

Business Leaders, Educators and Policymakers: Ten Tips for Creating a Dialogue To Improve Student Success

Education is a passionate topic for many people. We all have school experiences, both good and bad, we may have children and grandchildren who are currently in school and we have heard stories about what is working and what is not. This tip sheet is designed to help business leaders navigate the sometimes difficult conversations they may have with educators and policymakers about the imperative to improve the academic achievement of all students and the challenging decisions that must be made to raise standards.

1) Do your homework and ask for help.

Come to meetings prepared. You don't need to be an expert, but it helps to have a working knowledge of the issues and the relevant data. Educate yourself on the issues through reading, research and conversations with friends and colleagues. Schools and education expectations have changed considerably over the last few years; if you haven't been involved recently, you may not know what is happening in schools today. Many business associations have staff members who are knowledgeable on education issues and who will be happy to talk with you and provide you with information, resources and additional contacts.

2) Insist that all children can learn at higher levels.

Some people cite numerous reasons why their students are not succeeding. The children are poor, they come from broken homes, their parents are not involved or there aren't enough books in the library. While these factors certainly make it more difficult to educate students, they do not make it impossible. There are schools in every state of the union in which all students are learning at high levels—even students from disadvantaged backgrounds. While there are links between students' overall *achievement* levels and their parents' income, there is no such linkage between income and students' *progress* levels. In fact, many of the schools making the most progress raising student achievement are those schools that serve students from the most-disadvantaged backgrounds.

After twenty years of education reform, the data prove that all children can achieve, no matter what their background when they come to school, when they are given the right expectations, right teaching, right classes and right support. Other factors may determine where a child begins, but good teachers and good schools can determine where a child ends up.

3) Know the common education myths – and the corresponding facts.

There are many “myths” that educators, policymakers, businesspeople and the public believe (and repeat) about education. Be aware of such myths and how they can get in the way of strategic problem-solving. Be willing and able to respond to these myths with the facts.

4) Don't be intimidated.

Most business leaders are not education experts, just as most educators are not business experts. In every profession there are acronyms and jargon; the education field is no different. Ask for explanations and clarifications to make sure you understand the issues and what is being discussed. Do not accept that educators are the only individuals with relevant expertise and solutions.

5) Share your expertise.

To help improve education, business people need to bring their particular strengths and talents to the table. Many everyday business practices are not commonplace in education, such as setting measurable goals, strategic planning, using data to evaluate programs and improve results and responding to customer needs. Help educators evaluate the cause of achievement problems by identifying, compiling and reviewing the *relevant* data, refusing to accept education myths and advocating and supporting change based on the data.

6) Advocate for bold actions based on what is best for students.

Business leaders can and should advocate for what is best for students and students' improved academic achievement. Reform and change in education and public policy often come at too slow a pace—and sometimes the needs of adults take precedence over the needs of children. Business leaders need to create a sense of urgency and urge educators and policymakers to do what is best for students and to do it more quickly. Business leaders have the tools, expertise and credibility to advocate for bold change.

7) It is ok to disagree – but keep an open mind.

It is okay to disagree, but it's not necessary to be disagreeable. There are always two sides to every issue. Be willing to listen to other points of view and try to understand why educators believe what they believe. Remember that you may view the same situation very differently based on your positions and past experiences. Different perspectives are essential to finding solutions. If you do not agree with an idea, ask questions and see if you can find common ground. If not, do not give up or give in. And remember that raising student achievement through education reform is neither quick nor easy—but it can be accomplished.

Dialogue	Debate
Work together to find a common understanding. The goal is finding common ground.	Oppose each other and try to prove one another wrong. The goal is to win.
Listen to others to understand, find meaning and agreement.	Listen to others in order to find flaws and to counter arguments.
Search for basic agreements.	Search for disagreements and differences.
Assumes that many people have pieces of the answer and that together they can develop a workable solution.	Assumes you have the right answer.

8) Develop relationships but maintain your independence.

Get to know the educators and policymakers you will be working with. It is always easier and more enjoyable to work with people you know and trust. Be honest about what you and your company can and cannot do. Follow through on promises. But remember to maintain your independence, as a significant source of business leaders' credibility on education reform is their independence and willingness to serve as the voice both for youth and the broader community in the public debate.

9) Be aware of prejudices and stereotypes.

Be aware of any prejudices you may bring to the table-- and remember that educators may have similar prejudices or stereotypes about your profession.

10) Have fun!

Often the work you do with education will be volunteer work—or an “add-on” to “your real job.” To raise academic achievement and improve our schools, it will take patience, perseverance and people willing to commit. So enjoy the time you spend on these issues—even when the work feels frustrating or slow. It will be more rewarding if you remember the bottom line: Better life options for more kids.

Additional Resources: Education Trust www.edtrust.org; Schools and Communities Working Together: A Guide for Public Dialogue and Problem Solving, Study Circles Resource Center, www.studyircles.org