



# Partial Credit: How America's School Superintendents See Business as a Partner

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## Executive Summary

In America's siloed society, the link between our education system and our business community is critical to the nation's future. When that connection is strong, young Americans emerge from their education with the knowledge and skills to thrive in the workforce, able to make themselves and the United States prosperous. When it is weak, growth and opportunity stall.

The link is especially vital now. Today, America's prekindergarten through twelfth grade (PK-12) schools are in need of dramatic improvement. Business leaders persistently report that they cannot find in America the skilled, productive employees they need in order to succeed in increasingly competitive global markets. The education system has the potential, perhaps as never before, to prepare students to become the employees that companies would love to hire. Business leaders, in turn, have the potential to help educators as they strive to strengthen our education system.

It is unclear, however, whether the relationship between PK-12 educators and business leaders is healthy enough for them to work together well. How widely, and how effectively, are businesses engaged in America's schools? How welcome are they there? Do educators and business leaders see eye-to-eye on the state and trajectory of America's economy?

To address such questions, researchers at Harvard Business School and The Boston Consulting Group reached out in the fall of 2013 to the superintendents of the 10,000 largest school districts in America. Of them, 1,118 generously participated in our survey. Four strong patterns emerged from the superintendents' responses and are highlighted on the following page.

## Wide but not deep business engagement

Business is already involved in the vast majority of America's school districts, but business is engaged in what appears to be a fragmented array of subscale efforts, most focused on short-term benefits for students rather than long-term improvement of the education system.

95% of superintendents reported some form of business involvement in their districts.

64% of superintendents had business leaders to turn to for advice and support.

Only 12% of superintendents saw their business communities as deeply involved in their school districts.

By nearly 3 to 1, business efforts to donate money and goods and to support individual students outnumbered deeper engagements in curriculum design, teacher development, and district-level management assistance.

## Positive impressions, limited evidence

Superintendents have a favorable impression of current business engagements, especially those associated with larger state-wide or national efforts. But they note that their impressions have rarely been backed up by formal studies.

Nearly 90% of business engagements in schools were judged to have positive effects on student outcomes.

Only 10% of superintendents reported a formal evaluation of any business effort to support education.

## Eagerness for more and different engagement

Though some superintendents are frustrated by how business has approached education in the past, the vast majority would welcome greater engagement by the business community in the future, in new and deeper ways.

More than 80% of superintendents hoped to see greater business involvement in their districts in the future.

Only 0.5% called for business to be less involved.

## Significant barriers to greater engagement

There are, however, important barriers to greater engagement, including stark differences in the perspectives of education and business leaders. Most importantly, superintendents have a very different, and much more optimistic, assessment of the state and trajectory of America's schools than do business leaders.

65% of superintendents described America's PK-12 education system as **better** than that of other advanced economies. Only 19% of business leaders said the same.

57% of business leaders described America's PK-12 education system as **worse** than that of other advanced economies. Only 10% of superintendents said the same.

Taken together, the findings suggest that there is great untapped potential in the alliance between educators and business leaders. But tapping that potential will require a concerted and coordinated effort, especially to build mutual understanding and trust between the two sectors.

## The superintendents and the survey

Our survey of America's superintendents emerged from a larger, ongoing research effort that seeks to understand *how business leaders can partner with educators to improve America's schools*. The larger effort involves not only the two organizations that surveyed the superintendents—Harvard Business School and The Boston Consulting Group—but also the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Background research conducted in that context led us to a conclusion: though anecdotes suggest that businesses donate a lot of employee time and company money (by one estimate, \$3–4 billion each year<sup>1</sup>) to PK–12 education in America, there is virtually no systematic evidence on the depth, breadth, or nature of business engagements in schools. No one knows, for instance, how common it is for school districts to receive support from businesses, what forms that support takes, or whether the support is effective.

TABLE 1: CHARACTERISTICS OF DISTRICTS OF SUPERINTENDENTS WHO DID AND DID NOT PARTICIPATE IN THE SURVEY

	Among participants	Among non-participants		Among participants	Among non-participants
<b>REGION</b>			<b>STUDENT-TO-TEACHER RATIO</b>		
West	19%	16%	Minimum to 13	20%	23%
Midwest	38%	36%	>13 to 14	14%	14%
Northeast	20%	22%	>14 to 15	15%	15%
South	24%	26%	>15 to 17	21%	22%
<b>TYPE OF LOCATION</b>			>17	30%	25%
City	9%	7%	<b>PORTION OF STUDENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION</b>		
Suburb	28%	25%	0%–9.9%	18%	16%
Town	23%	22%	10.0%–12.4%	23%	23%
Rural	40%	45%	12.5%–14.9%	25%	25%
<b>NUMBER OF STUDENTS</b>			15.0%–16.9%	17%	16%
400–749	14%	19%	17%+	17%	20%
750–1,499	22%	25%	<b>PORTION OF STUDENTS WHO ARE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS</b>		
1,500–2,499	16%	18%	0% (includes missing)	23%	27%
2,500–4,999	21%	20%	0.1%–0.4%	16%	18%
5,000+	26%	19%	0.5%–1.4%	20%	17%
<b>NUMBER OF SCHOOLS</b>			1.5%–4.9%	22%	20%
1 to 3	28%	36%	5%+	18%	18%
4 to 5	24%	25%	<b>PORTION OF STUDENTS WHO ARE BLACK, HISPANIC, NATIVE AMERICAN, AND PACIFIC ISLANDER</b>		
6 to 9	22%	20%	0%–2.4%	10%	14%
10+	26%	19%	2.5%–4.9%	16%	16%
			5.0%–14.9%	29%	25%
			15.0%–49.9%	30%	28%
			50.0%+	15%	18%

Figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

To address these and other fundamental questions, we turned to the top leaders—the superintendents—of America’s 10,000 largest school districts. The 1,118 superintendents who participated in our survey reflected the enormous diversity of the nation’s school districts. Some respondents ran massive systems of more than 250 schools and more than 100,000 students; others oversaw a single school with fewer than 500 students. In the districts whose superintendents took part in the survey, the portion of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches ranged from 0% to 100%, with a median of 50%. The responding districts, as classified by the National Center for Education Statistics, were a mix of urban (9%), suburban (28%), towns (23%), and rural (40%). Because urban districts are so large on average and rural districts so small, urban students made up 25% of the total students in the surveyed districts, while rural students accounted for just 15%.

