

Keeping Partners and Building Stronger Ties

Your best partner is your current partner – look for ways to retain them and strengthen the relationship

Partnerships are powerful: They bring excitement and relevance to the classroom, and provide real-world connections to students preparing to enter the field of their choice. The downside, however, is that they're not necessarily easy to establish. It can take time – a lot of time – to find and engage new partners in your work. That's why retaining your current partners, and increasing the size and scope of your working relationship, is such an important topic. Current partners are already bought-in, and easy to re-engage as long as you have a positive relationship. But how do you maintain that positive relationship, and how do you engage them more deeply in your work?

There are always things out of your control, of course; for example, you can't do anything about a business partner that moves its facilities to another state. But outside of rare situations like that, the good news is that you have a great deal of control over the factors that influence whether, and how, your partners will work with you in the future. Read on to see how you can retain your partners and build on your past successes.

HOW DO PARTNERSHIPS END?

Unfortunately, there's been very little research conducted on the factors behind successful partnership programs, even within areas like career and technical education (CTE) where partnerships are so important to the student experience. However, a 2010 survey of district-level partnership directors by DeHavilland Associates, coupled with anecdotal reports from veteran CTE educators, point to the most common reasons that businesses walk away from a partnership role. (See the table at the end of page 2 for a summary of the top 10 reasons that partnerships end.)

Some of the most common factors include:

Failing to make partnerships a priority

Teaching is more than a full-time job: The typical educator’s day is packed with classroom time, lesson preparation, staff meetings, and grading student work. Because partnerships are not officially mandated, it’s easy for those activities to take second chair to the work you’re required to do. As a result, you might not feel you can invest the time in fully planning activities, preparing students, or fully evaluating outcomes. And when you treat partnerships as a low priority, your industry partners are likely to start eyeing the door.

Unrealistic expectations

There’s a natural feeling of wanting to “change the world” when you start a partnership; however, experienced partnership leaders temper their expectations based on the resources available, including not only funding but also the time and attention of school and community stakeholders. Partnership activities can produce great things, but those great things are more often than not proportionate with the investment being made in the activities.

Not meeting your partner’s needs

As discussed in the first guide in this series (“What Your Partners Want”), good partnerships take the needs of every stakeholder into account, including student needs as well as business needs and educator needs. If you’ve set up a partnership that doesn’t meet your partner’s needs – if they’re just there to provide resources, and have no say as the how the partnership is designed or what it’s supposed to accomplish – you’ll find that they have little or not sense of ownership in the initiative, and will look for other ways to invest their resources.

Not having a backup plan

One of the most common reasons that partnerships end is that one of the primary contacts, either on the business or education side, changes employment and fails to ensure a smooth transition to a new contact. In too many of these cases, these two parties were the only ones with a real understanding of the goals of the project and the responsibilities of each partner; at a minimum, finding a replacement contact can disrupt the flow of a partnership, and more often than not, that search results in the end of the activity.

Top 10 Reasons Partnerships Fail	
<i>From a 2010 survey of district-based partnership coordinators</i>	
Survey Item	Sometimes/ Frequent/ Very Frequent
Business is no longer operational or experiencing cutbacks	80.7%
School personnel have no time to manage partnerships properly	78.9%
There are no consequences for managing partnerships poorly	69.7%
Transfer or promotion of principal or designated school-based partnership coordinator	64.8%
School did not employ good retention strategies	62.9%
Partnership did not meet partner needs	62.0%
Transfer or promotion of CEO or designated business-site partnership coordinator	60.9%

School did not employ good partnership recognition strategies	60.2%
Partnership did not track activity or outcomes; partner did not see results for their efforts	56.2%
There is not enough district support	46.7%
Business is no longer operational or experiencing cutbacks	80.7%
School personnel have no time to manage partnerships properly	78.9%
There are no consequences for managing partnerships poorly	69.7%

While some of these challenges are easier to address than others, recognizing them and trying to account for them is the first step in improving partner retention.

HOW CAN YOU RETAIN PARTNERS?

There's no magic trick to retaining partners: It's simply a matter of addressing their interests and investing the time and other resources to build an excellent initiative. That doesn't mean it's easy to do necessarily, but if you're willing and able to make that investment, you can expect to see a far greater number of partners staying with you for the long term.

Make the partnership a positive experience

Businesses want to see a professional-level investment being put into their partnerships. That means a few things:

- A positive environment in which to work
- Leaders who understand and support your initiative
- Prompt, concise, and clear responses to questions and concerns
- Proper preparation for activities, including not only activity planning but preparation for students and training (if appropriate) for volunteers

These do require planning, investment (mostly of time) and outreach to school or college leaders, but that effort will pay off in a quality experience for students and partners.

