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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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Back to School: How Churches Can Partner with Local Schools

Every healthy community builds on the resources of local churches and schools. The vitality of these two key institutions tells the larger story of the community's overall quality of life. Historically, churches and schools formed partnerships that benefited children, their families, and the development of future leaders. Today's schools face unprecedented challenges—such as declining funds, poverty, performance pressures, and violence. What can churches do to strengthen their relationship with local schools?

It's Not a New Program

The successful initiative is not about starting a new program—it is about beginning a relationship with others in your community. Starting and growing any relationship requires an investment of time and listening. Leaders can take the first step by learning about the community and its schools. Get to know as much as you can about community needs, what others are doing, and potential partners—the school district, social service agencies, community non-profits, local government, and other churches. Be open to hearing and learning about the most crucial needs. Identify the individuals (the school principals and other key administrators) who are the primary players in any successful school-church partnership. Finally, find ways to build a relationship of trust and respect.

Ideas for Relationships and Partnerships

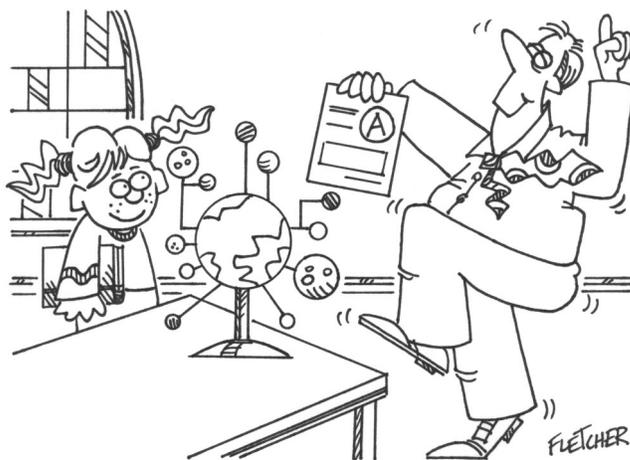
Dr. Lovett Weems, Lewis Center for Church Leadership, identifies four categories that provide a framework for thinking about church/school partnerships. Congregations can (1) help students succeed, (2) assist with student needs, (3) support and affirm teachers, and (4) advocate for schools and education.¹

Helping students succeed. The most common partnering role by churches involves volunteer mentors or tutors, or after-school programs. Many communities already have these programs in place and churches link members to existing opportunities to volunteer. Other options include offering space for a homework club, computer labs, practice space for

music or art, a community garden, and other school-related activities. Some churches help college-bound students with test preparation, college forms and applications, and college selection.

Assisting with student needs. Because student enrollment reflects the community, the percentage of schoolchildren that receive free or reduced-cost school lunches is one important indicator of area poverty. In many schools across the country, 100 percent of the attending children qualify for the free/reduced-cost lunch program. Once the figure reaches 40 percent or more, the number of children and their families requiring support and assistance is significant. These children often do not have some of the basic necessities to succeed in school—adequate nutrition, books and supplies, or school clothing and uniforms.

Some examples of ways that congregations partner with local schools to meet student needs include collecting and distributing school supplies as a new school year begins and assisting with the purchase of school uniforms, shoes, or sports uniforms. Because many children are at risk of hunger when school is not in session, some churches offer a summer lunch program or organize a backpack food program for the weekends (see the excellent starter toolkit for the Backpack Food Program by Hunger



PASTOR TED QUESTIONED THE AFTER-SCHOOL TUTORING PROGRAM'S EFFECTIVENESS UNTIL HE GOT AN "A" ON LISA'S SCIENCE PROJECT.

Free Colorado: <http://www.hungerfreecomunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/HFC-Toolkit-for-starting-a-BackPack-Food-Program.pdf>.

Supporting and affirming the work of teachers.

Teachers receive more blame and disrespect in political debates about public education than they deserve. Teachers welcome any positive words or actions to bolster their calling as educators. At the beginning of the school year, worship services can honor teachers, celebrate their contributions, and bless their future work. Create a community event at the end of the school year to celebrate the accomplishments of students and teachers. Other ideas from school-partnering churches include contributing or funding supplies used in the classroom, hosting a thank-you lunch for teachers, and providing volunteers for the classroom, lunchroom, or playground.

Advocating for schools and education. No single congregation can do everything, but every congregation can do something. If a congregation does ministry *with* their community (rather than *to* their community), they create solutions and possibilities together. Encourage members to become advocates for public education. Track the actions of local school boards and educational policies at the district, state, and federal levels. Invite a principal or panel of educational leaders to speak at your church. Congregations can help community leaders identify the root causes of economic injustice and how inequality affects children and their schools. Church leaders can also assist with organizing parents and teachers to create better schools.

Three Necessary Questions

A successful partnership between the church and community must meet three criteria by answering yes to the following questions.² First, do our efforts fit with our church's mission? Many wonderful initiatives and options exist but not all make theological sense for a local church. Second, what are the real needs of our community's children? Are we considering plans that satisfy and reward our members? Or, have we strategically identified where our partners and we might make the most difference? Third, what do we do well as a church? Do we have the passion, assets, and volunteers to carry out a successful partnership? When we lack the necessary capabilities even though our efforts fit with the church's mission and meet significant community needs, burnout and failure are the result. When real needs are overlooked or unmet even though our efforts fit with our mission and we possess the required strengths, irrelevance and disappointment

are the result. Doing what is best does not require great strength. But great strength is required to choose the right path.³

A Few Cautions

When children are part of the picture, additional assurances must be considered.

- All church-school partnerships must put child safety first. Train all volunteers to follow the guidelines for appropriate adult-child interactions. Check that church facilities are free of hazards and safe for children of all ages.
- Churches must honor church and state boundaries and refrain from evangelizing in the school context. Trust that your actions speak louder than words.
- To avoid setbacks, churches should begin small—by initiating a partnership with one classroom teacher, one school principal, or the parent leaders in a classroom. Long-term success relies on careful thinking about sustainability, accessibility, and scalability. In other words, if our efforts succeed, will we be able to meet future needs without exceeding available resources?

The Bottom Line

After World War II, the city leaders of Pittsburgh brought in Frank Lloyd Wright for a consultation. They were concerned about the downtown's dreary appearance stemming from steel manufacturing. They said to him, "What shall we do with Pittsburgh?" He studied the matter and then gave them this reply: "Bury it!" But those leaders stayed with it because they had a vision for their city. Pittsburgh became one of the most beautiful and livable city centers.

Unfortunately, many leaders have given up on public education and feel a proper burial is in order. People of faith can remain steadfast in their vision of how public schools are the best investment to create healthy communities and the next generation's leaders.

1. See the Engaging Local Schools Resource at <http://www.churchleadership.com/serveyourneighbor/EngagingLocalSchools.asp> for extensive material about how churches work with local schools.

2. Dr. Lovett Weems, "Identifying Strategic Initiatives" in Engaging Local Schools CD (2014).

3. Elbert Hubbard, American editor, publisher, and writer, 1856-1915.