# The Schools/Business Partnership

***Business involvement with schools is a growing fashion. But can it have a real, rather than a merely symbolic, effect on schools and their pupils? And can it avoid distorting the broader, non-economic goals of education?[1]***

Donald Hirsch

There are two reasons for being sceptical about the recent explosion of contacts between private businesses and publicly run schools in OECD countries. The first is that they will achieve too little. Companies concerned about education standards may 'adopt' schools, buy them computers or give pupils work experience, without in any way improving the way children are taught. The second is that they will achieve too much. Business feels it must get more involved with education largely because it is allegedly failing to 'produce workers with the right skills'. Educators understandably fear that schools themselves are in danger of being turned into factories, devoted to producing skilled labour rather than educated citizens.

The practical experience of links between education and business has shown this second worry to be much exaggerated. That is because the first worry – that cooperation will prove ineffective – proves valid except under certain conditions. The main condition is that business involvement should take place in the context of a genuine partnership with the education system, working towards commonly defined goals. Quite simply, private companies have neither the capacity nor in practice the inclination to mount a hostile 'takeover' of education. Their influence tends to be strongest when they are working with the grain of public education reform rather than against it.

This kind of partnership is helped by the fact that the long-standing divide between 'humanistic' and 'instrumentalist' views of education does not need to be as deep as it once was. Every recent analysis of the skills required in modern industry has identified a set of general competences that workers now require: the ability to formulate and solve problems, to communicate effectively, to interact well with others, to take initiatives and so on. In other words, workers no longer have merely to be able to take orders and execute certain routine tasks: they must be able to think and learn for themselves. Such requirements are in broad terms compatible with the desire of humanistic educators to nurture the general intellectual development of individual learners.

Partnerships with business, then, can play a constructive role in education. But what, precisely, do they achieve, and how? The OECD has undertaken the first substantial international study of a phenomenon hitherto analysed mainly within national boundaries, discovering that there is no single formula. Its 24 case studies indeed illustrate the wide variety of approaches: each partnership is in some way unique. Nevertheless, it is possible to distinguish certain common trends.

First, 'glasnost precedes perestroika'. A high proportion of links between schools and businesses have a largely symbolic impact. Businesses with little experience of education are inclined initially to see such links in terms of, for example, donating equipment or organising an open day at the factory. The immediate beneficiaries may be the company's public image and the managing director's social conscience. Such links have been dubbed 'feel-good partnerships', and rightly cause scepticism when they fail to develop into something more sophisticated. Yet their importance should not be underrated in the context of the fairly icy relations that have often existed between business and education in the past. Schools and businesses have to make friends – to start talking to each other, in a new spirit of openness – before they can devise any common strategy for reform.

The second trend is that schools now have to educate for new skills. School based purely on the traditional model of classroom, where a teacher lectures pupils and then tests each of them on their ability to repeat what they have learned, will not produce the general skills now required – teamwork, problem-solving, initiative-taking and so on. Neither is it straightforward for teachers or for companies to design new ways of acquiring such skills. But working together they have come up with innovative approaches, some of which are helping to change learning styles in the main school system.

Donald Hirsch works on issues related to human resources in the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) of the OECD.

1241 02

Table
**RECRUITMENT AND SCHOOL LINKS – TWO EXAMPLES**

**Carpentry shop with 70–80 employees**, with work-experience programme and management keen to promote good student and school contacts.

| *Staff hiring through student and school contacts* | *Cost (Skr)* | *Traditional staff hiring* | *Cost (Skr)* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Management's student and school contacts (160 hours) | 48,000 | Advertising costs | 20,000 |
| Work experience programme (lower-secondary school) – including supervision, food and clothes | 25,000 | Telephone interviews: 70 applicants (12 hours) | 3,000 |
| | | Interviews with 10 selected applicants (10 hours) | 2,000 |
| Administrative costs for work experience programme | 7,000 | Wage costs for five new employees – who failed on job and quit | 81,000 |
| | | Supervision for these five (736 hours × 20% × Skr 110) | 16,000 |
| Result: more students apply to woodwork programme in upper-secondary school. Of these, the company hires four per year. | | Result: three employees stay on | |
| Total: four recruits | 80,000 | Total: three recruits | 122,000 |
| On-the-job training: 25% × annual wage cost | 198,000 | On-the-job training: 50% × annual wage cost | 297,000 |
| Supervision costs | 66,000 | Supervision costs | 50,000 |
| Total hiring cost | 344,000 | Total hiring cost | 469,000 |
| Hiring cost per new employee | 86,000 | Hiring cost per new employee | 156,000 |
| **Result: Skr 70,000 per new employee saved through good student contacts.** | | | |

**Manufacturing company with approximately 700 employees**, running work experience for lower-secondary pupils and an experimental in-house vocational training programme at upper-secondary school level.

| *Staff hiring through student and school contacts* | *Cost: Skr* | *Traditional staff hiring* | *Cost: Skr* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Work experience programme (lower-secondary school) – including administration, supervision and clothes | 50,000 | Open house: advertisements, overtime compensation and refreshments | 63,000 |
| Result: more students apply to company's upper-secondary training programme (for 10 students over 32 weeks) | | Result: 50 applicants, with interviews | 6,000 |
| Planning (64 hours) | 8,000 | | |
| Training of supervisors | 32,000 | | |
| Reduced productivity: 10% per supervisor | 290,000 | | |
| Vocational studies teacher | 123,000 | | |
| Student costs: food, personal safety equipment, clothing | 75,000 | | |
| Government cost compensation for training supervisors | –5,000 | | |
| Government compensation of Skr 15 per student per hour | –192,000 | | |
| Result: all ten students hired | | | |
| Total: 10 recruits | 381,000 | Total: 20 recruits | 69,000 |
| On-the-job training: six months at 25% of annual wage cost | 276,000 | On-the-job training: six months at 50% of annual wage cost | 1,104,000 |
| Supervision | 0 | Supervision: 15% reduced productivity per student, for six months | 1,296,000 |
| Total hiring cost | 657,000 | Total hiring cost | 2,469,000 |
| Hiring cost per new employee | 65,700 | Hiring cost per new employee | 123,000 |
| **Result: Skr 57,300 per new employee saved through good student contacts.** | | | |

