

Educational Partnerships in Rocky View School Division, Part 1, 3(1)

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Abstract

Educational Partnerships are an important strategy for increasing the authenticity and value of school for our future citizens. In addition to the financial benefits that business-school partnerships often bring to schools, there are a variety of teaching and learning benefits of making links with the community at large. This paper outlines a number of reasons why schools, business, industry, and other agencies in the community should actively pursue educational partnerships, shares examples of successful and valuable educational partnerships in Rocky View School Division, and concludes with an examination of some issues and concerns. In subsequent discussion, Part 2 of this paper, we examine in detail the educational partnerships that have contributed to the success of the Galileo Centre at Banded Peak School in Bragg Creek, Alberta.

Introduction

Educational partnerships are an important strategy for increasing the authenticity of school for our future citizens. Alberta's provincial education system benefits greatly from the many contributions and donations from private industry. It is important to share information about the mutual benefits that educational partnerships offer to students, schools, businesses, and the community at large. Educational partnerships, in the form of business-school partnerships, promote civic responsibility and good citizenship, leadership and volunteer opportunities, and increase social contacts for our students with diverse members of their community, including senior citizens, artists, musicians, business people, university professors, and government employees. Our approach to sharing the story of educational partnerships in Rocky View School Division will be first to discuss the many reasons why schools and businesses should actively pursue business-school partnerships. We then describe how we choose to define and establish school-business partnerships, and report on examples of successful educational partnerships in Rocky View schools. Although there are some issues and concerns to be addressed, our position is that educational partnerships are of benefit to us all.

Why Educational Partnerships?

Educational partnerships enable us to start early with children on the lifelong process of managing one's own learning and work. [Alberta Education](#), the educational ministry for the provincial government, believes that all students should have access to effective career education and counseling at an early age in order to choose career directions and prepare for their post-high school life ([Alberta Education, 1996a](#)). Career education can be delivered in a variety of ways, and approaches should involve close cooperation among parents, students, schools and employers ([Alberta Education, 1996a](#)). [DeBruyn, et al. \(1996\)](#) research on career development demonstrates that children begin to develop lifelong interests that expand to include career choices while in the elementary grades. DeBruyn, et al., (1996) suggested that if educators and parents want children to choose a career from the widest array of choices possible, it is important to offer career-related experiences early in order to help students understand the connection between their interests and talents and their choice of careers.

Educational researchers argue there is a pressing need to evaluate the school's role in educating future citizens ([Goodlad & McMannon, 1997](#)). How often have you heard a student ask, "Why do we have to learn this stuff?" Students and the public increasingly question the legitimacy and relevancy of school, with its fixed curricula. The [Environics Research Group's 1996 Focus Canada Report](#) suggested that Albertans may be losing confidence in the school system's ability to prepare students adequately for either work or post-secondary schooling (Table 1).

**Table 1. The percentage of Albertans
who agreed that high school graduates are ready
for the workplace or post-secondary education.**

Survey Group	Prepared for Workforce	Prepared for Post-secondary Education
High School Students	80%	87%
Public/Parents	40%	63%
Post-secondary instructors	35%	53%
Employers	35%	70%

Students appear to be confident they are adequately prepared for work and/or for post-secondary education. However, parents, instructors, and employers' perceptions of students' readiness for post-high school work or further learning signal a marked lack of confidence. Many educators see the central purpose of school as preparation for university or college. However, [Statistics Canada \(1998\)](#) provides evidence that a majority of students enter the labor force directly after high school. Although educators may not necessarily agree with his outcome, [Levin's \(1995\)](#) surveys of public opinion showed that parents consistently rank preparation for work as an important function for schools. The ability to get a good job is even more important for students, who often see this as the paramount purpose for their schooling. [Levin \(1995\)](#) argued that the changing labor market in Canada has important consequences for schools, and that if present labor trends and fluctuations continue, the legitimacy of school will increasingly be questioned by the public unless there are linkages with work.

