would benefit both sides. And when a partnership starts to develop, they need to nurture the relationship like they would a new plant.

### The mutual benefit of community partnerships

Community partners can work with schools in a variety of ways. They can provide cash or material resources to support a particular school program. They can offer expertise by allowing employees to be guest speakers or mentor after-school clubs. They can allow employees to volunteer during the workday, tutoring students, setting up science experiments and helping in other ways.

Some companies have found school partnerships to be an effective way to ensure they can maintain a qualified workforce. In one Oregon school district, a large welding company partnered with the high school’s welding program. They donated equipment, helped develop the curriculum and promised well-paying jobs to students after graduation.

Some local companies partner with schools to offer after-school jobs and internships. Some provide expert staff to work with teachers to fine-tune the curriculum to address changing needs in their industry and assure that certain skills are taught.

In some districts, high school English classes have partnered with local assisted living facilities, and students have offered to help the residents write their life stories. It’s a wonderful way for the students to hone their listening and writing skills as they help the senior citizens put some of the memories they want to pass on to their families in writing. Beyond that, it

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helps older residents connect with younger people in a positive way and enables students to feel the value of helping someone else.

Schools that are located near a university can benefit from building partnerships with particular programs, such as the music department or world languages. For example, a high school that only offers a couple of languages might partner with the local college to allow students to take additional languages on campus at low or no cost. Or a university music department might invite the local high school orchestra to perform with them for a special concert.

Some districts organize or participate in local business councils where they meet regularly with business leaders and discuss how they can work together to better prepare students for the workforce.

Superintendents in some districts invite local business and community leaders to be part of a superintendent's advisory council. Members meet monthly or quarterly to discuss issues facing the district or programs that the district may want to start and offer feedback and sometimes resources.

Service clubs are great partners to schools. Many service clubs raise money to provide annual scholarships to the seniors in their local high schools. Others sponsor students to participate in exchange programs in other countries.

One of the most important partnerships schools can develop involves volunteers. Schools that develop strong volunteer programs reap the rewards of extra adult interaction with students, as well as the service they provide. For example, volunteers can tutor students in math and reading, lead small reading groups, play piano for music classes and so much more. They can help supervise recess, monitor the hallways between classes and accompany students on field trips.

### **Define your goals**

As you seek community partnerships, it's important to define what you want to accomplish and to set expectations. If the goal is to create more job opportunities for students, then a goal might be for your business partner to agree to create an internship program and hire a specified number of interns during the school year. Having written goals makes it clear what each partner aspires to do to move the relationship forward.

Deciding who might be a good partner is often a matter of a simple conversation. Invite the owner of a business or president of a civic organization to coffee, and get to know them. Talk with them about district programs and your dreams for new opportunities for your students. Then ask if they might be interested in working together in some way.

As for who to ask, every community has a long list of potential partners, including:

- Senior living facilities
- Farms and agricultural organizations
- Granges
- Civic organizations
- Veterans' groups
- Local businesses
- Colleges and universities
- Forestry departments
- Retirees
- Chambers of Commerce
- Churches

Every school district can benefit from having community partners. The first step to getting them is just to ask.

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Partners

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