The responding superintendents also had a wide range of personal backgrounds and experiences. Nearly half (46%) had been at the helms of their current districts for three years or less, while 9% had been in their posts for more than a decade. For most respondents (61%), the current post was their first superintendency, but many had led other districts, in some cases for decades.

In interpreting our findings, readers should bear in mind the possibility of response bias. The superintendents who opted to take part in the survey, 11% of those who were invited, might not be fully representative of all superintendents. For instance, those who responded might be individuals with more experience, better experiences, or worse experiences with businesses than the typical superintendent. Table 1

shows, reassuringly, that the districts of respondents do not differ dramatically from non-respondents’ in terms of observable characteristics. Compared to non-respondents, responding superintendents are somewhat more likely to work in large districts, in urban or suburban districts, in districts with high student-to-teacher ratios, and in the West or Midwest.<sup>2</sup>

The survey was conducted by Abt SRBI, a leading research firm. The survey instrument focused on two topics. First, we posed a set of questions related to U.S. economic competitiveness. In particular, we asked superintendents to assess the strength or weakness of certain U.S. institutions, including America’s education system through high school. In earlier surveys, we had asked business leaders the very same questions. The superintendents’ answers allow us to determine whether education and business leaders see America’s business environment similarly or differently.

The second portion—and majority—of the survey asked superintendents about their experiences with and perspectives on business engagements in their school districts. Much of this part of the survey focused on seven ways that businesses and business leaders can support schools, as outlined in Table 2. We asked, for instance, whether business is currently undertaking each type of activity in the superintendent’s district; if so, whether the activity improves student outcomes; and if the activity is not undertaken now, whether the superintendent would like to see such activity in the future. The superintendents’ responses provide what is, to our knowledge, the first systematic evidence on the nature of business’s support for America’s schools.

**TABLE 2: TYPES OF BUSINESS ENGAGEMENT EXAMINED BY THE SURVEY**

Category	Additional description given in the survey
1 Donate money	For example, to support school programs, sponsor extracurriculars, pay for field trips, or improve school facilities
2 Donate goods	For example, computers, school supplies, meals, or athletic uniforms
3 Support students	For example, by giving scholarships, providing one-on-one mentors, offering internships, or encouraging employees to volunteer in schools
4 Support professional development	For example, by providing funds or experts for training
5 Contribute to curriculum development	For example, by giving guidance to align content or skills with employers’ needs via committees or other means
6 Advocate for schools in the community	For example, by supporting schools in policy or funding debates or in groups such as the Chamber of Commerce
7 Assist in district-level improvement efforts	For example, by helping with organizational redesign, funding implementation-support partners (like consulting firms), or offering management advice or expertise

## Wide but not deep business engagement

The overall picture that emerges from the superintendents' responses is mixed. On the one hand, business is widely engaged in America's schools. On the other hand, the efforts appear fragmented, with a heavy weight toward "checkbook philanthropy."

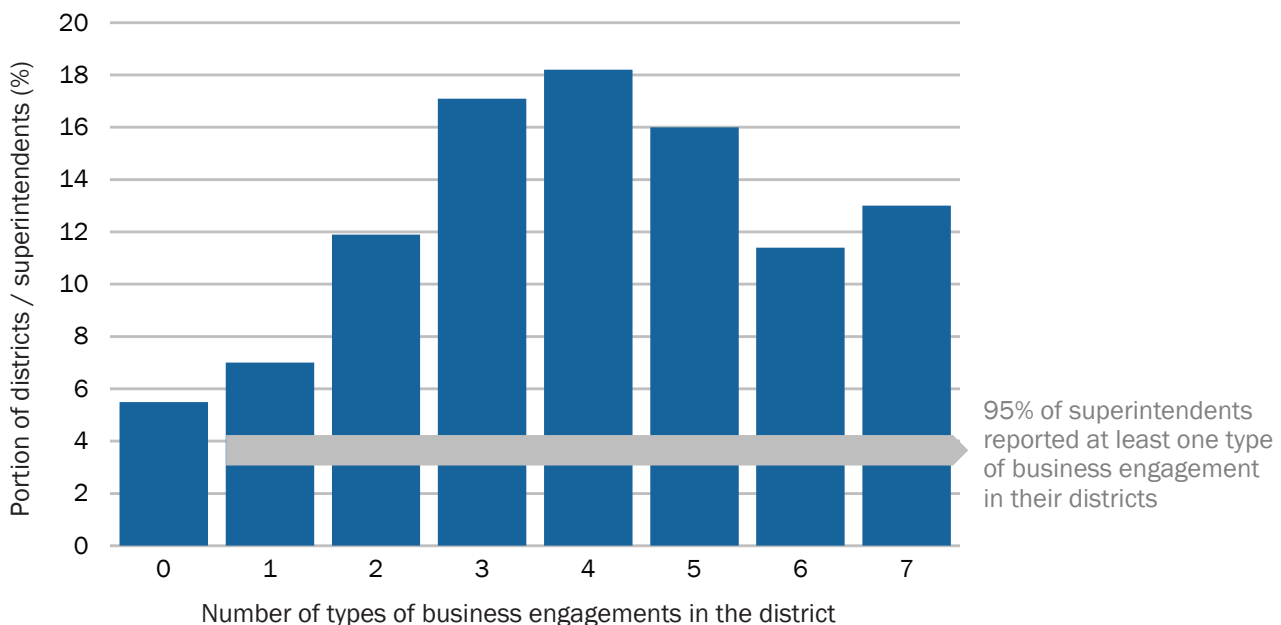
Nearly every school district in our survey receives some degree of support from business. Figure 1 shows the portion of superintendents reporting that none of the seven types of business activities is happening in their districts, the portion reporting just one of the seven, and so on up to all seven types. Business support was altogether absent in only 5% of school districts, and the median district saw four types of business activity.

