

Community Connections

What do you get when you add 1+1+1? The answer isn't necessarily 3 when you are adding groups and individuals with similar goals and a commitment to students.

Student activity advisers who stay in the business of advising year after year discover that making connections within the community with businesses, parent groups, service organizations, and senior citizens adds up to projects that benefit everyone involved.

There are many benefits to engaging in school and community partnerships:

Promote support.

Remembering that people support what they create, the more people you can involve in activities of the school, the more people will be supportive of it.

- Get senior citizens into the school and interacting with students with a senior citizens prom or a computer class taught by students where seniors can learn how to use

e-mail and the Internet.

- Invite business owners or leaders of service organizations to serve as judges for the Homecoming festivities.
- Partner with adult service organizations such as Kiwanis or Optimists whose goals include supporting the youth of the community. By

offering these groups a chance to support a project designed by

students, they fulfill their group's mission

without having to create their own activity or worry that a

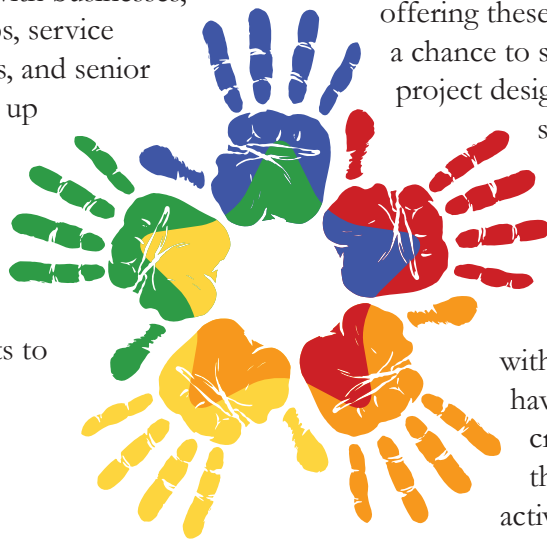
project they plan will not attract local youth.

- **Develop pride.** Taxpayers pay money toward public schools whether or not they have kids in the school system. Let them see where their money is going by promoting the good things your organization and school does. Getting community members involved in the activities of the school as guest

speakers and resource people will engage them and help them develop a sense of pride in the school. Local lawyers who help coach the mock trial team, a dance instructor who comes in to teach ballroom dance workshops before prom, and guest presenters at a health fair will all leave feeling good about their contributions. That good feeling can translate into a positive connection and sense of pride in the school.

Raise money. In this day and age, almost every school does fundraising of one kind or another. Whether it's to pay for essentials that are in short supply due to budget cuts, or to fund some extra activities, support from community groups and businesses can really help. You'll also need their support when it comes time to vote for bond issues or tax increases.

Break down barriers. Racial, cultural, and other barriers can be broken down as people join together with one common purpose, to improve their school and community. This sense of purpose can bridge the gap of language, race, culture, or interests and unify the community.



Getting Started

Realizing that community connections are essential is a first step, but developing them takes some effort. So how do you get started?

Look at what your needs are.

A good place to start is where you know you need some help. What projects do you have planned that are too big to handle by yourselves? In what areas could you use some extra resources?

Search for possible partners.

Who could help with what you need? What groups or businesses are the best match for your needs and concerns? Don't look at it only from the viewpoint of what your group can get out of the partnership. The best partnerships work two ways, so consider who could benefit by working with you and consider what your group could offer each potential partner.

Look at what connections you already have. What companies employ parents of your group members? Which parents are members of service organizations? Conduct an inventory of your group members' parents and other contacts. Make use of the built-in support you already have by asking those people to approach the businesses and organizations for you. An adult may make the initial contact, but student leaders should

become part of the process immediately thereafter to determine how the two parties can work together in a mutually beneficial partnership.

Develop a plan and approach the potential partner with it.

List strengths that each group brings to the potential partnership and benefits on both sides. You might want to start with something small to begin with, then once you have established a successful relationship, move on to bigger endeavors.

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Get the support of your administration. Be sure you don't surprise your principal by establishing a partnership without his or her knowledge. Your principal might have plans of his or her own for asking that business for help. It's usually best to keep your administration apprised of what you're working on.

Iron out the details. Meet with leaders or representatives from your partner group and establish the parameters of the partnership. Think about such things as:

- Goals you will work toward
- How decisions will be made

- Who will lead meetings
- What roles each leader and participant will play
- Ways to keep each other informed
- Exactly what each group will contribute—know-how, time, energy, “people power,” supplies, money, etc.
- What will be the timeline and deadlines for the project.

Remember to thank everyone and publicize their efforts. Thank-you letters are, of course, mandatory protocol. But think beyond a standard letter. Especially if you want to continue working together, it's important to let the business or organization know how much you appreciate their help, and let others know they support the school as well.

How else can you recognize the contributions of a supporter? Consider framing an event poster that members of the group have signed, or designing a customized certificate of appreciation. Schedule a time when your student leaders can make a formal presentation of the gift and arrange for a person to take photos. Send a photo with a media release to the local papers or post them on the school's website. Such measures not only say thank you, they invite future collaborations. When others see the support you garner, they might want to help as well.