

# THE PATH FORWARD

Forging Partnerships to Improve Education



U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE FOUNDATION



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The U.S. Chamber of Commerce is the world's largest business federation representing the interests of more than 3 million businesses of all sizes, sectors, and regions, as well as state and local chambers and industry associations.

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## Forging Partnerships to Improve Education

### Introduction

Improving educational opportunities and experiences for all students in the United States is a national imperative. Although doing so is complicated and arduous, there are important lessons to glean from success stories. Promising examples share a key element: partners with similar goals at the helm. This guide highlights how partnerships between nontraditional allies can provide great leverage in creating positive change and demonstrating broad appeal. Distinctive voices proclaiming a unified message are more powerful together than in isolation.

In December 2015, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation (USCCF) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) came together to co-host *The Path Forward: Improving Opportunities for African-American Students*. The business and civil rights communities recognize the repercussions of ignoring achievement gaps—a growing number of students will leave school unprepared, ultimately limiting their access to further education and workforce opportunities. For *The Path Forward*, the two organizations assembled close to 100 chamber executives and NAACP chapter leaders from across the country to discuss this national challenge and how it can be corrected with local solutions.

Business and civil rights leaders offer comparable strengths. They are both in the unique position to aggregate the needs of their communities, provide solutions, and share broadly the factors that result in success. These two organizations have other similarities—both are national voices that represent a specific constituency, find their strengths in local partners, and regularly convene leaders to present an influential voice earning the attention of policy leaders and the media. And both organizations—critically—agree that education is the great equalizer.

U.S. Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Thomas J. Donohue said at the event, “What brings us together is a civil rights issue, an economic issue, and, at its core, an issue of American opportunity. Education is the key to opportunity in this country.”

Donohue, recognizing that equal opportunity is not available to all students, said the following:

We have many fine schools, staffed with the most dedicated and hardest working teachers. But no one can deny that from school to school, district to district, state to state, the quality of education differs vastly. Our education system is a patchwork that is propelling some to success and consigning others to failure. For those who slip through the cracks, their reach is limited, their potential is stifled, and their chances of living a life of struggle are greatly increased. This is a fundamental driver of inequality in our country. It's unfair, it's unjust, and it's at odds with the American promise of equal opportunity for all.

NAACP President Cornell William Brooks echoed the emphasis on the education imperative and how collaboration could open doors to progress:

Education is the bedrock of democracy. . . . Together we strive to ensure that students from everywhere are receiving a rigorous and equal education to prepare for the future. To do less creates fundamental instabilities that threaten our prosperity—a threat that compounds the longer it lasts. This [partnership] represents a new commitment and acknowledgment that maintaining the greatness of our nation now requires a commitment to equality for all—not just for children but for businesses and a society that needs diverse voices and views to adapt and prepare for the future.

The USCCF released a report at the event on African-American student achievement, drawing attention to the fact that we are simply not doing enough to improve academic opportunities and experiences for students of color. Attendees heard from notable business leaders from Target and Lockheed Martin as well as esteemed education leaders such as former secretaries of education Rod Paige, Margaret Spellings, and acting Secretary John King, who equally reinforced this message.

The goals of the event were to consider best practices for improving education equity, share resources and knowledge with one another, and identify potential partners to activate solutions back home. The event created momentum for change and a desire to organize local initiatives and conversations, similar to the collaboration between the two national organizations. Attendees recognized that national voices like the USCCF and the NAACP have central roles to play, but that the greatest strength comes from on-the-ground efforts at the state and local levels.

Of utmost importance is to acknowledge that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for improving academic achievement. This document intends to serve as a guide for forging partnerships, taking into account feedback from our local partners and employing lessons from their vast experiences.

You do not have to be a chamber or NAACP chapter leader to benefit from this guide. Although it is a product of the coming together of these two groups, any similarly organized association can adapt these tools to meet their own needs. Whereas stewardship has its place, moving the needle on academic achievement requires more than providing goods and services to a school district. As *Path Forward* contributor and The Education Trust West Executive Director Ryan Smith said, “We have seen that throwing money at a district doesn’t necessarily mean better outcomes for students.” Being on the vanguard of change requires painstakingly hard work and commitment to build trust, agree on common measurable and outcomes-based goals, gain buy-in, and consistently hold one another accountable to be effective partners.

## At the Starting Gate

The beginning of a partnership is the most critical stage. Before reaching out to potential partners, ensure that your organization has clear challenges to overcome and end goals in mind. These goals should not necessarily dictate the activities of the partnership but are the ultimate achievements your organization wants to accomplish.

### Identifying Needs and Potential Partners

To grasp the most pressing community issues, a needs analysis can ensure that you are fully steeped in the issues in which you want to engage. Answering the questions below can be constructive before you search for a partner:

- What are the goals you are trying to achieve?
- What programs and supports exist in your organization?
- What is your capacity to be a champion?

