

## Fixing Schools Outside of School

Districts are turning to private companies, nonprofits, and foundations for partnerships that can help tackle the biggest impediments to learning.

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### **BUSINESS**

How do you fix a school? For more than a decade, test scores have ruled the day—and the idea that if students didn't perform well, teachers and schools should be held accountable. Shut down the schools with low scores, the thinking went, and start over somewhere else or as charter schools.

The No Child Left Behind Act, signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2001, brought a more market-oriented approach to K-12 education—the idea that rewarding good schools and weeding out the bad ones would drive achievement higher. The law, replaced in December with a new education bill that largely moves oversight to the states, brought advances in keeping schools accountable for students' performance. But it did little to address [root causes](#) of struggling schools—notably, poverty and a lack of support at home. A student from a low-income household faces an uphill battle to succeed in school, and even a talented teacher can do only so much.

The ideal solution: End poverty. That's out of a school district's hands, of course. But schools have found ways to help their students' lives outside of the classroom, or at least adjust to them, by finding partners in the rest of society—businesses, nonprofit groups, foundations, public libraries, parent groups—that have an interest in a strengthened system of education. In a world of limited resources for schools (and for other public endeavors), the schools have come to depend on the kindness of outside partners.

John King, the acting secretary of education, believes outside partnerships are critical to surmounting obstacles that students face today. He should know. King, who lost both of his parents to illnesses by the time he was 12 years old, credits New York City public schools with providing him hope during a challenging time. “There's no question that what happens inside of the classroom—the work of teachers and principals—can shape the course of students' lives,” King said in a telephone interview. “But it's also true that schools are embedded in communities, and if we want to ensure that all of our schools are successful, we need good partnerships.”

This isn't just about money. Philanthropic donations to all educational institutions (public, private, libraries, universities, etc.) amounted to [roughly \\$55 billion in 2014](#), mostly for higher education. The little that goes to K-12 public schools is an afterthought to the nearly \$600 billion the nation's primary and secondary public schools spend each year.

Partnerships with outsiders matter for another reason: They give educators a chance to experiment and innovate in ways that might have been difficult otherwise. A business or foundation can bring a fresh perspective to a problem, as well as expertise and resources. King [cites](#) Brooklyn's P-Tech as a collaboration between schools and companies—in this case, IBM. “That's a place where school leaders are being smart about identifying business partners who can help students see strong connections between what they're doing in a high school classroom and their future,” King said. The school, which opened in 2011, lets students earn a

high school diploma and an associate's degree in six years, then get an inside track on jobs at IBM.

Or, look at what the community has done for Clintondale High School, just outside of Detroit. Most of its students are low-income, and many of them work after school or care for younger siblings. Homework gets ignored, which teachers believed was hurting students' achievement. Greg Green, then the principal, had an idea in 2010—to [flip](#) the school day, so that students would watch lectures at home or before class, giving teachers time to help students with homework during classroom hours.

But this wasn't something the school could do on its own. Green reached out to TechSmith, a Michigan-based software company that offered a screen-recording program, and asked for help. TechSmith first provided free licenses for Clintondale teachers to experiment with prerecorded lectures and later sent staffers to the school on a regular basis to troubleshoot and to research best practices for this upside-down model of education. Eventually, Green applied it school-wide, lowering failure rates dramatically and pulling Clintondale out of an ignominious ranking among the state's worst-performing schools.

Some of the most effective partnerships are concerned less with pedagogy than with removing impediments to a child's education. Clintondale found a way to provide services that students might not get at home—a helping hand with homework. Other schools attend to students' physical well-being. In Lower Price Hill, a mostly white, working-class neighborhood of Cincinnati, [Oyler School](#) makes sure students have access to adequate health care. The school has medical and dental clinics on site as well as a vision center where students can get free eye exams. Also, children can eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner at school and bring food home for the weekends.

A student with an empty stomach or a toothache won't learn as well as one who is healthy. "All kids can learn, and they can learn at high levels, but it's very conditional on kids having the right opportunities," said Elaine Weiss, an education expert at the liberal Economic Policy Institute in Washington. "Those opportunities to learn tend to be extremely disparate, based in particular on social class and also, to a large extent, on race."

Partnerships have their limits—politically, if not pedagogically—in these ostensibly public schools. Funding alone doesn't assure a successful partnership. For example, Mark Zuckerberg's daring announcement in 2010 on Oprah Winfrey's television show that he would donate \$100 million to Newark's beleaguered public schools. This amounted to an eighth of the school district's yearly operating budget. The deal was contingent on cooperation between then-Mayor Cory Booker, a Democrat, and Republican Governor Chris Christie, whose office controlled the budget for the school district.

But the experiment ran into resistance from parents and teachers left out of the conversation on how to fix the city's schools. The results were mixed at best, according to a chronicling in *The Prize: Who's in Charge of America's Schools?* by Dale Russakoff. Zuckerberg's \$100 million, plus another \$100 million in matching funds (from New York hedge fund managers and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, among others), got spent quickly, with big sums going to labor, contracts, and consultants. Ras Baraka was elected Newark's mayor in 2014 after a populist campaign aimed at so-called reformers who were "taking away our right to democratically govern our public schools." While the effort wasn't without its successes—Zuckerberg recently touted a 13 percent increase in Newark's graduation rate since 2010—the acrimonious battle in Newark played out more like a school district takeover than a partnership. "It's very important

to understand the desires of a community, to listen and learn from families, teachers, elected officials and other experts,” he wrote, preparing for a similar effort in San Francisco.

More often than not, both sides in well-designed partnerships stand to benefit. Businesses have a stake in helping their communities provide good public education. For one thing, first-rate schools help to lure top talent to a local employer, according to Linda Rosen, the CEO of Change the Equation, a nonprofit group that tries to connect schools and companies to foster science and technology education. Longer-term, businesses may want to groom the type of workforce they’ll need in the coming decades, especially for analytical skills and science-related knowledge. “These companies recognize that the root of that talent is something that needs to be nurtured as early as elementary school,” Rosen said.

Still, it’s important to remember that partnerships between schools and outside entities, while valuable, won’t remedy the deeper causes of struggling schools—poverty and discrimination. Schools can take advantage of whatever resources are available to provide the best education possible. Unless the social and economic forces conspiring against student achievement are eradicated, however, educators will be swimming against the current.