Business involvement in schools is not new, but some people are concerned about the commercialism inherent in many partnerships. New guidelines help schools gain resources without selling out.

The Funding Challenge

“Commercial Interests Name Buildings, Sell Products in Public Schools,” a recent headline declared, capturing an unwelcome aspect of the influence business partnerships can have on public education. Business involvement in schools is increasing according to the Fifth Annual Report on Trends in Schoolhouse Commercialism, the 34th Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the public’s attitudes toward public schools. The report identifies lack of funding as the number one problem facing local schools and recognizes that many principals find themselves in the middle of a dilemma as they try to provide strong educational programs that meet the academic needs of all students with limited and often inadequate resources.

How can stakeholders and businesses help meet this funding challenge while demonstrating awareness and respect for the attitudes of the local school community? The Guiding Principles for Business and School Partnerships, developed by the Council for Corporate and School Partnerships, may provide some help.

Across the nation, the quality of virtually every community is defined by the strength of its public schools. Although the most important stakeholders in these schools are students and their parents, local employers and other businesses have a vested interest in the success of schools as well. Acting on both the need to enhance the quality of education and the desire to be a good neighbor, businesses have for decades embarked on arrangements that involved direct donations, contributions toward instructional programs and activities, volunteer projects, and mentoring. In addition, such initiatives as product sales, direct and indirect advertising, and sponsorships have provided benefits to businesses and schools alike. Now, challenged by budget shortfalls in the face of efforts to have all students meet high standards and recognizing the link between good schools, student achievement, and a prosperous economy, schools and businesses are more ambitious and creative than ever in their efforts to work together.

Because most business and school partnerships are devel-
oped without specific rules or guidelines, the relationships between educators and business leaders have sometimes been scrutinized. Some advocacy groups are critical of commercialism in the school environment, arguing that companies are involved with schools for publicity and marketing benefits alone. At the local level, in particular, educators are often torn between competing points of view regarding commercialism in schools. When considering such issues as the sale of products and services, advertising on school grounds, and direct marketing to students, local school and community leaders should make decisions based on careful consideration of the needs and values of the students, schools, and local communities.

The Council for Corporate and School Partnerships, established in March 2001, provides guidance for schools and businesses as they address the funding versus commercialism dilemma. The council serves as a forum for the exchange of information, expertise, and ideas to ensure that the partnerships between businesses and schools achieve their full potential for meeting educational objectives. To
better understand the dynamics of successful partnerships, the council conducted significant outreach and opinion research. This research included interviews with educators from urban, suburban, and rural school districts and executives from large, medium, and small businesses. The council used key findings from these interviews to develop Guiding Principles for Business and School Partnerships. This report incorporates information about successful business and school relationships and focuses on eight guiding principles that illustrate the characteristics of effective partnerships. The four topic areas (Foundation, Implementation, Continuity, and Evaluation), and eight guiding goals are:

**The Foundation: Developing the Partnership’s Core Values**

**GOAL 1:** School and business partnerships must be built on shared values and philosophies:
- Begin with an open and frank discussion about values, goals, and needs
- Respect and reflect the culture and goals of both the education and business partners
- Support the core mission of the school
- Bolster the academic, social, and physical well-being of students
- Complement the social values and goals of the school, business partner, and the community.

**GOAL 2:** Partnerships should be defined by mutually beneficial goals and objectives:
- Clearly define short- and long-range goals
- Focus on collaboration to determine activities that meet the goals of all involved
- Partnership goals and objectives should be aligned with educational goals for students
- Partnerships should include written descriptions of roles and responsibility, accountability measures, and guidelines for responsibilities of educators and business employees
- Partnerships should include training for all key personnel.

**GOAL 5:** Partnerships should define specific, measurable outcomes:
- Partnerships should be guided by collaborative agreement on outcomes, benchmarks, and measures of progress.

**Implementation: Translating Values Into Action**

**GOAL 3:** Partnership activities should be integrated into the school and business cultures:
- Partners should communicate frequently to respect and understand each other’s cultures
- Partnerships should provide students, teachers, and business employees with opportunities to interact at school, community, and business sites.

**GOAL 4:** Partnerships should be driven by a clear management process and structure:
- Each school and school district should have a point person to manage partnerships to ensure quality and alignment with educational goals for students
- Partnerships should include written descriptions of roles and responsibility, accountability measures, and guidelines for responsibilities of educators and business employees
- Partnerships should include training for all key personnel.

**GOAL 6:** Partnerships should have support at the highest level within the business and the school and concurrence at all levels:
- Superintendents, principals, school boards, CEOs, and managers should articulate and demonstrate support for the partnership internally and externally
- Partnerships should be explicitly supported by teachers, employees, and other constituents
- Communities should have the opportunity to review and contribute to partnerships.

**GOAL 7:** Partnerships should include detailed internal and external communications plans that clearly illustrate expectations of all parties:
- Partners should communicate regularly about intended and actual outcomes of all activities
- Communication about partnerships should allow opportunities for private and public recognition of both parties.

**Continuity: Sustaining the Partnership Over Time**

**GOAL 8:** Partnerships should be developed with clear definitions of success for all partners:
- Measures for success should be established at the outset of the partnership
- Partnerships should be evaluated on a regular agreed-upon basis
- Evaluation should include collection and analysis of information to determine accomplishments, strengths, and weaknesses of the partnership.

The council firmly believes that all decisions related to establishing or developing school-business partnerships should be made in collaboration with local school officials and school boards. When considering partnerships that
As principal of an urban high school in downtown Colorado Springs, CO, I had the opportunity to see firsthand the enormous benefits of strong school and business partnerships. The more than 100 business partners at William J. Palmer High School played a key role in the renaissance of the school. School and business partnerships included funds, incentive programs, guest speakers, mentors, internships, and tutors. With the support from our business community, as well as the involvement of our students, parents, staff members, and alumni, we saw the image of Palmer change dramatically from a school with high dropout rates, declining enrollment, and a poor reputation to one of the top schools in the region. In times of very limited resources, we were able to keep programs in place that had a positive effect on student achievement: Our dropout rate decreased, our graduation rate increased, discipline referrals declined, and our overall enrollment increased.

Not only was the business community involved with our school, but also we were involved with the business community. As principal, I worked with Colorado Springs Downtown Inc., a consortium of Colorado Springs businesses that were committed to improving the downtown environment. The Denver Post stated that Palmer’s involvement with the business community played an important role in the economic renaissance of downtown Colorado Springs.

Increased student achievement occurs when the entire school community cooperates and takes action toward achieving rigorous standards. We saw tremendous positive change at our school, but we also had some partnerships that did not work out as well as anticipated. I feel that the Guiding Principles for Business and School Partnerships developed by the Council for Corporate and School Partnerships would have been an asset for us, a tool that would have helped us build even stronger partnerships focused on achieving our academic mission.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) establishes goals and criteria for all schools across the United States. Adequate funding to support programs that positively affect student achievement is necessary for schools to meet the challenges of ESEA, but in reality, the vast majority of public schools in our country are struggling to meet the needs of all students with the resources they have available. The Guiding Principles for Business and School Partnerships may provide schools and businesses with strategies that will allow them to enhance the quality and variety of programs available to students, programs that can make a difference in academic achievement and student success.