We also asked superintendents whether they have business leaders to whom they turn regularly for advice and support. The great majority of superintendents, nearly two-thirds, said "yes" (Figure 2). In urban districts, the figure rose to 84%.

Corroborating evidence arrived when we asked superintendents whether and why business leaders were interested in improving K-12 education<sup>3</sup> in their districts (Figure 3). Only 24% of superintendents reported that most business leaders in their districts are not deeply interested in improving education. A full 70% felt that business leaders are deeply interested, most often for workforce-development reasons.

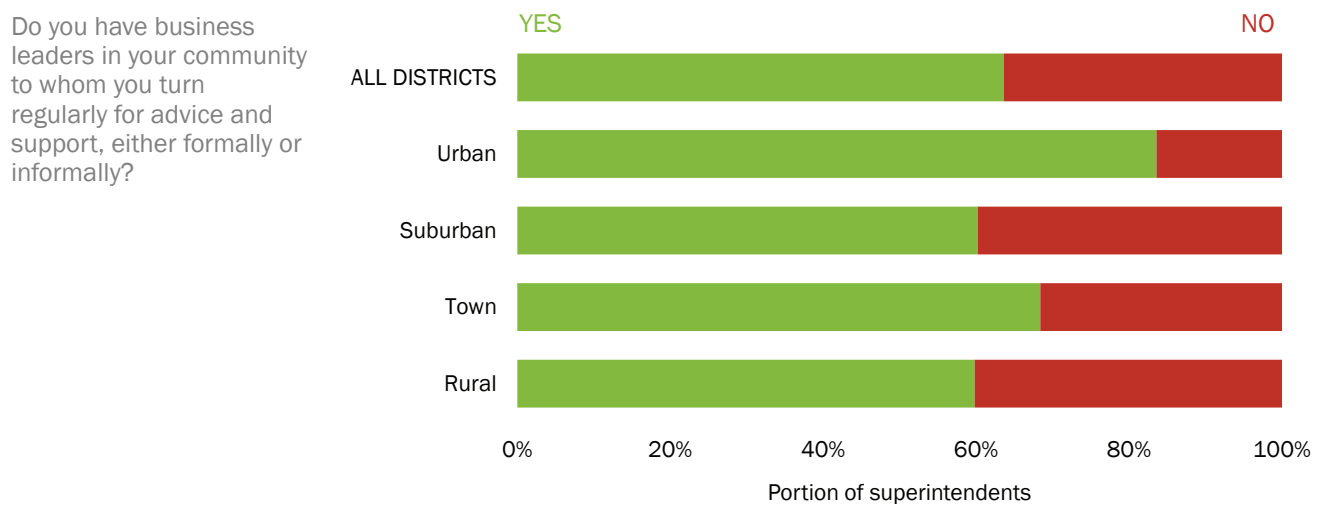
An *interest* in improving K-12 education, however, does not necessarily translate into *involvement* among business leaders. Only 12% of superintendents described their business communities, overall, as deeply involved in their school districts (Figure 4). Half felt that their business communities were somewhat but not deeply involved, and 37% described their business communities as barely or not at all involved in local schools. Business involvement was strongest by far in urban districts and lowest in rural areas.