Source: *Good School Contacts Pay Off*, Swedish Employers' Confederation, Stockholm, 1991

One British scheme involved a number of teachers spending time in a cake and chocolate factory to experience how various skills were applied in the working world. They then went back to their schools where, assisted by some of the factory's employees, they involved pupils in a project to design and make a new chocolate product. The project involved teachers in as many subject disciplines as possible – including English, maths, home economics, business studies, art and languages. Each had a role – for example, the final objective of the project, overseen by language teachers, was to send the chocolates, along with covering letters (written by 11-year-olds) to a group of French pupils who had been their hosts on an exchange visit. The teachers tried to incorporate what they had learned from the project into their everyday teaching practices. In Britain, such initiatives are more integrated into a general reform movement than in many countries, as they are supported by national initiatives. The most important, the 'Technical and Vocational Education Initiative', has been trying to nurture new core skills in secondary schools, in partnership with business, since 1983.

## How Vocational?

The third trend involves relevant vocational preparation. Most continental European countries have well-developed systems of preparing pupils for specific occupations through vocational education at the end of secondary school. Other OECD countries, such as the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada, are wondering whether they should be adopting a similar model.

But even where vocational schools exist, they are not always good at keeping abreast of the rapidly changing demand for skills in each industry; partnerships can help them keep more closely in touch. Thus, for example, an expensive workshop near Paris, run jointly by Renault and the French education authorities, gives a taste of state-of-the-art roboticised technology to vocational students who would otherwise have to rely on blackboards for learning about modern production methods.

The importance of ensuring that vocational education maintains close links with

1. **Partners in Education**, OECD Publications, Paris, forthcoming 1992.

Harrogate Rossett High School/Prospect Foods

*The pupils of one British school, in Harrogate, spent time in the chocolate department of a local factory to experience how various skills were applied in the working world.*

the work-place is reflected in world-wide admiration for the German 'dual' system, where apprentices based in firms are released for vocational schooling for one or two days a week. But relevance is not the only issue. A potentially competing priority stems from the desirability of a high degree of general skills – mathematical and linguistic ability, for example – in a growing number of occupations. The world can no longer be neatly divided into the 'academic' class destined for university and the 'vocational' class learning mainly practical skills after the age of 16. A few partnerships are helping to develop new schooling styles which combine high-level technical preparation with advanced academic studies for the same pupils.

As the pool of unskilled jobs diminishes, less-qualified school leavers have been finding it increasingly difficult to enter the workforce – especially, though not exclusively, in countries with less-developed vocational education. One response has been partnerships that attempt to create direct links between the end of school and the start of work. In 1982, Boston employers struck a deal with the city's school department, promising to hire specified numbers of high-school graduates in exchange for a pledge to reduce drop-out and absentee rates by 5% a year and to enforce requirements on academic standards. The 'Boston Compact' has been copied in many other cities in the United States and Europe.

Have such compacts succeeded? In terms of meeting specified targets of improved student performance, their record has been decidedly mixed. But as vehicles for mobilising a coalition of interests around educational improvement, they have been highly successful. This generalisation applies broadly to all education partnerships. They have found it hard to demonstrate quantitative results, largely because they are not the only influence on educational achievement. Their success over the longer term will depend on their ability to bring together new forces to achieve qualitative changes in the education process.

## A Two-sided Deal

Companies too might benefit from such partnership and possibly change their behaviour, as a result of contact with schools. The most obvious gain comes from cultivating a direct source of future youth labour – at a time when demographic factors are making it increasingly scarce. Partnerships can pay for themselves several times over by reducing recruitment costs, as the example of two Swedish companies shows (Table). Companies that get closer to education might also adapt the way they judge young job applicants. For example, in a number of countries qualifications based mainly on exam results are being replaced by more qualitative 'student profiles' or 'records of achievement'. For these to be of value in the labour market, employers have to understand what they mean, and the educational philosophy that lies behind them.

Some visionaries would like to go further, and use partnerships to instill some of the higher-minded values of education into the corporate world. Although it will be a long time before teachers start lecturing on compassion to classes of chief executives, there are some areas where progress could be made. An OECD code of 'Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises' recommends environmental education for employees. Companies could draw much from school practice in this area.

□ □

For the moment, most partnerships concentrate on the not insignificant task of reforming education, as opposed to enlightening business. Progress varies considerably among countries. An important variable is the degree to which education ministries and local governments are open to change. In addition, a partnership 'culture' has emerged in some countries faster than in others. Here, the OECD's bird's eye view might be helpful. A glimpse of how other nationalities do it might help teachers, business employees and policy makers to see how far partnerships can go. Their ability to bring fresh and useful ideas into education is proving more effective than many thought possible. ■

### OECD Bibliography

- **Partners in Education**, forthcoming 1992
- **Curriculum Reform – An Overview of Trends**, 1990
- **Education and the Economy in a Changing Society**, 1989.