

UNIVERSITY/URBAN SCHOOLS NATIONAL TASK FORCE CONFERENCE ON

SCHOOL/COLLEGE/BUSINESS PARTNERSHIPS

FORMATION OF PARTNERSHIPS FROM THE BUSINESS PERSPECTIVE

PRIVATE SECTOR SUPPORT FOR EDUCATION

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Let us begin by looking back five years. 1983 was not a particularly promising year for public education. A Nation At Risk had just been published and had been - somewhat unexpectedly - the subject of extraordinary public attention. At first, however, no-one was certain if we were on the threshold of a major recommitment to public education or if the report was more on the order of a last hurrah.

There was good reason for concern. We had just come through a major recession. Reaganomics had taken hold of the federal budget process. Dramatic cuts were occurring in both taxes and spending, with the promise of more to come. Government agencies and nonprofit organizations that were involved in such areas as education, health, housing and nutrition were trying to figure out how to stretch increasingly limited dollars to meet rapidly growing needs.

As a nation, we seemed poised to turn our back on 50 years of history. Programs that made a difference in peoples' lives clearly were out of favor -- especially if they cost tax dollars. And the national debate, to the extent one existed, centered not on how best to help people and institutions in need, but why we should be involved at all.

The situation has changed somewhat now. Indeed, some trends may be reversing themselves. Our economy has shown steady and solid improvement. Unemployment rates have declined although poverty rates have remained discouragingly high. Federal funding is not what it should be, but the worst of the budget cuts are over. There are signs the public once again is accepting the

idea that government can be a positive force in peoples' lives. And A Nation At Risk, instead of being the burial of public education, has turned out to be a new beginning of sorts, a triggering point for vital national efforts to improve the quality of pre-collegiate education.

Within a surprisingly short period of time, virtually every aspect of public education has been the subject of serious inquiry. The objective has not been to trash our public schools or to simply gather data; it has been to find ways to improve public school systems. The whole system has been examined -- the curriculum, the problems teachers face, the classroom environment, the needs of minority and disadvantaged children, the role of community groups, administrative and management issues, even the physical condition of school buildings themselves.

However, despite some positive outward signs, it is not clear that public education has yet achieved the political and social support necessary to sustain it in the years ahead. If the education community fails to capitalize fully on the current window of opportunity, it may find itself in a much more difficult position four or five years from now.

An important example is the role that the private sector has been playing in public education.

The involvement of the private sector in public education during the late 1970s and the early 1980s was an important development.

Business had been involved with higher education for years. But except for placing an occasional corporate executive on a

school board or in short term management assignments, we had steered clear of elementary and secondary school education. We knew public schools were important. We just thought someone else should worry about them. The connection between the corporation and the public school was just too tenuous and too indirect. And the controversies which had beset the public schools - such as busing, teacher strikes, competition with private religious schools - were hardly an inducement to business involvement.

Somewhere along the line, though, in the midst of all the growing concern about international competitiveness, the national economy, adult illiteracy, and our future work force, the business community began to realize it did in fact have an important stake in the future of our public schools. The fact that many CEOs, myself included, were products of the public schools, didn't hurt.

Indeed, the key ingredient of most early successful school business partnerships was the personal participation of executives and employees on a regular basis -- not all of them, but enough to convey the message that this was not a haphazard or trivial effort. And enough so that the business community learned from their experience as well.

New types of corporate involvement and support of public education have emerged as a result: community-wide coalitions that seek specific program and management objectives; advocacy groups that lobby in Washington, state capitols and city hall on behalf of established education programs that work and for new ideas that deserve to be tested. The more the business community

became involved, the more it learned about the strengths and weaknesses of each type of activity.

In addition, the business community arrived at some conclusions about the roles it could and could not play in public education.

The concept of public-private partnerships may have come into vogue when major cutbacks started to occur in government programs. But the business community understood very quickly that it was not in a position to assume the responsibilities of government. The business community does not have the financial, administrative or political capacities to develop and operate public school systems. Even if it did, it wouldn't be a good idea. Who wants the education of our children to flourish or wane dependent upon whether corporate profits are rising or falling? Or whether a certain product or service becomes a major success?

