

Industry Partnerships: Uncovering New Paths to Support Every Student

Educators and industry can work together to inform and cultivate educational paths to meet every student's needs.

By Steve Holberg



Education's core mission is to prepare students for the future, and every investment directly or indirectly aims toward that goal.

Think beyond typical expenditures like teacher salaries, instructional materials, and classroom resources; technology deployments such as solar and mechanical system installations and energy upgrades also translate into student learning opportunities.

The technologies displayed in school buildings today hold tremendous educational implications, especially for students interested in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) career fields. Moreover, the organizations that design, develop, and deploy these technologies

all recognize the schools as the sources of a well-trained technical workforce for the future.

With multiple paths to long-term career success, it makes perfect sense for leaders from education and industry to work shoulder to shoulder to inform and cultivate the educational paths for people who are interested in these careers.

Raising Expectations for Suppliers and Vendors

School buildings are not merely physical structures; they are learning environments that directly affect students'

academic achievements, personal development, visions of future careers, and in the longer term, their workforce readiness.

The recent "Infrastructure Report Card" from the American Society of Civil Engineers, however, gave America's school facilities a grade of D+. ASCE cited widespread issues with building systems, limited capacity, deteriorating conditions, and a lag in keeping pace with operations and maintenance issues.

Have high expectations beyond signing the contract and hold industry partners accountable for delivery.

Recent infusions of grants, along with other funding sources, mean that many schools can now make good progress in overcoming these infrastructure challenges. As school leaders and officials engage in the planning, construction, and improvement of their buildings and building systems, they should also raise their expectations for their suppliers and vendors who provide these technologies and support services.

What should you expect from an industry partner? At a minimum, suppliers and vendors should be able to successfully design, implement, and service the technical solutions they sell. An industry partner should also be willing to go the extra mile required to support your educational mission and vision.

Education leaders should expect partners to share in the commitment to making K-12 education work for everyone: students, educators, staff, and their greater communities. It's not only the buildings and technical solutions that create the optimal environment for learning and long-term success.

What should you look for in an industry partner?

Look for a well-established organization with a proven track record of delivering on the core mission of education in the areas of academics and workforce development. Engaging students and providing teachers with resources related to STEM, such as energy audits, green energy exploration, digital Internet of Things (IoT), makerspaces, living labs, and sustainability programming go beyond the sale, yet encompass far more than off-the-shelf programs.

All buildings and all communities have their own needs and aspirations. The right industry partner will listen carefully to discover what's most important to solving the most pressing problems. Only then is it possible

to cocreate and implement a comprehensive plan for aligning and achieving educational and workforce development goals.

Getting Started

Have in-depth conversations with your suppliers and vendors about industry partnerships. Technical solutions are only part of the conversation; understand that value-added programming can be positioned in ways to select a vendor, so it's important to discuss educational partnerships in parallel with technical and implementation planning.

Consider, too, incorporating value-added partnership requirements in upcoming requests for proposals to align with the STEM education, academic programming, and workforce development elements that best suit your school or district and that align with key infrastructure needs.

Once an industry partnership is underway, it can be difficult to monitor the program's implementation and to ensure that the partner delivers on the pledges and overtures made during the selection process. Having the right people in place to hold everyone accountable and drive the programs through to completion can lead to good results.

At the end of the day, any number of vendors can provide school infrastructure upgrades, green energy, and IoT solutions, but only some are willing and able to go that extra mile. Have high expectations beyond signing the contract and hold industry partners accountable for delivery. These partnerships can ultimately be fundamentally important for your school or district, its students and educators, and the community.

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