

**Topic:**

**Characteristics of School-Firm Partnerships in Public Education**

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In an increasingly integrated world, firms face exacting competitive pressures. To maintain their edge, they depend on a qualified innovative workforce (Becker 1993; Crouch, Finegold and Sako 1999; McMahon 2000). This fact gives public education a special role, because it shapes the firms' future workforce. It also encourages business to collaborate with government towards improving the students' skill levels, even though disagreements over issues such as educational goals, methods and outcomes are frequently hampering their efforts. Seen from another perspective, many political scientists consider public-private sector collaborative arrangements as a reflection of the dominant role of business in society (Block 1987; Carnoy 1984). Neither of these perspectives appears to consider the other side's viewpoint or focus on the possibility that government and business may collaborate to their mutual benefit in areas like public education.

School-firm partnerships represent one way in which firms have chosen to collaborate with the public schools. They seem to be particularly prevalent in cities like Chicago with a long tradition of civic engagement among the business elite (Abu-Lughod 1999; Shipps 2003). These alliances are not always welcomed by community and teachers' groups who may fear that public education is becoming too beholden to corporate interests. Notwithstanding their objections, since 1995 Chicago's Mayor Richard M. Daley has openly encouraged business leaders to engage with the city's public schools. School-firm partnerships in Chicago are therefore an excellent venue in which to ask questions about the nature and key characteristics of these collaborative arrangements.

This paper will discuss the preliminary results of open-ended, semi-structured interviews with participants of firm-school partnerships between medium and large corporations from various industries and the Chicago Public Schools. It will begin with a

brief historical background on the development of school-firm partnerships in Chicago. According to Education scholar Peter Martinez, the 1983 publication of “*A Nation at Risk*” by the National Commission on Excellence in Education galvanized Chicago business leaders into taking action. Next it will discuss the conceptual framework, outline the nature of the current firm-school partnerships and, based on the interview data, describe and analyze the key school-firm partnership characteristics. My goal is to gain a full understanding of the nature and key characteristics of school-firm partnerships from the perspective of each participant, and identify the pros and cons of this collaboration. Finally, this work-in-progress also takes a first stab at whether or not the data fit the hypothesis that school-firm partnerships can be beneficial for all participants involved and not lead to the dominance of corporations over public education.

Chicago’s high level of civic engagement makes the city an outlier among large U.S. cities. Yet this circumstance yields a rich source of interdisciplinary data for public-private partnerships and societal problem solving. This paper’s grounding in political science contributes a fresh perspective to the topic of multi-organizational partnerships. It can help to explain collaborative strategies and their outcomes by examining, for example, how the distribution of power between the partners affects key characteristics of school-firm partnerships and the collaborative framework as a whole.

**Themed session #4:** Intersectoral Collaborative Arrangements: Effective Vehicles for Societal Problem Solving?

**Key Words:** School-firm partnerships; collaborative framework; power; mutual benefit

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