

## DEFINING THE ISSUES: PUBLIC SCHOOL/PRIVATE SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS

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The ubiquitous partnership. It has emerged from nondescript community education texts and training manuals to whole issues of scholarly journals. Public school liaisons with business, industry, and other non-school entities have been formed in small communities and major cities throughout the United States. They work. They provide experiences otherwise unavailable to children and youth, as J. Douglas Holladay persuasively noted in *Community Education Today*,<sup>1</sup> along with many educators in a recent *Kappan* devoted to partnerships. And, as Robert Cole shared in the foreword to the *Kappan*,<sup>2</sup> we like the idea of partnerships, too. Yet our basic concerns remain largely unaddressed, concerns which have more to do with looking carefully at the implications of such partnerships — philosophically and operationally — not whether or not they “work.” We will reiterate several questions we have posed elsewhere.<sup>3</sup>

### Suitability of Specific Business and Industry

First, is it important to distinguish entities which model behaviors or policies consistent with what we would want to be valued or modeled by students in public schools? Outside of a safe environment which provides meaningful learning experiences, does it really make a difference to children and youth and to the quality of that experience if the sponsor of funds, expertise, or resources is an arts council or a multinational corporation which sells inferior baby formula to Third World nations? We found little in the literature which calls into question these distinctions — or even the need to. In addition to a well-constructed needs assessment and thoughtful goal setting,<sup>4</sup> the “how-to” sequence of building partnerships might include in an initial step, and revisited thereafter, criteria educational decisionmakers devise for building partnerships. Not who or what is eligible in light of existing needs, but rather who or what *should* be eligible is one important question. Anyone with the time, money, and commitment? What activities, liaisons, or products of a business or industry would prohibit a partnership, if any? Who decides what? And

in the asking of such questions, are we willing to answer to bankrupt schools the reasons for disassociations with certain businesses or industries? If we wouldn't think of accepting Birch money for use in our schools, can we accept a partnership with an entity with explicit far-right leadership? If we wouldn't accept directly Playboy Foundation money for use in our schools, can we accept a partnership with an establishment which displays exploitative publications? “Excessive questions,” a colleague has charged. Perhaps. And if we begin to ask these kinds of questions, what is to prevent vigilantism from emerging? Images appear of self-righteous educators opening closets, looking under rocks, and peering into the musty attics of non-school settings in the partnership planning process. Yet I must believe these are important questions to ask.

### Identification of Agendas

Danzberger and Usdan<sup>5</sup> note in their description of Atlanta partnerships that “partnerships with the private sector are . . . likely to be more successful when the arrangements allow the business volunteers to meet some of their own goals.”<sup>6</sup> When put in that context, decisionmakers would be wise to scan above, beyond, behind, and below partnership plans submitted by businesses and industries for subtle or overt forms of advertising or promotion. Bernstein would argue further that “of late, all too many of these partnerships have become unsuccessful attempts at mutual exploitation . . . students are becoming victims of a poor bargain struck between school leaders who hunger for the approval of high-status community leaders and business leaders who want narrowly-trained, cheap labor.”<sup>7</sup>

In what is now viewed as a classic essay on the covert in public education, Apple<sup>8</sup> addresses the issue of agendas. He describes rules which govern schools: the *basic* rules, or broad parameters in which action can take place, and the *preference* rules, or the choices one has *within* those parameters. By establishing linkages with certain non-school entities, it can be argued that students

are tacitly learning and internalizing identifiable social, economic, and political norms very similar to what Philip Jackson described as the hidden curriculum in public school settings. If this is the case, choices, but not parameters, are enlarged. Apple argues: Students in most schools and in urban centers in particular are presented with a view that serves to legitimate the existing social order since change, conflict, and man (sic) as creator as well as receiver of values and institutions are systematically neglected . . . these meaning structures are obligatory. Students receive them from persons who are "significant others" in their lives, through their teachers, other role models in books and elsewhere. To change this situation, students' perceptions of to whom they are to look as holders of "expert knowledge" must be radically altered.<sup>9</sup>

If the holders of this "expert knowledge" — many from the military/medical/corporate/industrial complex — are systematically perpetuating and protecting the existing social, economic, and political order, our dilemma as educators is the extent to which we as brokers of educational experiences want to perpetuate and protect the interests of some of these entities. Balancing education's identification with the schools' maintenance functions with its potential to gravitate toward a more radical social change position involves some very knotty questions. Apple quite accurately reminds us that "as an act of influence, education is also an inherently political act;"<sup>10</sup> the reader is referred to Reed's essay in *Community Education Journal*<sup>11</sup> for a discussion of the ambiguous political nature of education in general, community education in particular.

What exactly are some of the partnership tradeoffs? When educators can't get what they need — adequate personnel, curriculum or instructional materials, money for learning outside the classroom — it is no wonder that they gleefully and unabashedly take what is offered, regardless of the source. But if we pause to consider possible long-term effects of linking public schools and certain businesses and industries, the scenario might not be as rosy as it initially appears, the price being the potential compromise of the character and goals of public schools, the commercialization of learning, and the exploitation of children and youth.

Maxine Greene has been imploring us for many years to think about what we're doing. In the long term, the desirability of any given partnership might be better viewed in the light of Bernstein's following remarks: We can no longer afford educational fads in the United States. The time has come to stop shopping for miracles and start working with simple things that we know are good: giving students more to read in better books, allocating enough time and money to teach writing,

finding better ways to teach mathematics, getting serious about foreign languages in elementary school, devising a science curriculum for non-specialists, and infusing the entire program with activities that cause students to think.<sup>12</sup>

And in the final analysis, only to the extent that partnerships can foster these ends should we examine their proposed benefits.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Holladay, J.D. "Adopt-a-School: The Time is Right," in *Community Education Today*, 1984, pg. 4.

<sup>2</sup>Cole, R.W. "The Editor's Page," in *Phi Delta Kappan*, 65, 1984, pg. 378.

<sup>3</sup>Wear, D. and D. Cook. "Public Schools and the Private Sector: Taking a Closer Look," in *Community Education Journal*, 11 (3), 1984, pp. 22-24.

<sup>4</sup>Merenda, D.W. and M. Hunt. *Creating and Managing a Corporate School Volunteer Program*, Alexandria, Virginia: National School Volunteer Programs, 1983.

<sup>5</sup>Danzberger, J.P. and M. Usdan. "Building Partnerships: The Atlanta Experience," in *Phi Delta Kappan*, 65, 1984, pg. 396.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>Bernstein, H.T. "The Information Society: Byting the Hand that Feeds You," in *Phi Delta Kappan*, 61, 1983, pg. 109.

<sup>8</sup>Apple, M.W. "The Hidden Curriculum and the Nature of Conflict," in W. Pinar, ed., *Curriculum Theorizing: The Reconceptualists*, Berkeley: McCutchan, 1975, pg. 114.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup>Reed, H. "Maintenance or Social Change?" in *Community Education Journal*, 9 (4), 1982, pp. 5-6.

<sup>12</sup>Bernstein, *op. cit.*

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