

Business Alliances

improve career awareness

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By Megan E. Kirkpatrick and Christopher L. Droessler

PREPARING EVERY STUDENT TO MAKE KNOWLEDGEABLE CAREER CHOICES

through academic rigor and work-based learning experiences requires a systematic, comprehensive and community-wide effort. Schools cannot truly prepare their students for productive and rewarding careers in an academic vacuum. Engaging business and community leaders, who may someday hire the students, is essential to building a thriving, productive community. Educators teach the curriculum, but business volunteers make it relevant.

Rich History

More than 13 years ago, a handful of business leaders approached the Wake County Public School system in Raleigh, North Carolina, with the idea that a collaborative partnership be established to improve workforce development. They sought a way to infuse the curriculum with relevant and realistic career experiences that enhance it, and provide additional learning opportunities for both students and educators.

They hoped that this collaborative partnership would lead to better prepared entry-level employees who understand the requirements necessary to be competitive in today's global workforce. Today the community is reaping the benefits of what has become a mature, sustaining, collaborative partnership between the business community and education in a program called the Business Alliance Initiative. The life experience and career expertise that the business volunteers provide is priceless. When recruited, they are asked to donate the priceless gift of time and talent. The initiative's intent is not to approach businesses with an outstretched hand looking for money or equipment, but rather to seek out their life experiences and business contacts to help improve

career awareness for all students and educators.

Business Alliances

Business alliances bring local business leaders from the public and private sectors into the schools to collaborate with students, teachers, administrators and postsecondary educators. The networking ability of our business leaders allows the alliance initiative to tap into an extensive resource of talented individuals to which students would not otherwise have access. The mission of each business alliance is to unite the endeavors of the school and area business partners to mutually benefit students, and the community, through collaborative activities that emphasize and nurture both the value of education, and the relationship between education and career opportunities. Business Alliance activities or projects might include:

- Career fairs.
- Practice job interviews.
- Graduation project mentors.
- Classroom speakers.
- Resume reviews.
- The character component in the hiring process.
- Business ethics discussions.
- Business site tours.
- Internship and apprenticeship hosting.
- Job-shadow hosting.
- Subject and language tutoring.
- Dropout prevention.
- Electronic mentoring.

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The Great Xplorations Career Fair offers students opportunities to network.

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The master career event calendar can be found online at www.wcpss.net/school_to_career/calendar.

Growing Program

As the Business Alliance Initiative started to gain acceptance and grow within the school system, a liaison between the school system and the business community was created. Requiring a business background, the Business Alliance coordinator's role is to coordinate the initiative for the entire school system, while providing advice and guidance to each alliance. Currently there are 38 business alliances in Wake County. This includes approximately 500 business leaders working with the school system on a continual basis (hundreds of others help as needed or when they are available). Some alliances function independently, associated with a single school, while others operate in a combined structure working with multiple schools. Each alliance has the flexibility to determine the projects and events to best support the specific needs of their school and community. The school-based business alliances meet monthly as they work to complete the career development projects they have selected for the year. The school system's commitment to business alliances is evident by the funding of a full-time career development coordinator or facilitator (CDC or CDF) at each middle and high school. One role of the

CDC is to utilize the expertise of the business volunteers to ensure relevant career programs.

Strategic Planning

Each fall, school-based business alliances engage in a yearly cycle of strategic planning to ensure that alliance activities are aligned with their School Improvement Plan (SIP). The alliance then develops a SAP, which addresses what the business alliance chooses to do to support the SIP. At the end of each school year, each business alliance evaluates the work they have done in support of their SAP and submits their data to the school system's Business Alliance coordinator for review, evaluation and compilation. Alliance plans should incorporate state and national programs—such as The Center for International Understanding, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and Future-Ready student objectives—to be sure that globalization concepts needed for success in the workforce are included. Character education, and its immense importance in the hiring process, is also a key component of career activities.

Effective Alliances

Time and experience has taught the school system many lessons in creating and sustaining successful school-based business alliances.



Although flexibility is inherent in the alliance model, there are essential components that must be part of each alliance:

- Principal's leadership and commitment to the alliance concept.
- Principal's, or designate's, attendance at alliance meetings.
- Dedicated career development coordinator or facilitator.
- PTA liaison attendance.
- Student representatives.
- Meetings run by a business volunteer.
- Action and goal-oriented business alliance members.
- Regular attendance at alliance meetings.
- Alliance improvement based on SAP results.
- Organized one-hour meetings ensuring focus, involvement and sustainability.
- Recognition and awards to thank the volunteers.
- A focus on a few activities that are done well.
- Principal and CDC guide the alliance to meet school objectives.
- Plans are kept flexible.

Formal recognition of volunteers' work can be crucial to their retention. Including the company name and logo on Web and printed materials can give the business a sense of benefit from participation. Writing a thank-you letter to the volunteer or the volunteer's supervisor can go a long way. Wake County recognizes several volunteers each year who have exceeded volunteer expectations. Having the superintendent present the awards at an annual volunteer celebration shows the appreciation of the school system. Business Alliances must continuously market their program. This includes reinforcing the benefits of the initiative to the school staff and informing the press about newsworthy alliance events in order to bring public attention to the program. In addition to publicly acknowledging volunteer participation, principals enjoy reading positive stories about their school. Each Business Alliance has a Web site to explain and promote its work. These Web sites keep the school staff and community informed of business alliance activities.

The Results

After 13 years, the highly successful Business Alliance Initiative boasts more than 500 business alliance members with countless additional partners helping with career events. This initiative has created a wealth of Web site resources, and a formalized

strategic planning tool, used by each of the 59 middle and high schools to plan and evaluate the year's career activities and events. In addition to school-based events, all alliances join forces annually to make the two countywide career exploration events a reality. Great Xplorations (www.wcpss.net/school_to_career/great_xplorations) is a career fair for 2,500 eighth-through 10th-grade students. More than 150 businesses set up displays to discuss careers with the students. Xtreme Beginnings (www.wcpss.net/school_to_career/xtreme_beginnings) is a career development event for approximately 600 10th- through 12th-grade students.

EVERY COMMUNITY, LARGE OR SMALL, URBAN OR RURAL, HAS COMMUNITY LEADERS INTERESTED IN BEING INVOLVED WITH THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM TO ENSURE THAT QUALIFIED FUTURE EMPLOYEES WILL BE AVAILABLE TO THEM.

This event recruits 200 adults from the community to provide career development through roundtable discussions, practice job interviews, postsecondary education information, and an employment fair for students considering direct-to-work options after graduation. Business Alliances provide the relevancy to the curriculum by helping students understand the connections between school and career. They forge much needed relationships that can prove to be crucial when trying to get that first job. The alliances also encourage rigor by explaining the educational requirements for employment in their career pathway, and stressing that a life-long commitment to education is essential in the job market.

Program Replication

Every community, large or small, urban or rural, has community leaders interested in being involved with the educational system to ensure that qualified future employees will be available to them. The design of the Business Alliance Initiative allows for flexibility from school to school, with each alliance designing its own program based on the specific needs of its school and community. Wake County is extremely fortunate to have had such forward-thinking business leaders who were the catalyst of this initiative more than a decade ago. Schools have a collaborative partnership with area businesses that has created an innovative and sustainable initiative that can be replicated in any part of the country, with any size school district. In support of all students, this initiative addresses the postsecondary educational needs of a diverse group ranging from college-bound to those entering the world of work directly after graduation. For more information, visit www.wcpss.net/school_to_career. ■