[Alberta Education \(1996b\)](#) has worked hard to enhance and strengthen its ties with business, industry, volunteer, and other agencies in the community to meet the needs of students who will make either a school-to-work, or school-to-post-secondary, transition. The following is an excerpt from Alberta Education's published policy on off-campus education and services:

"Since most school staff are more familiar with the professions, career opportunities in the trade, service and technical areas may not receive the same emphasis in career education and counseling activities. This may result in a large number of students taking university preparation programs in high school. When they do not go to university, these students often *default* into the workplace with little preparation for any job. As we move into the *information age*, the *knowledge worker* will be in high demand. All workers, regardless of their career, will require high level employability skills. Students should have the support of parents, educators, government and business in giving them the opportunity to be the very best in any career they choose" ([Alberta Education's](#)) vision of preparing students for "any career students choose." Whether a student has a predisposition for fine arts, or an interest in carpentry, cooking, or physics, educators have an obligation to provide the best educational experience possible for every individual. Educational partnerships can enrich the diversity, breadth, and relevancy of our provincial curricula for all students by bringing the world of work into the classroom, and moving the classroom into the world of work.

In order to assess their success in preparing students for their future roles in society, schools must also measure whether students can actually apply their knowledge and skills to real-world problems and situations ([Levin, 1995](#)). Educational partnerships provide just such opportunities. Originally, work experience programs were targeted at vocational and nonacademic stream students. Increasingly, the public is demanding similar opportunities be made available for all students. This trend has been recognized in postsecondary institutions where cooperative education programs are flourishing. A recent ACCESS survey showed that in 1978/79, 21 post-secondary institutions across Canada had 13,782 students enrolled in cooperative education programs, which increased by 1996/97 to 112 institutions and 62,600 students. The trend towards cooperative education, internship and Youth Entrepreneurship programs shows increased responsiveness to the need for higher education to integrate the practical with the theoretical.

Finally, changing demographics in Canada means there is increased pressure to spend tax dollars other than on education. [David Foot \(1996\)](#), a University of Toronto demographer, described how 1996 was the last year in Canada that there was an increase in kindergarten enrollment. As the fertility rate continues to decrease and life expectancy increases, [Foot \(1996\)](#) predicted that the majority of people will want to see their tax dollars spent elsewhere, rather than on our education systems. School divisions in Alberta have recently been subject to damaging cuts in the provincial education budget and schools must raise money to make up for provincial shortfalls ([Dawson, 1998](#)). Changing times require creative ways of dealing with decreased national and provincial spending on education, and educational partnerships have long been recognized as an important strategy for dealing with decreased resources in education.

School-Business Partnerships in Rocky View School Division

As Canada's economic future becomes more directly linked to global competitiveness and the education and training of our young people, educational partnerships are becoming more important than ever. Schools can no longer work in isolation and ensure a successful experience for today's students. Through educational partnership programs, students can learn about the realities of work and develop some of the leadership and citizenship skills necessary to make the successful transition from school to their chosen career. Subsequent sections of this paper report on school-business partnerships in [Rocky View School Division \(RVSD\)](#), the sixth largest school division in Alberta.

Characteristics of Educational Partnerships

Partnerships can vary considerably, and range from single-school/single-business partnerships, to broad collaborations that involve school boards, colleges and universities. [RVSD](#) believes the keys to a successful school-business partnership are enthusiasm, commitment to shared goals, and good communication. Partners must commit to the central ingredient of a partnership, which is a direct and measurable learning benefit to students.

Common characteristics of successful educational partnerships include, but are not limited to:

1. Established Divisional Partnership Policy (see [Alberta School Boards Association, 1997](#))

2. Shared knowledge and expertise
3. Joint planning and goal setting ([Canadian Chamber of Commerce, 1992](#); [O'Connor & Allen, 1996](#))
4. Orientation and training sessions for volunteers
5. Consistent evaluation and feedback with participants
6. Employees of both partners are informed about the partnership
7. Continuous improvement of the partnership

[RVSD](#) has invested in many educational partnerships that combine schools and/or businesses in multi-level and multi-faceted collaborations that involve the whole community. For example, NOVA Gas Transmission partners with two [RVSD](#) high schools in Airdrie, Alberta, to enhance career awareness and development, and to promote employability skills and lifelong learning. Another example of a multi-level partnership is that between [RVSD](#) and First Calgary Savings and Credit Union. First Calgary has led the development of resources available to all [RVSD](#) schools. For example, the "Grandparent Volunteer Program" (jointly developed with Calgary Board of Education and Calgary Catholic School District) involves tapping into the love, expertise, time, and energy that seniors have to share with school children ([Craven, Coburn, & Barton, 1996](#)).