With respect to the future of school business partnerships, it is important not to take the successes of the recent past too much for granted. In any organized activity, particularly one which is new and innovative and creates a lot of excitement and publicity for the participants, there comes a point when the parties start to lose interest. Yesterday's innovation becomes today's routine. You get tired and bored. Nobody is paying much attention anymore. You don't hear the praise you once did. The support system that fueled the early interest of the participants starts to fall away. Your motivation begins to evaporate. Inertia begins to set in.

I think there are some early warning signs that this is beginning to happen to the American corporation with respect to public education. The more I talk with business colleagues about various public policy issues and corporate social responsibility programs, the more it seems that the American corporation is turning inward. It's as if they are saying: We did our job for five years. Now leave us alone so we can get back to giving our business all our attention.

A second source of concern is the changing structure of American business. In a very basic sense, it no longer is operating as it used to.

When corporations became involved in public education, they did so largely because they sensed they had some important ties to local communities, ties worth building, ties worth maintaining. After all, these were the communities where they were located and the public schools were an important ingredient in the quality of community well-being.

But the growth of conglomerates, mergers, acquisitions and absentee ownership are making it difficult to sustain many ties between corporate America and local communities. Convincing industry that its own self-interest lies in well-educated kids who live in its own back yard is a much tougher sell when the corporate headquarters is 1,000 miles away and the vision of the future is increasingly seen in 90 day cycles.

These two problems -- the five-year slump and the impact of changing corporate profiles on community ties -- are important to consider not because public education is about to imminently lose the private sector support it has worked so hard to maintain, or

because the private sector wants out. Rather, it is important to consider because we need to understand, as clearly and specifically as possible, the business environment in which we are working and the changes that are occurring within that environment. Otherwise, we will be acting on a set of assumptions that may not even exist or which, if they do, may be irrelevant.

The support generated during the last several years will not disappear or dissipate easily. But that's not the problem public education advocates face. Our problem is that we need to further strengthen and expand the ties between business and the public schools. And in order to do this, the education community cannot take too much for granted. Yesterday's corporate concern is not an automatic guarantee of the public school's place on tomorrow's corporate agenda.

The days when the private sector would come to the schools are pretty much over. Now the schools and their supporters may have to seek out the private sector.

Educators will have to persuasively document and demonstrate that business has a direct stake in public education.

Educators will have to describe the ways in which our economic future will be determined by what happens in our public schools.

Educators have to convince business that this is one issue in which it cannot afford to be uninvolved.

And educators will have to demonstrate success.

We have done reasonably well on the first three factors, all of which are closely interrelated. It is this fourth factor,

however - the success issue - which may be the most important issue for the future.

If educators want business to stay involved - indeed if we want to keep public support for the educational reform movement - then we will have to demonstrate that we have a product worth investing in. Many businessmen, indeed many citizens, still cling to a view of public schools as a tired old institution that hasn't changed for 25 years and won't change for at least another 25.

This is the wrong time for school bureaucracies to hunker down, to resist change. Change is opportunity, and the opportunity to change won't last forever. The failure to implement changes in the way our schools are managed could stall the education reform movement and ultimately doom it. And cycles of interest are such that it will be very difficult to renew interest in public education for a long time afterwards.

I am not predicting doom and gloom; I am only expressing a healthy reminder of the stakes that are involved. In fact, for the most part, I remain pleasantly upbeat about the persistence, breadth and growing sophistication of the education reform movement.

The latest manifestation of my optimism is the report issued late last year by the Committee for Economic Development on the educational needs of disadvantaged children.

"This nation," the CED report says, "cannot continue to compete and prosper in the global arena when more than one-fifth of our children live in poverty and a third grow up in ignorance. The nation can ill afford such an egregious waste of human

resources. Allowing this to continue will not only impoverish these children, it will impoverish our nation -- culturally, politically, economically."

This is a remarkable report, both because of the message and because of the messenger. It recognizes the importance of viewing education not as an isolated phenomenon, but as a process that integrates and builds upon all we have learned about human growth and development. And in calling once again for the business community to become a "driving force" for the changes it recommends, the CED reaffirms its earlier position that the economic future of our communities and our nation demands that business become involved in public education.

Marching orders about the overriding importance of public education have thus penetrated to the highest levels of corporate America. Our job is to assure that this critical message is disseminated as widely as possible and that its recommendations don't just sit on the shelf.