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# Classroom partners

Public and private schools should unite to help more children fulfill their potential

BY PATRICK F. BASSETT, DAVID DRINKWATER AND JACQUELINE SMETHURST

**O**ur new president has handed the same assignment to leaders in every sector: "Rethink it." As educators, it's an invitation we welcome.

The challenges faced by our nation's public and private schools are serious. Money is tight, and after so many years operating in worlds apart, it now seems clear we need each other: It is time to create public-private school partnerships in communities all over the nation.

Over the past three decades, we've watched the educational and opportunity gaps widen as a disparity in resources and outcomes grows. For much of our history, public and private school teachers have launched students on parallel paths, too often toward widely divergent ends.

During the 1960s and '70s, private schools worked to increase access for students from diverse backgrounds. Financial aid programs welcomed and supported students who were prepared for better opportunities. While the learning curve was often steep for the individuals and the institutions, good things happened on campus — but only for a select few.

Now the focus must shift to helping the many — on every campus, in every community. The time has come to create authentic partnerships that extend the outreach of private schools without a comparable growth of expenses. Schools and communities need to engage in the pursuit of a high-quality education by tapping resources on hand. We know it works, because all around the country, we've found communities forging these partnerships.

In Baltimore, the Middle Grades Partnership combines the resources of nine private schools, 14 public schools and the Johns Hopkins University. It provides summer instruction in reading, writing, math and science to hundreds of academically promising public school children entering seventh, eighth and ninth grades. The Middle Grades Partnership helps students develop a love of learning while improving their academic skills and building confidence. The program also provides opportunities for teachers to collaborate and share ideas for improving education.

In Connecticut, a partnership program takes a different but equally inspired approach. Todd Eckerson, a teacher at Westminster School, an independent private school in Simsbury, is on loan

two afternoons each week to Hartford Public High School, where the graduation rate is about 30 percent. Volunteers with the Crossroads Cooperative Learning Program hold sessions where the students are — in after-school hangouts or at football practice — to track their grades, help them prep for SATs and accompany them on "walkabouts" to meet with their teachers.

And there are more examples, in California, Boston, Philadelphia and beyond. All are authentic partnerships created by public and private school leaders, teachers and students who have approached one another with energy and ideas for building new models of collaboration.

Traditional tutoring may be useful to students in many struggling public schools, but what additional strategies can the partner schools offer? What experiences are mutually meaningful to students, both rich and poor, who have rarely stepped out of their comfort zones? We challenge educators to ask these questions and set up new partnerships that make sense in the context of their communities. Although our organizations focus on independent private schools, in some places, this may include a role for parochial schools as well. Every community has needs that public-private school partnerships can address by sharing strategies, finding what is replicable, developing approaches that work and moving forward as collaborators.

This essential shift can address the race and class issues that divide us and realistically begin to close those gaps. For public schools, it can mean immediate access to needed resources. For private schools, it can mean broader connections and an influx of teachers and families determined to make a difference in their communities, but who might have hesitated to consider yesterday's private schools.

The last time private schools took stock, good deeds were done. This time, the idealism of the past combined with the pragmatism of the present should lead us to more profound change. Times have changed: Now we must change together.

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