Once your organization agrees on the challenges to address, execute a search plan for identifying potential partners to help attain your goals. Researching an organization goes beyond perusing its website and reading its mission statement. You should also review its policies and activities. A clear understanding of what you aim to get out of the partnership and how the collaboration will help you attain your goals is useful when reaching out to partners.

## Laying the Groundwork

Initiating contact should include a concise but comprehensive document to discuss at an opening meeting. Among the recommended talking points, the agenda should incorporate a discussion about both organizations' strengths. If those conditions differ from one another, it presents an opportunity to play off one another's strong suits.

The meeting should enable both organizations to articulate their respective wants and needs. Undoubtedly, these will not align perfectly. As recommended by many *Path Forward* attendees, focus on what you agree on, not on what you don't. The easiest way to stop a partnership in its tracks is to focus on dissimilarities rather than on common goals. If possible, know in advance what those areas of disagreement are (through prior research), acknowledge them on the front end, and then move past them. Do not let disagreements—even when they come up—stop you from your eventual common goals.

Agree on one or two urgent needs in the community. These should be specific, such as articulating career pathways from education to employment via an internship training program in a singular field or creating resources to train intern supervisors. A question to ask could be, What keeps you up at night? This results in focusing on what is most pressing rather than on an ambiguous, philosophical effort.

It is crucial not to bite off more than you can chew. Be up front about capacities and expectations. Transparency is the No. 1 driver of building trust. Staffing is significant. Each organization should have a champion who agrees to have regular contact, mutually deciding how frequently check-ins will occur and how often in-person meetings will be held. Of these two people, one should be the appointed leader in charge of follow-up. Other resources to consider include additional staffing needs, money, fundraising, and collaboration.

Setting goals is tricky but a foundational component of the opening meeting. These goals should be measurable and outcomes focused. To be effective, each organization must agree on the definition of success for purposes of the partnership and ensure that it is directly tied to the goals. As stated in the report released at *The Path Forward* event, "Measurement of progress is essential for long-term success. The most promising of programs are able to connect success stories to real data that are moving the needle on improving student performance. Investing in what works makes perfect business sense."

Again, dissent between partnering organizations is not rare or necessarily bad. Disagreements aren't personal—all work should be done with the end goal in mind. One common obstacle is when communication gets lost in translation. New partners often want the same things yet talk about them differently. Don't let this serve as a barrier to getting things done. Have patience and bring in an intermediary who may be able to help bridge communication gaps. One way to avoid impediments

is to write down what both organizations agree on (e.g., challenges to overcome, mutual goals, plan of action) and have each organization's champion share the document internally with colleagues to ensure that people interpret the terms of the partnership similarly.

## Gaining Buy-In and Creating Your Strategy

As your partnership goals are clarified, getting buy-in from internal executives and leaders will have far-reaching effects. The quickest way to make an initiative matter to everyone in the organization is to make it matter to the president/CEO. Make the case of why this partnership and the agreed-upon goals are crucial to the organization and the community at large.

Once you have agreed upon your mutual goals, tied them to some kind of measurement, and confirmed internal support, the next step is to develop your strategy. This will be an evolutionary process. However, having a well-defined blueprint of how you will accomplish your goals is essential to gaining expansive buy-in from other potential partners and community leaders.

One of your greatest strengths is that you know your community better than most others. How can you communicate your strategy in an appealing way to demonstrate why and how this is a win for the community? A lesson from previous efforts is to figure out how to put together a messaging piece that appeals to peoples' heads and hearts. USCCF's *Laggards to Leaders* report includes lessons from state leaders who have been part of successful efforts to improve student achievement. The authors said,

**Lots of reform strategies can work, but ... they need to be adopted and executed with an eye to local realities. ... States succeed at educational improvement when key stakeholders adopt a strategy, stick to it, collaborate as they put it to work, and then pursue it thoughtfully and courageously.**

Or put more candidly as former Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings specified at *The Path Forward* event, "... upend the old system of just sending checks and hoping for the best."

Creating a well thought-out strategy involves arming yourselves with data. A natural inclination for data wonks is to report the data as it is (i.e., a bunch of numbers on an Excel sheet), but this does little to elicit an action-oriented response. Use the data to tell a story—going about it this way gives you a chance to interest broader audience members and involve them as part of the solution. There are plenty of resources available (including those listed in this report) that provide discernible data at the state level—and in some cases, data that can be broken down to the district level.

Depending on your specific needs, bringing in external experts who can provide data and understand the context is valuable, especially those who can leverage the various strengths of each organization to drive improvement. Imagine if you organized a meeting for technology-related employers to show them your state's STEM passage rates to inspire their engagement. As those company leaders think about labor market demand planning, K–12 data can be powerful.

