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Business and education partnerships—a focus on the future

In 2014, President Barak Obama highlighted and praised the commitment of business leaders of companies such as Apple and Microsoft for helping to improve the quality of education and access to technology for at least nine out of ten American students. In the United States, businesses consider education to be the number one social issue to which they should contribute. Business-education partnerships serve to strengthen instruction in academic skills and to enrich the educational process by contributing the talents and ideas of business personnel. Such partnerships produce more purposeful learning as students engage in real-life business-directed projects and are allowed to intern at a business facility. Students also get unique opportunities for career exploration. Business-education partnerships may involve entire school boards and hundreds of students; other private-public partnerships pair a company up with individual students (Frank & Smith, 2000; Watt, 2003). Education is big business and a long-term investment for government and societies. Businesses that partner with and donate funds to public schools help to effect change in the forms of encouragement and student academic development in order to assist the public education system with reforming its curriculum and improving student success.

An important consideration for any educator or administrator is to determine whether businesses that seek partnerships with schools really help to solve national problems, whether such reforms have changed schools for the better. Let's examine whether the educators or businesses championing such initiatives provide compelling reasons for the reforms they seek. According to Molnar (2008), business and industry is the leading customer of the educational system. Businesses want to ensure that there will be good employees, customers, and leaders in the future. It is, therefore, in the self-interest of businesses to help the public education sector to produce robust individuals who will become contributors within their communities. Molnar (2008) also points out that, in order for business and education partnerships to be

successful, education has to be the foundation that underpins the strongest and most successful communities or societies. Even the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) implies that, without adequate investment in skills, people will languish on the margins of society; technological progress alone will not translate into economic growth, and countries will no longer compete in an increasingly knowledge-based global society (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2012).

On the other hand, there are other voices such as Larry Cuban (2005), who argues that the goals of education are different from the goals of business. Businesses, therefore, should not be allowed to dictate the focus of education. Cuban looked at the motivations and methods behind business-school partnerships in an attempt to examine the educational reforms that resulted (Cuban, 2005, p.14). This paper will describe five different business and entrepreneurial initiatives in education that can improve the STEM and business curriculum and can increase student success in college and the workforce.

Businesses involvement in education is not new; Bayer made reform of science education their focus in the mid-1990s. Bayer, a science-based invention company with three business sub-groups, Bayer HealthCare, Bayer Crop Science, and Bayer Material Science, recognized its responsibility to society to help strengthen student development and education in the STEM fields. Business and industry continues to demand more employees with STEM skills, but the education system is struggling to provide them. Molnar (2008) emphasizes that Bayer knew that a strong STEM curriculum today meant a strong workforce for tomorrow, one that can successfully compete in the current global marketplace (p. 8). Bayer recognized and wanted to address many of the problems facing modern society: the cost and availability of health care, global warming, environmental sustainability, and the access to food and energy sources. Bayer believed that research & development and technological advances offered solutions to current and future world problems. Bayer concluded that one way of tackling these problems was to create citizens with a

more sophisticated understanding of science, with the potential to develop solutions in partnership with the company. As a result, Bayer created educational initiatives that would create such students (Molnar, 2008, p. 9).

Bayer's first effort was the grassroots program, *Making Science Make Sense*, launched in Elkhart, Indiana to promote science education (Molnar, 2008). The program sought to prepare students in public schools to deal with pressing global problems. Scientists at Bayer created the program more than forty years ago with the goal of promoting inquiry-centered, hands-on science education that fostered science literacy and skills such as critical thinking and problem solving. These scientists were successful in creating informal partnerships with local school districts. A number of the Bayer sites within and outside of Indiana became interested and created their own local science-education partnerships and programs. All of Bayer's science programs shared a focus on inquiry-based, hands-on learning, and a strong commitment by Bayer employees to volunteer in science classrooms. In the end, Bayer created partnerships with local school districts in more than six communities where the company had a major presence (Molnar, 2008). The reform initiatives created by Bayer follow the criteria for exemplary science programs set by the National Science Resources Center (NSRC), and they work jointly on projects with the Smithsonian Institution and the National Academies. These criteria are: hands-on materials, centralized materials support, teacher training, assessment, and community support. Additionally, opportunities for student engagement exist along a spectrum of activities from providing resources for individual schools to mobilizing community support for policy initiatives to training teachers and students in new skills and technologies.

Bayer's engagement in STEM at the secondary or high school level takes on many forms. C.A.U.S.E (Creating Awareness and Understanding of our Surrounding Environment) is another popular program that focuses on job training and company internships. The goal of C.A.U.S.E is to challenge students to follow novel approaches to science education. Sponsored by Bayer and partners such as the

Carnegie Science Center SciTech Initiative and the Pittsburgh Filmmakers, C.A.U.S.E. challenges public high school students who are not on a science track to become more scientifically and environmentally aware through making short films on environmental subjects. Bayer is keen to forge partnerships with schools and to invest in programs that will build a more diverse STEM pipeline and workforce (Molnar, 2008). For the United States, diversity is a key natural and educational resource and perhaps the country's greatest strength is the focus on improving the interest of girls and underrepresented minorities in STEM (Molnar, 2008).

