

Partnerships bring business models into schools

By NATE DOUGHERTY - 7/16/2010

The second-grade class at Virgil I. Grissom School No. 7 in the Rochester City School District has nearly 1,900 books, and it is thanks in no small part to Paychex Inc.

The company partnered with the school through the district's Rochester PENCIL Partnership Program, which connects leaders from the business community with individual schools to set goals and develop initiatives and programs.

After the program's second full year, the participants said the collaborations have helped bring some of the efficiencies and business models from the private world to education.

There are plans to make the program more in-depth for future years, said Nydia Padilla-Rodriguez, director of strategic community partnerships, youth development and the family services department at RCSD. The district is working to create an online exchange where partners can share ideas and best practices.

"Let's say a business partner is matched with a school and that school wants to improve parental involvement," Padilla-Rodriguez explained. "That company may not know much about getting parents involved but can go into the exchange and look at schools that have helped improve involvement and capture those ideas."

Program leaders are in talks with school districts in Baltimore and Washington, D.C., which would create a larger system that could better leverage its collective power, RCSD superintendent Jean-Claude Brizard said.

"This program used to be just in New York City, and as the relationships grow the number of examples grow as well," Brizard said. "Sometimes when people come together they don't know where to start, but PENCIL does a good job of doing this without being too prescriptive."

He would like to see business partners expand into some projects that build capacity among parents, Brizard said. When he was a principal in Brooklyn, the partner at his high school, HSBC Holdings PLC, ran a program to teach parents how to be bank tellers.

RCSD also has been in talks with the Rochester Business Alliance Inc. on having the group serve as an intermediary that could administer the program. The district's uncertain future regarding the mayoral control proposal has slowed this conversation, Brizard said.

"We're looking to leverage that type of relationship to move us to the next level," he said. "Partnership is not our expertise. PENCIL does this well, but they're based in New York City, and whether it's the RBA or someone else, I would love to find a partner in the short run who better knows business infrastructures."

The PENCIL program has helped RCSD build a group of involved business partners, Padilla-Rodriguez said. Prior to the program's start in 2008, more than 90 percent of the district's outside relationships were with non-profit organizations.

"It's been a way to build and support customized partnerships between business leaders and the principals," Padilla-Rodriguez said. "It brings out the best ideas, resources and talent across sectors with the intent to help develop strong leaders, build the school capacity, enhance student learning and really inspire community and corporate support to help create some changes in city schools."

In the case of School No. 7, Paychex brought in a small team led by Thomas Hammond, director of the Paychex product management office. The company led a book drive, created a yearbook and helped older students open a school store. Some 25 employees were involved, said Wakili Moore, school principal.

"We have the ideas but sometimes struggle with manpower and resources," Moore said.

Padilla-Rodriguez works with schools and business partners to find which have complementary missions or programs. She helped match School Without Walls with Clark Patterson Lee, an engineering and architectural firm that led students in the design of a space for Lollypop Farm, the Humane Society of Greater Rochester.

Students were responsible for creating the structure, including interior and exterior design, as well as a marketing plan.

"I think the goal is to expose students to a variety of different careers so they can think about what it is they want to do," said Vendy Clark, the district's partner with Clark Patterson Lee.

The partnership had benefit for Clark Patterson Lee as well, she noted.

"I think our company grew a lot," Clark said. "We really have a much better understanding for education today, for the different ways children learn and the different ways we can be helpful as a company and individuals."

One central theme of the program is to build capacity in schools. The district's adult education program used its partnership with Parker, Kent & Wayne Inc. to improve and market its microenterprise program. Umbereen Mustafa, the partner with the consulting firm, came up with a streamlined communication process and introduced business practices to the program.

"We helped the supervisors understand what it takes to be profitable or break even," Mustafa said. "Many of them hadn't seen a profit-loss statement before."

Having a perspective from the business world has helped the microenterprise program set clear goals for achievement and make sure all involved know what it takes to accomplish them, said Paul Burke, director of the adult education program.

The PENCIL program is based in New York City and operates as a non-profit organization, funded through corporate support. The district here hired a consultant from New York City to help set up the program, but as the contract for the position has expired RCSD officials are working to build an infrastructure that can continue to support the project, Padilla-Rodriguez said.

The district also is working with the national PENCIL organization to establish an evaluation tool for the partnerships. It recently sent an evaluation survey to the companies and schools involved to get a better sense of what worked and what needs improvement, Padilla-Rodriguez said. And with six new high schools set to open in the fall, the district is recruiting new members and seeking to attract more midsize and large businesses.