Top 10 Partnership Retention Strategies	
<i>From a 2010 survey of district-based partnership coordinators</i>	
Survey Item	Sometimes/ Effective/ Very Effective
School is a positive environment in which to work/volunteer	97.7%
School recognizes their partners frequently and in a variety of ways	96.6%
Schools and their partners communicate frequently	95.5%
School deals with problems promptly	95.4%
Staff makes it a priority to address partner needs/concerns	94.2%
The principal stays engaged with partnerships	91.9%

Needs of partners have been identified and are addressed	91.8%
Partners know how they impact student achievement	85.2%
Partner volunteers receive training	76.5%
School provides their partners with outcome data on the effectiveness of activities in supporting student achievement	75.0%

Listen to your partner

As noted above, everyone who participates in a partnership initiative – students, staff, and employer partners – needs to realize benefits that are important to them. Take the time to talk with your industry counterpart and find out what it is they want to achieve through their involvement, whether that’s improving their workforce pipelines, building community goodwill, providing employees with rewarding volunteer opportunities, or something else. If you build a partnership that provides your employers with a real return on their investment, you’ll see partners who have a vested interest in participating in your program.

Focus on outcomes

Businesses live and die on data: They care about profit and loss, sales ratios, production statistics, and much more. And they’ll want to see that you share the same interest in measuring outcomes. Look at ways of not only measure student outcomes, but also measuring school, staff, and business partner outcomes based on the priorities you identified when asking about their needs. (See Guide 8, “Building a Data-Driven Partnership,” for specific guidance on approaching this issue.)

Debrief

At the end of a project, sit down with your partner to ask whether their experience was positive and there’s anything you can do better going forward. If things didn’t go well, this can be an opportunity to mend fences and plan for improvements; at worst, you’ll learn what you can do better or differently the next time you approach a partner.

Recognize your partners’ work

Recognition is extremely important, both to show your partners that they’re appreciated as well as to give them credit with audiences that are important to them. This can take any number of forms, such as newsletter announcements, placing their company information (logos, website addresses, etc.) on project materials, recognizing them publicly through press releases, social media accounts, and public events, and even simply saying “thank you” with a letter, certificate, or plaque. While it’s not the only outcome they’ll care about (again, remember to ask), it’s almost always going to be on the list of things that matter to them.

HOW CAN YOU BUILD STRONGER TIES?

Retention is Job One; however, once you’re confident that your partners are invested in your work for the long haul and feel like a real and valued part of your program, you have an opportunity to talk with them about expanding the relationship, whether that means serving more students or increasing the ways in which you work together. There are a few approaches to consider:

Look at the history

If you've been working together for a while, ask them to meet with you for a periodic review of your work together. Do a shared review of the activities, and ask whether there are ways in which you can improve those efforts going forward. Review all available outcomes data, both for student and partner outcomes, and talk about what you can do to create even greater results.

Learn more about their needs

If you've built a mutually beneficial relationship, you've taken the time to find out about the needs they want to meet through their involvement. Revisit that conversation and expand it: Ask for an update on the state of the business and the challenges they're currently facing and, based on the benefits they've received to date, whether there are ways in which you could more fully support their work if you looked at options for expanding your partnership.

Plan collaboratively

If you want your partners to feel ownership of your work (important if you want to strengthen your relationship), they need to feel that they have a voice in planning both the design and intended outcomes of your partnership activities. Give them a seat – an equal seat – at the table as you identify desired outcomes and the ways in which you can achieve those outcomes.

ACTION STEP: QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

As you think about retaining partners and deepening your current industry relationships, ask yourself the following questions:

Retention

- Do I know why my partners want to work with our students? Does the design of the partnership reflect those interests?
- Have I invested the needed resources (particularly time) in building and running the partnership? That includes planning and execution.
- Is my school or college leadership aware of our work together? Is there some way they can express their awareness and support?
- Do I have other contacts at my partner's place of business in case something happens? Are there other educators who are aware of our work and could take over if the need arose?
- Have we developed and signed a written agreement that lays out goals and responsibilities?
- Have I talked with my partner about ways in which we can measure the outcomes that are important to each of us?
- What steps have I taken to engage my partner in the planning process? How am I providing valuable opportunities for us to collaborate?
- Do my partners understand that they are important to us? Do we respond quickly to questions and concerns? Do we revise our efforts based on their feedback?
- Am I doing enough to recognize our partners, both publicly and directly, for their contribution to our program?

Expanding the relationship

- Have I taken the time to sit down with our partners to review our past work together (with a special emphasis on reviewing available outcomes data), reflecting on successes and discussing opportunities for improvement? Have I emphasized the ways in which their feedback has determined what we do, or how it has changed what we do?
- Have I asked them to share more about their interests and needs so we can look for ways to better help them?
- Have I talked to them about deepening our relationship in ways that can help them better address their interests and needs, and invited them to be equal collaborators in the design of new and better initiatives?

ADDENDUM: CROSS-DISTRICT COLLABORATIONS

While collaborating across different stakeholder groups is impactful, collaborating within education can improve efficiency in program management, prevent 'industry fatigue,' and expand options for students within a region. Examples within Colorado of multi-district work-based learning collaborations where educators are the conveners include the following:

- Pikes Peak Business and Education Alliance (PPBEA)- Colorado Springs Region (*See Case Study for details of this partnership*)
- *Northeast Colorado Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness Partnership*
- *Southeastern BOCES*

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide has been developed by Colorado CTE, housed at the Colorado Community College System to help Colorado CTE educators build strong and lasting relationships with employers and other stakeholders. For more information on CTE and other resources available to help you, please visit <http://coloradostateplan.com/>.



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