FIGURE 1: BREADTH OF BUSINESS ENGAGEMENT

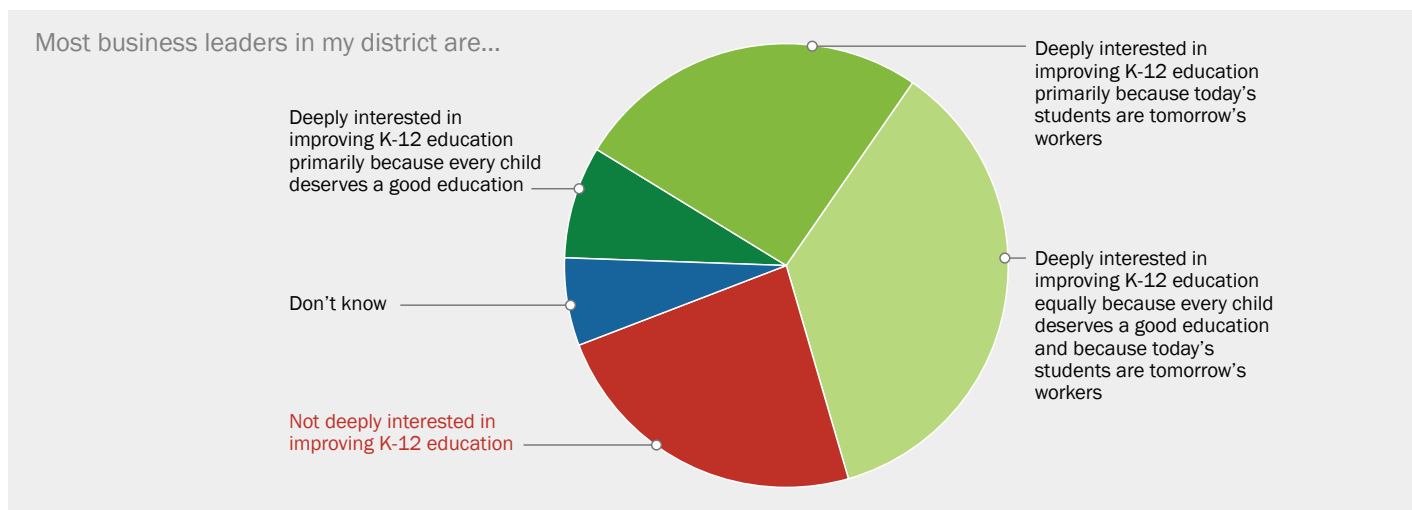




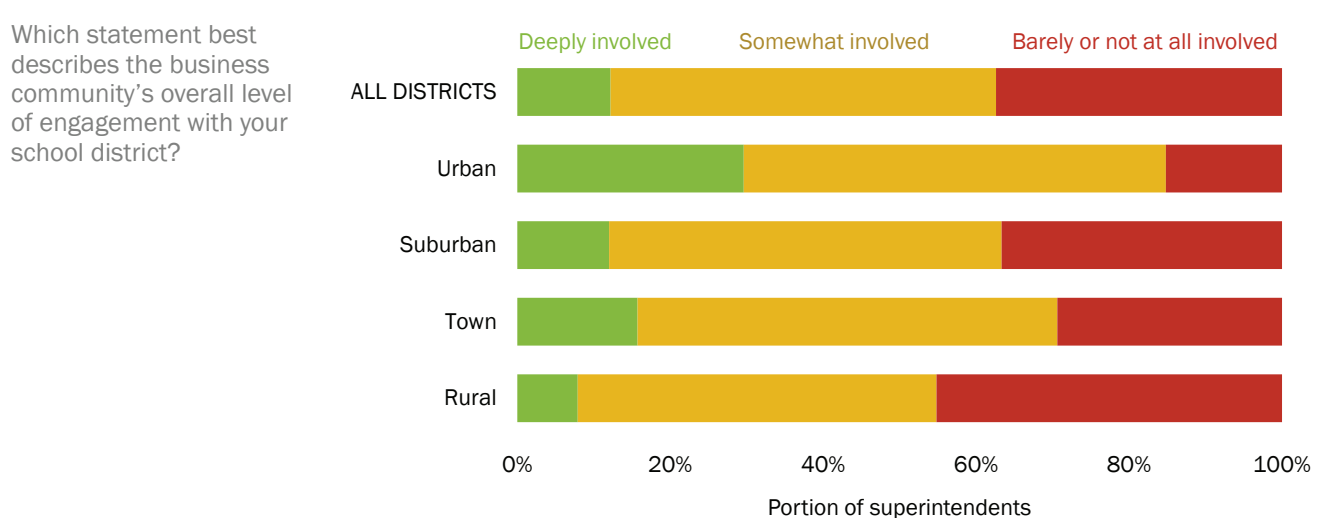
**FIGURE 2: ACCESS TO BUSINESS LEADERS**



**FIGURE 3: INTEREST IN IMPROVING K-12 EDUCATION**



**FIGURE 4: INVOLVEMENT IN K-12 EDUCATION**



A possible explanation for the gap between business-leader interest and involvement became clear when we examined how businesses tend to support districts and schools (Figure 5). Among the types of business activity in schools, the most common by far were donating money, supporting students (e.g., via scholarships), and donating goods. Businesses can accomplish all three without getting deeply involved in improving education. In contrast, efforts that require much deeper engagement—for instance, helping to build curriculum or improve district management—were far rarer.

We also examined whether current business engagements were parts of larger state-wide or national programs or were more local in nature (Figure 6). Across all types of engagement, local efforts outnumbered state and national efforts by a wide margin—more than 6 to 1, overall.

Interviews of education leaders, conducted independently of the survey, added confirming color to the statistics. The overall pattern that emerges is one in which well-intended business leaders engage in a fragmented array of local efforts, often pet projects, to support schools and districts. By and large, the efforts aim to benefit current students immediately—an admirable goal—but they do little to improve the education system over the long run. In essence, they alleviate the symptoms of a weak system but rarely strengthen the system. Enough businesses engage a little bit that nearly every school district gets some support, but few superintendents sense deep involvement and support from their business communities.

FIGURE 5: PREVALENCE OF DIFFERENT TYPES OF BUSINESS ENGAGEMENTS

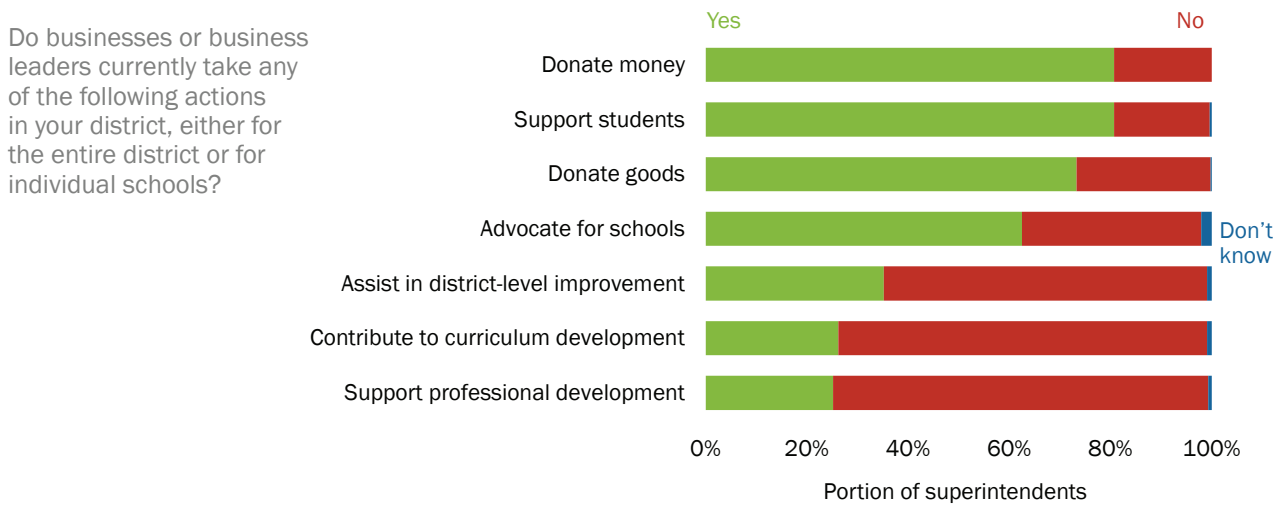
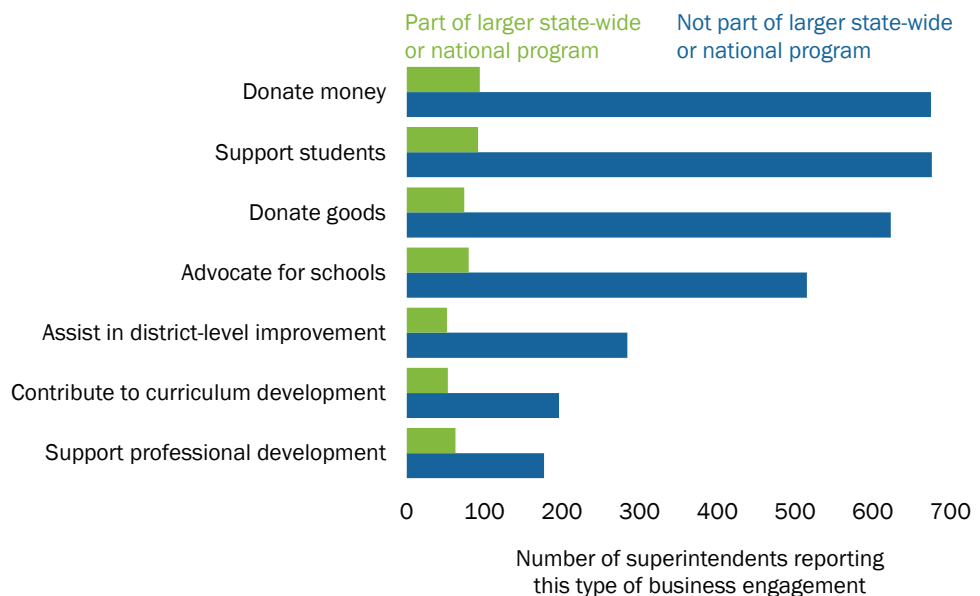