Businesses other than Bayer are also keen to improve students' results and are willing to work with schools and educators to communicate the business skills needed to prepare students for life after high school. The Business Coalition for Educational Excellence (BCEE) at the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce is one example of how local business communities are helping schools reach their achievement goals. BCEE is supported by many of New Jersey's leading companies, including Prudential Financial, Verizon, State Farm Insurance, and IBM. BCEE aims to increase middle school and high school achievement so that students are prepared to enter college or the workforce (Business Education Network, 2006).

BCEE's programs invest in schools, teachers, and students, and emphasize credible research, quantifiable and proven results, and a high return on corporate philanthropy. BCEE's student-focused program is called the *Learn More Now, Do More Now, Earn More Later* (LDE) Student Credentialing System. It was created in direct response to employer surveys that cited knowledge deficiencies in young adults as a workforce challenge. LDE encourages rigor in middle-school and high-school curricula, builds work ethic, increases computer and financial literacy skills, and is structured around widely accepted educational research. LDE has three components, each of which produces a credential that documents students' progress toward specified criteria, helping them to prepare for college, work, and life. The

“Technology Challenge” component is responsible for boosting student skills in common business software in 50 schools across New Jersey (Business Education Network, 2006, p. 17). Students start the program in the eighth grade and finish in high school as advanced users of word processing, spreadsheet, and presentation software. Employers benefit from the program as they can be sure that candidates who complete the program will have skills appropriate to their job requirements (Business Education Network, 2006).

Marriott’s partnership with the National Advisory Board of DECA, started in 2005, also focuses on preparing students for college and the workforce. Through the years, Marriott and DECA have worked together to touch thousands of students whose potential is sometimes greater than their means. Features of this fourth business-education partnership include:

- Internship, work study, and co-op outreach efforts connecting thousands of DECA members with Marriott properties across the country
- Sponsorship of DECA’s Hospitality Services Management Team Decision-Making Event, introducing thousands of students to career pathways in hospitality
- Providing scholarships to DECA members who are focused on careers in hospitality
- Removing financial barriers to a college education (Business Education Network, 2006).

The fifth and final initiative is the National Backpack Program, financed and organized by Office Depot. This initiative plays an important role in enhancing the quality of life for needy children and their families. Between 2001 and 2013, Office Depot provided backpacks and school supplies to more than 3 million under-privileged students (Office Depot Foundation, 2014). Office Depot believes that backpack recipients will experience enhanced self-esteem, greater confidence, and improved chances for academic success. The National Backpack Program complements Office Depot’s Back to School business strategies as well as the company’s ongoing support for schools and teachers through its “5% Back to Schools” and

“Star Teacher” programs. The 5% Back program generates millions of dollars in credits that schools may redeem for free school supplies, while the Star Teacher Program provides discounts, networking opportunities, and other resources to thousands of teachers throughout the United States and Canada (Business Education Network, 2006). Corporate actors such as Office Depot are incented to compete, to deliver value to education clients, and to deliver value to governments and society.

Lastly, businesses and education can partner to strengthen the future and the competitiveness of the United States (Menashy, 2013). Frank and Smith (2003) purport that those business partnerships with schools whether consultative, contributory, operational or collaborative, often improve relationships between diverse groups—they can become a powerful vehicle to support change and transition (p. 7). There are benefits to both education and society when businesses help to improve schools. The interest shown can help to enrich the public education curriculum by ensuring schools are teaching skills that are required for industry.

Business-education partnerships also exist to support national initiatives that address education reform and link education districts with organisations that serve underprivileged or unmotivated students. The focus should shift, as Cuban (2005) suggests, from the failure of American schools toward a more humble approach when recommending changes. Businesses should target urban and rural schools that need direct assistance and educators should be given more ownership of the reform (p. 177). Pressure from society for businesses to become good corporate citizens has spurred them to focus on improving the nation’s public education system, but even more pressure is needed to drive beneficial business involvement in schools (Molnar, 2008, p. 12). There are two important short-term motives for companies: revenue and profit economies in which to compete and building firms’ future workforces (Porter & Kramer, 2011). Firms must, in the words of Justin van Fleet, “realize how a better-educated society benefits both the global community and the business community” (van Fleet, 2011, p. 3). The country’s ability to adequately

bring most students to the STEM table is and should be a valuable business-education partnership focus. This focus is necessary if STEM is to become one of the country's greatest strengths.

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