Establishing School-Business Partnerships

Educators need to take the lead in the development process, and be creative in establishing partnerships. [RVSD](#) takes the following steps to assist teachers and schools in making partnerships successful joint ventures:

1. Inform colleagues about the potential partnership and assess their interests.
2. Obtain specific commitments and resources.
3. Complete an organization or school profile outlining the needs and expectations of the organization or school. This profile plays an integral role in matching partners.
4. Assign someone to coordinate the partnership by selecting an individual with the ability, interest and enthusiasm needed to ensure success.
5. Involve students in the planning and ongoing discussions about the partnership.
6. Discuss priorities, needs, and interests during initial meetings. Establish a clear direction for the partnership early in the process.
7. Document a short list of priority statements or objectives for the first year of the program.
8. Meet regularly with partners to assess the strength of the program and to maintain constant communication.
9. Perform a formal annual evaluation of the partnership, and use this information for future planning ([Otterbourg & Adams, 1991](#)).

Educators and business representatives should discuss the variety of activities in which they will participate, as well as the mutual benefits of their collaboration. In [O'Connor and Allen's \(1997\) National Overview of Partnership Practice survey](#), respondents indicated that they believe partnerships best benefit their organization by enhancing community linkages, assisting with school-to-work transitions, providing distinct school and business advantages, and improving employee morale.

Successful [RSVD](#) Educational Partnerships

Educational partnerships can yield a variety of learning benefits to students, schools and the community. Appropriately, the largest group of beneficiaries should be the students. However, teachers, educational administrators, and community members also benefit from participation. The following section organizes some specific examples of successful educational partnerships in [RVSD](#) into three sections: 1) Benefits to Students, 2) Benefits to Schools, and 3) Benefits to Business/Community Organizations.

Benefits to Students

1. *Partnerships with business, industry and or community organizations increase student motivation for learning by providing authentic reasons to do good work.*

Business people are not only concerned with students' marks on achievement tests. Through a fine arts partnership with IKON Office Solutions, student artwork is chosen and professionally framed for display in their head office. The work of student artists is celebrated at a yearly reception to which students, their parents and teachers, and IKON employees are invited. The qualitative benefits of this type of partnership become clear when students see their artwork displayed where adults work. When she saw her artwork published on IKON's Christmas cards, one of our grade four students commented, "I must be an important person in the world."

2. *Partnerships can provide enrichment opportunities beyond the school curriculum.*

Through a partnership with Alberta Environmental Protection, a grade five class in Banded Peak School became Bow Habitat Field Station Number 1. The "Fish In Schools (FINS): Raising to Release" program supplied six Alberta classrooms with 100 rainbow trout eggs and equipment to raise trout to the fingerling stage for release. Students shared their learning with others in order to educate the broader community by keeping daily journals about their experiences with the project, creating a web site, conducting tours for parents and other educators and students, making public presentations, and publishing a newsletter for parents. Throughout the project, students accessed experts and specialists from Alberta Environmental Protection, developed confidence presenting their work to adults and other students, and contributed new knowledge to the scientific community.

3. *Partnerships can encourage students to develop a better understanding of the private enterprise system and the community.*

Through partnership programs such as Job Shadowing ([Gladstone, 1996](#)) and Work Experience ([Alberta Education, 1996b](#)), students are given hands-on experience in both the workplace and community settings, and direct contact with career role-models. After job shadowing, one of our students commented: "I found the experience eye opening and wonderful. They were just so happy I was there because they are trying to show what they do for a living. I was formatting disks, I was being treated like an adult, they had total

trust in me." It was very motivating for this student to realize her skills were valued in the adult work environment.