FIGURE 6: PREVALENCE OF LOCAL VS. STATE OR NATIONAL PROGRAMS



## Positive impressions, limited evidence

Despite fragmentation and less-than-deep involvement, superintendents had very favorable impressions of the impact of business efforts on student outcomes (Figure 7). The portion of superintendents reporting small or major positive effects topped 80% for all seven types of business activity. And virtually no superintendents reported negative effects (0.4%). Superintendents whose business communities advocated for schools in public settings were especially likely to report that the effort had a major positive impact (48%).

Though only a small fraction of business engagements were parts of larger state-wide or national programs, such engagements were far more likely than local efforts to have a major positive impact on students in the eyes of superintendents (Figure 8). This pattern held up across all seven types of business activity.

Note that we did not ask superintendents explicitly whether business engagements associated with larger programs were more effective. Rather, we asked separately whether an activity was part of a larger program and how effective each activity was. It turns out that those activities associated with a larger program were also far better received among superintendents. This strong pattern suggests (but falls short of proving) that the business community could increase its positive impact on education by focusing on and scaling up successful regional or national programs rather than launching additional, isolated local efforts.

Superintendents' impressions of business-activity impact were, by and large, exactly that: impressions. Only 10% of superintendents reported that the impact of any of the business activities in their districts had been evaluated and measured in studies (Figure 9). Our overarching sense is that no one knows with confidence what works and what doesn't when businesses try to support schools and students.