Similar to gaining buy-in from your company's senior leadership, doing so for community stakeholders is pivotal to help you build your army of volunteers and/or supporters. It is worthwhile to strategize which players have the trust of your intended audience—whether it is elected officials, parents, church leaders, and/or teachers. As the recruitment process occurs, it is chiefly important for partners to reiterate the same key messages and terms for engagement so that there is no misunderstanding about the unified end goal.

Some partners have maintained that it is advisable to create an executive committee made up of well-respected and connected community leaders. This should include representation from both the business and civil rights communities, leaders who will bring gravitas to the partnership's mission. These leaders can speak with authority, eliminating time to waver on decision making, and they should be sought after based on their ability to avoid the groupthink trap. As NAACP National Education Chair Adora Obi Nweze advised *The Path Forward* crowd, “Bring forth people who think differently, look differently. Diverse thinking brings about stronger minds. If you think only one way, there's no way for you to process whether that's the best way or not.”

## Local Conversations for Local Solutions

Whether it is a formally created executive committee meeting or a simple effort to recruit fellow advocates, hosting local conversations can be useful to test your approach. This kickoff convening should have a clear agenda of what you aim to accomplish and a playbook that includes a tactical plan. Be up front about community needs, the collaborating organizations' goals, and how you plan to work toward those goals.

Part of your role as leaders of the initiative is to be aware of local sensitivities and address them. Depending on your community, it may help to start with small groups to be nonconfrontational. From there, you can expand to a larger convening and include PTA, church leaders, educators, and—as several *Path Forward* attendees suggested—the students themselves so that they feel tied to the initiative.

As you expand your network, it is easy to try to solve all problems for all people—that should not be the intention of this collaboration. Stay focused. If conversations drift from your goals and the predetermined agenda, move people back on track and always bring them back to your end goal. Previous partnership leaders suggest starting and closing every meeting with a reminder of the end goals, and some even print this on the agenda to serve as a constant reminder.

## Mutual Accountability but Differentiated Responsibility

Once you have received buy-in from local stakeholders and held conversations to discuss your strategy, be transparent about next steps and how you plan to implement them. Establishing short-term wins can be beneficial. When you have achieved them, communicate them to your volunteers and supporters so that people feel energized. Doing so effectively relies on being thorough when tracking progress or lack thereof.

Follow-through is a paramount element of building trust, which is not only important to the foundational relationship of the championing partners but also for those who have joined as advocates for the initiative. The popular idiom “do or do not—there is no try” applies here. Although it may require being flexible and adjusting tactics, seeing your proposals through to completion is the surest way to be accountable. Follow-through requires setting deadlines and benchmarks. You may need to fine-tune over time but remain firm on making progress. The partnership relies on holding one another accountable on the respective designated tasks.

Since you have completed the hard work of engaging trusted community leaders in your initiative, continue to keep them involved by identifying opportunities for them to be public faces for the efforts. This could be as simple as writing an op-ed in the local newspaper, setting up an interview with a news station, or serving as a guest speaker at an event related to the chosen initiative.

## How Partnerships Can Enhance Policy to Ensure Every Student’s Success

Given the recent passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act, local governments will have more control over accountability; therefore, business and civil rights leaders, in particular, will play a major role in holding states accountable for improving academic experiences for all students. In your local communities, even raising public awareness of the state policymakers’ role in developing accountability systems to ensure equity and excellence in education for all students is urgently needed.

Several of the lessons mentioned previously relate directly to the role of policy in creating local solutions to our national education issues, especially the importance of trust as we transition to this new reality of local control. Rick Hess, American Enterprise Institute director of education policy said at *The Path Forward* event, “When you’re trying to drive reform and policy in these relatively small states, there’s a degree of trust, familiarity, and agility that often escape reformers when they try to take these lessons and bring them to larger states; there’s going to be a lot more fumbling of the baton as it gets handed off, and that means there’s a need for patience and sustained focus.”

Notably, trust is a commonly mentioned component to achieving successful partnerships. Although perhaps more difficult to do in statehouses than over coffee in a laid-back convening with local leaders, it is prudent to build trust even with those who do not see eye to eye on every issue. Hess added, “We’ve often tried to run education reform like a college football program. Fire a coach every two years; as if we expect the next guy is going to be a miracle worker. That’s not how you build trust.”

## Conclusion

We know that effective partnerships don’t happen overnight. USCCF’s *Partnership Is a Two-Way Street* report tells a realistic story: “Business leaders who want to make a difference are often steered to model cities, where tales of collaboration dominate the conversation. But they may not realize that these successful efforts are the product of tumultuous, hard-nosed endeavors—and that what they are seeing is the calm that follows the storm.”

What we have learned is that there are promising partnerships to study and consider. These success stories are usually models of persistence, quick to embrace that this can’t be a short-term effort. Let your partners know that you plan to be around for the long run. Making a commitment is about showing that there is value in hard work—it takes more than throwing money at a problem hoping it’ll resolve itself.