4. *Partnerships can increase awareness of desirable employability skills.*

The Employability Skills Portfolio process currently being used in five [RVSD](#) high schools has benefited hundreds of students. Students complete self-assessment activities based on the [Conference Board of Canada's Employability Skills Profile](#), set skill development goals based on their results, save evidence of their skills and accomplishments, and create a personal portfolio. The portfolios show evidence of students' accomplishments using examples of best writing, math, science, and social studies work, volunteering, sports accomplishments, and part-time employment experience. The employability skills process builds self-esteem, helps students to better understand themselves and their capabilities, and demonstrates the linkages between school and future careers ([Calgary Educational Partnership Foundation, 1996](#)). This process has been published as "[Creating Your Future: An Employability Skills Portfolio](#)" ([Calgary Educational Partnership Foundation, 1996](#)). Four [RVSD](#) high schools are operating successful career resource centres ([Depoe, Hiebert, & Gladstone, 1996](#)) as a result of this program.

Benefits to Schools

1. *Partnerships can provide enriched curriculum, teaching and learning opportunities for entire schools.*

Through an annual Galileo Doctoral Fellowship awarded by the [University of Calgary](#) and funded by the Gallagher Educational Foundation, the Galileo Centre at Banded Peak School benefits from having a full-time doctoral student on-site who offers professional development to teachers, conducts classroom-based research, and acts as a liaison with the Faculty of Education. Both the university and the school have benefited from the rich opportunities for graduate students and faculty to conduct action research in an innovative teaching and learning setting, and from the professional development opportunities.

1. *Through partnerships, teachers can develop a better understanding of current employer expectations.*

The "Teachers in Business Summer Program," offered by oil companies like NOVA and Imperial Oil, provides summer positions to classroom teachers based on proposals to work within the organization. While working in the company, the teacher has the opportunity to identify specific individuals and programs that would best fit with his/her own students and curriculum, as well as to develop authentic images of current work environments. One teacher returned to her school and instituted compulsory computer classes because she realized how integrated computers are in the business environment.

2. *Partnerships provide a new arena for professional development of teachers.*

A Calgary-based technology training firm is offering computer classes for teachers and staff at greatly reduced rates in [RVSD](#) schools. A clear benefit of this partnership is the increased opportunity for teachers to learn technology skills from professionals in the field.

3. *Partnerships provide important marketing opportunities for our schools.*

Public schools have an increased need to showcase what they do, and businesses provide opportunities to share learning results with the community. For example, fine arts exhibitions provided to businesses showcase student work, and in some cases, give employees and students an opportunity to perform music and drama productions together. Work experience and summer employment placements give business people the opportunity to work alongside high school students and develop a better awareness and understanding of the knowledge and skills these young people have to offer their community.

Benefits to Business/Community Organizations

1. *Business and community organizations benefit from partnerships that provide increased visibility and recognition, and enhance their corporate image.*

IKON Office Solutions, along with the University of Calgary, Bloodhounds International Inc., the Gallagher Education Foundation, and [Galileo Centre at Banded Peak School](#) were honored for their business-education partnership with the **1998 Excellence Award in Professional Development** by the Calgary Educational Partnership Foundation. This award recognizes topnotch collaborative work done for the benefit of students. IKON has made a significant financial and human resource commitment to Banded Peak School, providing a high end networked digital imaging system and setting up the school's computer server and network. Two IKON employees are currently working with the school's project teachers on a technology training program to develop student experts who will lead technology integration efforts in the school. Garry Oelke, project manager for IKON professional services in Calgary, says that this partnership with Banded Peak School is "an investment in the future" ([IKONnow, 1998](#)).

2. *Partnerships contribute to a well-trained workforce and the proactive sharing of required employability skills.*

A variety of businesses are funding and supporting student programs such as the [Global Vision Junior Team Canada Trade Missions](#) which provide international travel opportunities for motivated [RVSD](#) students who represent their country and write reports about their experiences. Student benefits include international exposure and experience, and benefits to businesses include helping to train the future work force, sharing their expertise with students, and becoming more aware of the potential and promise of younger citizens.

3. *Partnerships contribute to increased employee satisfaction, morale and teamwork (Bloom, 1995).*

Partnerships can provide opportunities for business people to interact across the hierarchy. Through their involvement in school-business partnerships, employees can demonstrate their skills with diverse groups, including CEOs, vice-presidents, teachers and children.

4. *Partnerships encourage and promote a better understanding of the education system.*

As a result of creating personal connections and relationships through school-business partnerships, business people become more aware of current educational issues, values, and goals, as well as develop productive working and communication relationships with today's youth. Two corporate trainers from IKON Office Solutions, who worked with elementary students to develop computer support skills, expressed admiration and enthusiasm for the students' ability to share their new expertise with IKON employees.