FIGURE 7: IMPACT OF BUSINESS ENGAGEMENTS ON STUDENT OUTCOMES

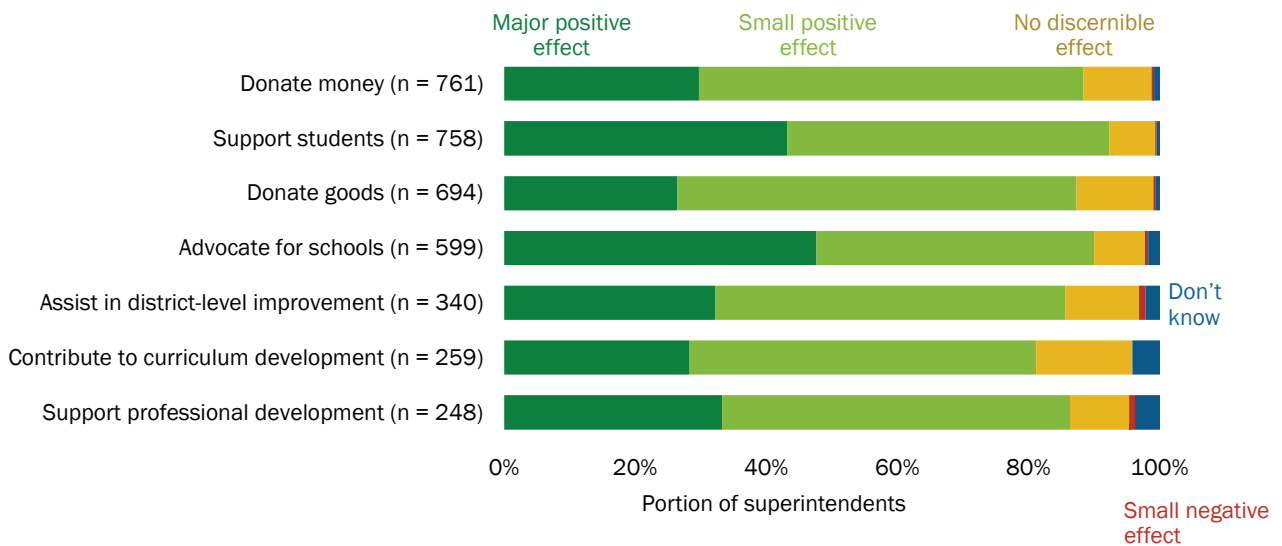


FIGURE 8: IMPACT OF LOCAL VS. STATE OR NATIONAL PROGRAMS

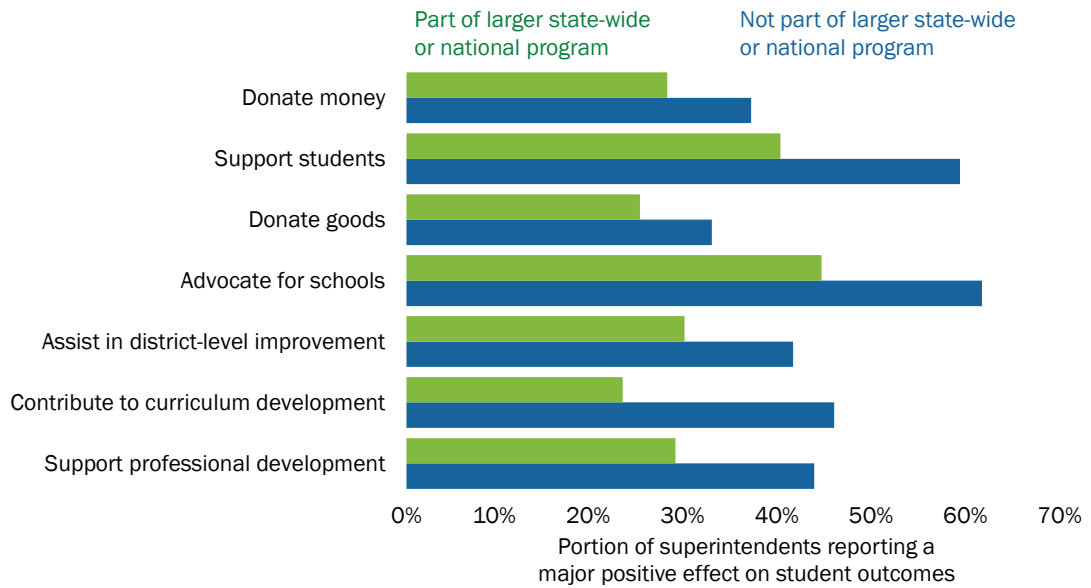
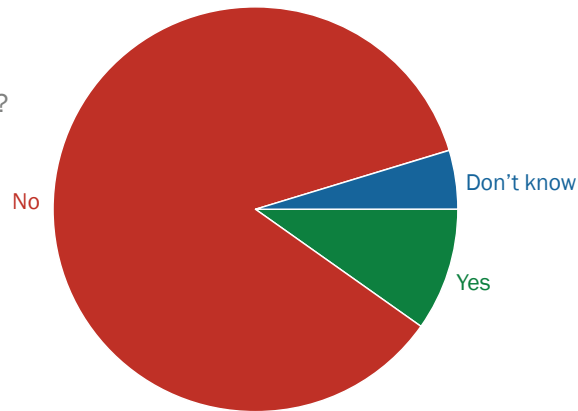


FIGURE 9: MEASUREMENT OF IMPACT OF BUSINESS ENGAGEMENTS

Has the impact on student outcomes of any of the business engagements in your district been evaluated or measured in studies?



## Eagerness for more and different engagement

Turning to the future, superintendents were remarkably eager to have business more involved in their districts and schools—and involved in new ways (Figure 10). Among the 81% eager for greater business engagement, 98% called for business to be involved in new ways or both the same and new ways. Among the 17% who preferred businesses simply to stay as engaged as they are today, 83% wanted involvement in new ways or both the same and new ways. Overall, only 3% wanted the same amount of the same types of engagement. And a mere 0.5% called for business to become less involved.

Among superintendents not currently seeing each type of business activity in their districts, interest in every type of new activity was very strong (Figure 11). Superintendents were especially eager for businesses to support students and advocate for schools in public settings. But even the least appealing form of additional activity, contributions to curriculum development, attracted interest from more than 60% of superintendents. Interest was high among types of engagement that require deeper partnerships, like supporting professional development.

FIGURE 10: SUPERINTENDENTS' PREFERENCES FOR FUTURE BUSINESS INVOLVEMENT

Overall, you would like your business community to...