We can agree that education equity requires immediate attention and a lot of challenging work to improve. People are passionate about education, and we are better for it. There is something to be said, however, for channeling outrage. As Hess said at *The Path Forward* event:

**Outrage is the right response when we recognize that we’re stealing the future of any child, that we’re not cultivating his or her gifts. But the key is to channel the outrage constructively. Otherwise, what can happen is that the outrage can work against us. At times, it seems that our natural response to outrage is to see how aggressively we can Tweet or how loudly we can shout. A more measured approach is usually going to do more for kids.**

Smith followed up with a challenge to the audience: “I’d like to change outrage to urgency ... how are we actually changing urgency to political will to change the system for these students?”

We are capable of providing a better path forward for all our students. Let’s figure it out together.

## Additional Resources

**Leaders & Laggards:** The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation's signature education report, *Leaders & Laggards*, has a long-standing history of effectiveness in informing the business community, policymakers, and the public at large about education in each state. This state-by-state report card analyzes K–12 effectiveness, K–12 educational innovation, postsecondary education, black student achievement, and state efforts to improve academic achievement.

**Laggards to Leaders:** This case study report takes a close look at what happened in the three places (the District of Columbia, Hawaii, and Maryland) that made the largest gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report between 2005 and 2013. The profiles offer a chance for key stakeholders to discuss achievements and how the gains occurred.

**Partnership Is a Two-Way Street:** To make a difference in the education arena, business can function as a critical customer, a partner, or a policy advocate. This resource tells the stories of business leaders in Austin, Nashville, and Massachusetts who adopted these roles, thus stepping up to make a big difference in K–12 schooling.

**Education Reform Playbook:** This guide helps business leaders think strategically on how best to contribute to K–12 education reform in their communities, states, and across the country. It offers practical advice for those considering new initiatives, and it addresses a wide range of questions designed to help businesses analyze their capacities, assess the school system's needs, identify priorities for engagement, understand the culture and politics of public education, and develop appropriate ways to measure the impact of their work.

**School Board Questionnaire:** School boards play a unique role in school district governance. To effectively execute their responsibilities, school board members must clearly understand district governance and have a strong commitment to advancing student outcomes. This resource includes a list of sample, nonpartisan questions that voters, editorial boards, and other stakeholders can use to gauge the views and knowledge of school board candidates. The questions are designed to be customizable for individual districts and communities, regardless of size or geography.

**Making Youth Employment Work:** This resource looks at youth employment through the lens of the business community and argues that youth hiring practices are not just good acts of stewardship but also serve a valuable business function. The paper notes five competitive advantages of employing young adults, outlines approaches to implementation, and identifies common barriers to success and the essential elements necessary to mitigate those challenges. The report also offers an employer checklist and case studies of companies that have been successful in their efforts.

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## The Path Forward: Checklist of Questions to Consider

Creating a successful partnership requires collaboration, drive, and a mutual desire to achieve real and measureable outcomes. This checklist provides an overview of questions to consider when forming a partnership.

### At the Starting Gate

- Be reflective—consider community needs and what you want to achieve from a partnership
  - What are the most significant challenges facing your organization? Your community?
  - What goals are you trying to achieve?
  - In what ways will the partnership help you attain your goals?
  - What capacities do you have to be a champion for the partnership?
  - What are your strengths?
- Be proactive—get to know your potential partners
  - What work have they previously been involved in? With whom?
  - How can you align your respective missions?
  - How can you leverage one another's strengths?
  - What can each organization contribute (e.g., staffing, money, fundraising, and collaboration building) to the partnership?
  - Who will be the champion from each organization? Who is the follow-through leader?

- Be intentional—set your strategic direction
  - What areas and challenges do you both agree on?
  - How will you formalize partner expectations?
  - What does success look like in the short term? Long term?
- Be accountable—set measurable, outcomes-focused goals
  - How will the partners hold one another accountable?
  - What is a reasonable timeline to aim for achieving your goals?
  - How will you measure outcomes?
  - What processes are in place for follow-through?

## Gaining Buy-In and Creating Your Strategy

- Activate allies—gain buy-in and support
  - Which internal senior leaders from each organization can serve as public champions?
  - Who will be the most positive and influential voices in your community?
  - How can you engage a broad range of community leaders?
  - How can you leverage data to build the case for engagement?
- Activate local conversations—host meetings with partners and stakeholders
  - What is the best tactical approach to engage your community?
  - How will you communicate the agreed-upon goals of the partnership to your supporters?
  - What are the agreed-upon indicators of success?
- Activate your strategy—be thorough and transparent
  - What are the significant milestones over the short term? Long term?
  - What are the best ways to communicate to your allies when progress occurs?
  - How will you engage partners throughout the initiative?







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