5. *Partnerships provide professional development opportunities for employees.*

Teachers can offer lunch-hour seminars to businesses on a variety of topics, such as: the new science curriculum, the new technology framework, presentation and teaching skills, and how to get the most out of a parent-teacher interview. Businesses can benefit from accessing the rich knowledge, skills, and resources that are resident in our schools and teaching faculty.

6. *Partnerships can provide increased access to school facilities and resources.*

Business meetings held in a partner's school ensure that participants are away from their phone and other distractions. Business partners might use the school gym for team building exercises, and in some cases, students in food preparation programs prepare their meals and snacks.

Issues and Dilemmas

Educational partnerships are a mutually beneficial strategy for providing students and business people with increased learning opportunities, dealing with reduced educational funding, and addressing a changing Canadian economy and employment situation. Although there can be a variety of mutual benefits from school-business partnerships, there are also some issues and concerns that must be addressed.

In order to increase the chances of a successful partnership, those who initiate the school-business link will have to convince a critical mass of people to become involved in order for the partnership to move beyond the pilot stage and gain momentum. Educators and industry partners already have very full schedules, and there is a need to convince those involved of the value for time investment. Formal evaluations, strategies for tracking observable and peripheral learning benefits, and other measures of successful outcomes will help to convince skeptics who are hesitant about forming greater links with business.

When entering into a school-business partnership, it is important to reassure and remind educators and business people of the importance and value of their distinct roles in order to build a climate of trust. Both parties need to accept and value the school-business approach to providing extended learning experiences in order for the partnership to flourish. Business people need to respect the knowledge and experience that educators bring to the school-to-work experience, and educators need to be open to and consider diverse business perspectives about the goals of education.

Partnerships are often created and operated through the efforts of highly committed individuals, and the results are gratifyingly positive ([Bloom, 1995](#)). However, a school-business partnership can be at risk if its sustainability depends on person-to-person relationships. Where an individual educator or business person has been the driving force in creating and sustaining a partnership, that individual's departure can severely undermine the effectiveness of the entire program ([Bloom, 1995](#)). There is increased recognition of the importance and need to institutionalize partnerships to reduce this risk. One of the ways that [RVSD](#) has chosen to address this risk, as well as deal with the huge workload of creating and organizing partnerships, was to create a Partnerships Coordinator position in order to train others in partnership development. As part of this mandate, the Partnerships coordinator worked together with NOVA Corporation to develop the [Rocky View School/Business Partnership Video \(Hutchinson & Gladstone, 1997\)](#).

A dilemma that school divisions have to grapple with is defining the difference between a school-business partnership and the school division acting as a business. The [Environics Research Group \(1997\)](#) Focus Canada Report provides evidence that an overwhelming majority of Canadians support the idea of schools forming more links with business, but many are wary of advertising in the classroom. Advertising on school buses is something [RVSD](#) has been working towards for over two years in order to raise funds for the school division. Business may see this as a partnership, while [RVSD](#) sees this as strictly a financial, or business, deal. Educators have to clearly define for stakeholders what constitutes an educational partnership, and what is a business deal. In [RVSD](#), potential partners are encouraged to make use of the [Conference Board of Canada's Ethical Guidelines for Business-Education Partnerships \(Bloom, 1995\)](#). The bottom line for [RVSD](#): if there is no direct educational benefit to children, then the relationship is not an educational partnership.

Implications

In order for educational partnerships to contribute to a valuable and legitimate educational experience for our children, there has to be a direct and measurable impact on learning. We are convinced that educational partnerships can offer important benefits to students, schools, and the businesses, and therefore, benefit society at large both now and in the future. An additional benefit is that personal relationships are cultivated among and between professionals from schools and businesses, and educational partnerships make school and learning more personally relevant to children by impacting their future employment and education opportunities.

In the [second part](#) of this article we present a case study of the partnerships that have contributed to the success of the Galileo Centre at Banded Peak School in Bragg Creek, Alberta. We also highlight the need for joint evaluation of the outcomes of an educational partnership ([Otterbourg](#)

[& Adams, 1991](#)), and describe ways in which educators and stakeholders can work together to plan for the assessment and evaluation of a partnership.

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