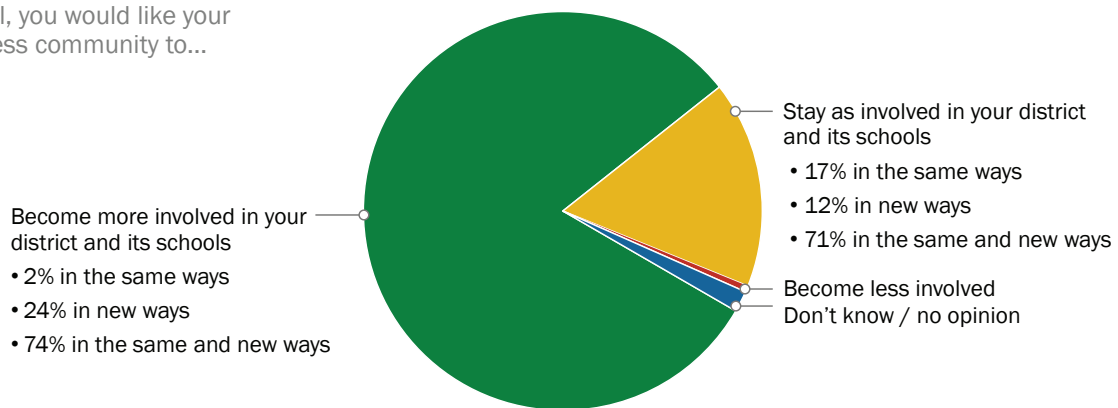


FIGURE 11: INTEREST IN NEW TYPES OF BUSINESS ENGAGEMENTS

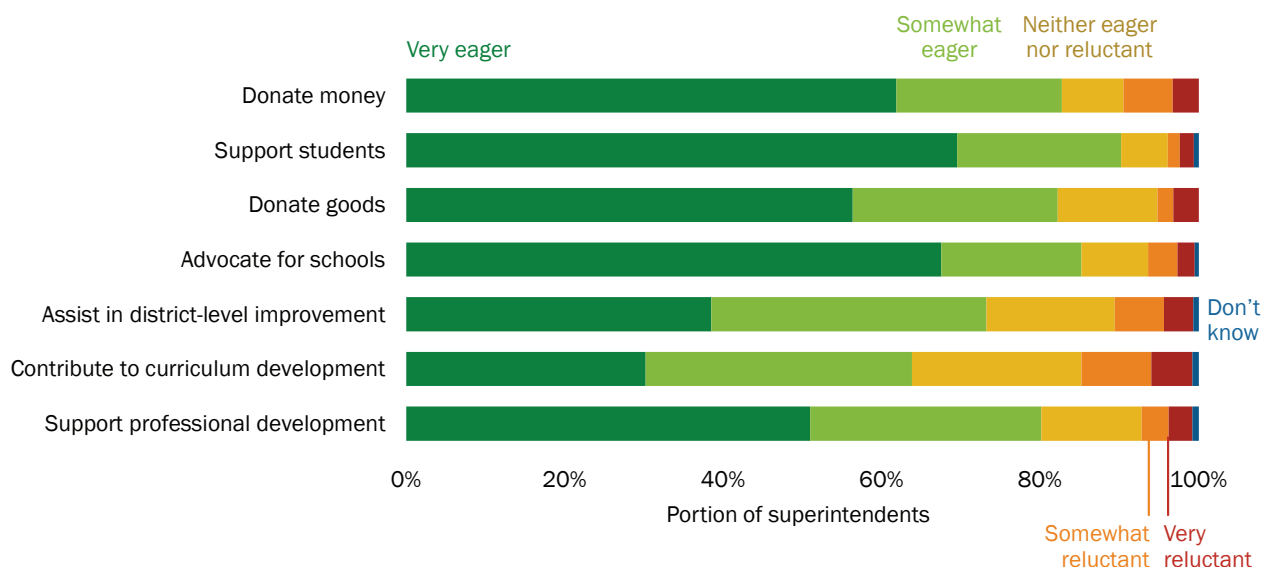


TABLE 3: SUPPORT THAT SUPERINTENDENTS WOULD IDEALLY LIKE FROM BUSINESS IN THE FUTURE

Type of desired support	Portion of responses
Help schools develop in students the skills required to succeed in the workforce	26%
Create apprenticeship opportunities for students	15%
Donate money, technology, and other goods to schools and districts	14%
Advocate on behalf of public education in policy debates	11%
Provide mentors to students	9%
Be aware of education issues and initiatives	5%
Provide volunteers to schools	5%
Support increases in taxes that fund education	3%
Serve on school boards and advisory councils	3%
Other suggestions	8%

Figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Overall, we were surprised by how eager superintendents were for greater engagement by business. It is, of course, vastly easier to welcome new engagement in a survey than in reality. But even accounting for that difference, we found the stated willingness to accept more support from business to be striking.

We also asked superintendents to describe, in an open-ended fashion, how they would ideally like the business community to support their districts in the future. Table 3 reports how often superintendents mentioned each type of desired support. The most frequent response, by far: superintendents wanted businesses to help them understand, and develop in their students, the skills that will allow students to succeed in the workforce. Superintendents were also very eager for apprenticeships for students—

presumably another way to help students land and retain jobs—as well as business support in policy matters. Superintendents mentioned donations of money, technology, and other goods, but that was far from a dominant theme.

While most respondents were optimistic about and open to greater business involvement in the future, *an important minority of superintendents expressed deep frustration with how business has engaged in the past*. The sidebar “Superintendents’ frustrations with business” shares a sample of these voices. Superintendents were especially impatient with business leaders who criticize the education system before understanding it and who point out problems in schools without trying to be part of the solution.

## Superintendents' frustrations with business

### LEARN AND HELP RATHER THAN COMPLAIN

*"Actually visit our school and observe, listen to teachers and students, and become part of an effort to formulate solutions to the problems in American schools. Students, teachers, and school systems are continually criticized by the business community at a time when we in education are facing monumental problems."*

*"Come to our schools and immerse yourself before judging or jumping to solutions."*

*"Take time to listen and learn about our challenges, then work collaboratively toward solutions that will both benefit the schools/school system and the businesses. Just making demands and providing critical feedback will not lead to transformation."*

*"Visit and tell us what [businesses] need. [Don't just] tell the media about what we are not giving them."*

*"Schools need business leaders to find ways to help schools improve the conditions for the poorest and most reluctant contributors to our country, not expect schools to fix them alone. We need partners in these challenges, not critics."*

*"I wish the business community would first really learn about how public schools work. Public schools share many similarities with the business community, but they are also very different."*

*"Too often, the business community wants us to operate like a business, and they consider test scores to be the end-all be-all of success. That has, ironically, led to a weakening of our education system."*

*"Don't assume that you know how to run a school because you have run a successful business."*

*"Believe in public education rather than voice support for charter and for-profit schools."*

*"Be engaged and interested in all aspects of our program, whether it be 'career-based' or not. Avoid having STEM as the be-all and end-all of the discourse."*

*"I would like business leaders to spend more time understanding what we are doing in public education before they swoop in and offer a set of 'solutions from the business world.'"*

*"Stop whining and be a part of the solution. Schools cannot and will not train 17- and 18-year-olds for specific jobs, jobs that are constantly changing. We can only provide strong foundational skills."*

*"As a partner, recognize that we have a level of expertise and offer to work collaboratively to reach our goal. [Don't] simply tell us what to do."*

### OFFER MORE THAN MONEY

*"Funding is helpful, but more importantly the business community needs to partner with schools to emphasize the importance of education to students. Anyone can throw money at a problem."*

*"I would like business to provide internships and mentoring programs, to participate in job and health fairs ... It isn't just about money."*

*"Money is nice, but I would like to see businesses work alongside teachers to provide meaningful examples of creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, and communication in our schools. These are the skills that will help our students to be successful in the global marketplace."*

## Significant barriers to greater engagement

Though superintendents were eager for business to be more involved in their districts, other survey responses highlighted daunting barriers to mutual engagement. Perhaps most important were stark differences in how superintendents and business leaders size up the state and trajectory of education in America.

