Letter to Business People


Dear Business Person:

Did you know that approximately one-half of the work force in the United States has easy and routine access to a microcomputer or a terminal tied into a mainframe computer system? Did you know that more than one-fourth of United States households have a general purpose microcomputer? (This does not count the 40 percent that have a Nintendo!) More than half of these home computers are purchased for work-related activities, but there is also a very strong emphasis on educational uses.

Contrast these figures with the one computer workstation per 20 students that is average for the precollege education system in the United States. Factor in the fact that most teacher training programs lack adequate access to computer-related technology and the resources to prepare their faculty to use such facilities. Based on such data, it is not surprising that American business and industry are unhappy with the products of our educational system. The world of business and industry is changing very rapidly, but our educational system is not designed or funded for rapid change.

The private sector has recognized that it has a vested interest in improving our educational system, and it has much to contribute to that effort. The number of education-business partnerships has grown markedly in the past few years. Typically, when a school or school district enters into a partnership with the private sector, its primary underlying thought is acquiring resources such as equipment and money. However, the private sector cannot donate enough resources to modernize our educational system. Resources from the private sector can help, but there are other, more important things that these education-business alliances can accomplish. For example:

1. Locally, regionally, and nationally the private sector should insist that we have a high-quality educational system. The typical American student does not believe that doing well in school will lead to getting a good job. American business and industry could lead to substantial improvement in our educational system merely by publicizing that they give preference in hiring to better students, and then actually give them such preference.

   It is evident that the private sector places major emphasis in the quality of the school system when they are considering the creation of new corporate sites or major movements of staff. This should be widely publicized, and sites that do not measure up should learn about their deficiencies. Nationwide publicity on the desired standards would do much to raise the overall standards for education that are being set throughout the country.

2. The private sector has come to understand the benefits of empowering workers, of using quality circles, and of reducing the number of levels of
management. It understands accountability and responsibility in a manner that is quite different from that used in most of our schools. Education-business alliances should focus on helping schools to use these modern business practices.

Businesses compete; if they do not compete successfully, they go bankrupt. To a very large extent, schools do not compete, and there are few penalties for failure to compete. We cannot allow local school systems to have a large school dropout rate and to produce unemployable graduates. The private sector must help local educational leaders and taxpayers understand the standards that are needed for employment, and they must insist that these standards be met.

3. The private sector has far exceeded our education system in learning to make appropriate use of computer-related technology. Appropriately designed education-business partnerships can provide both students and educators with a window into a world that is new, exciting, and challenging.

The typical worker who needs to make use of a computer has ready access to such facilities. As a rough estimate, there will be twice as many microcomputers and computer terminals installed in the private sector during 1991 as the total installed base used in all of our precollege schools for instructional purposes. Much of the equipment in schools is antiquated. The gap between what goes on in the classroom and what goes on in business and industry is growing. To a large extent, teachers and school leaders are not aware of this massive and increasing technological gap between schools and the private sector. Education-business partnerships can focus on education of teachers, educational leaders, and school board members.

The International Society for Technology in Education has a mission of working to improve our educational system. This professional society stands ready to help you as you work on dealing with the types of issues addressed in this letter.

Sincerely yours,