Our survey presented to superintendents 17 elements of the business environment that prior studies have shown to be drivers of national competitiveness. The sidebar below lists and describes the elements. We asked superintendents to assess each element in two ways. First, on each, is the United States currently better than, the same as, or worse than other advanced economies? The percentage answering “better” minus the percentage replying “worse” is the horizontal metric in Figure 12. Second, on each element, is the United States pulling ahead of, keeping pace with, or falling behind other advanced economies? The percentage saying “pulling ahead” minus the percentage answering “falling behind” is the vertical metric in Figure 12.

Figure 12 reports the assessments of the elements of the national business environment among superintendents in 2013. Figure 13 shows the assessments that emerged when we asked the very same questions of nearly 7,000 alumni of Harvard Business School’s MBA and longer executive education programs (for short, “business leaders”). (The alumni were surveyed a year before the superintendents, so some differences between Figures 12 and 13 may reflect current events.)

Figures 12 and 13 reveal a sharp and important difference in perspectives: *Superintendents viewed America’s education system through high school as better than that of other advanced economies and keeping pace with other countries’ systems. Business leaders saw the nation’s education system as weak today and falling further behind.*

## Elements of the National Business Environment

### MACRO ELEMENTS

**Macroeconomic policy:** soundness of government budgetary, interest rate, and monetary policies

**Effectiveness of the political system:** ability of the government to pass effective laws

**Protection of physical and intellectual property rights and lack of corruption**

**Efficiency of legal framework:** modest legal costs; swift adjudication

**Complexity of the national tax code**

**Education system through high school:** universal access to high-quality education; curricula that prepare students for productive work

### MICRO ELEMENTS

**Logistics infrastructure:** high-quality highways, railroads, ports, and air transport

**Communications infrastructure:** high-quality and widely available telephony, Internet, and data access

**High-quality universities** with strong linkages to the private sector

**Context for entrepreneurship:** availability of capital for high-quality ideas; ease of setting up new businesses; lack of stigma for failure

**Availability of skilled labor**

**Flexibility in hiring and firing of workers**

**Innovation infrastructure:** high-quality scientific research institutions; availability of scientists and engineers

**Regulation:** effective and predictable regulations without unnecessary burden on firms

**Strength of clusters:** geographic concentrations of related firms, suppliers, service providers, and supporting institutions with effective collaboration

**Quality of capital markets:** ease of firm access to appropriate capital; capital allocated to most profitable investments

**Sophistication of firm management and operations:** use of sophisticated strategies, operating practices, management structures, and analytical techniques



FIGURE 12: ASSESSMENT OF ELEMENTS OF THE BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT: SUPERINTENDENTS IN 2013

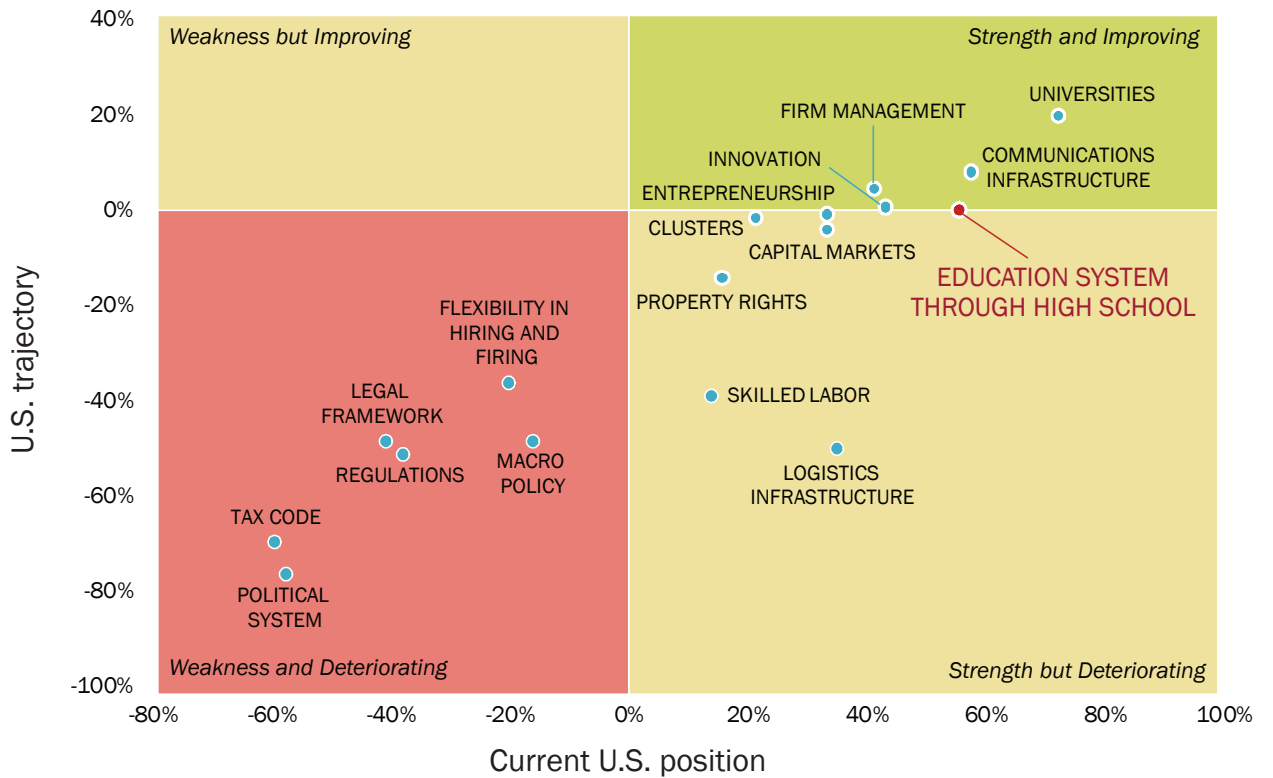
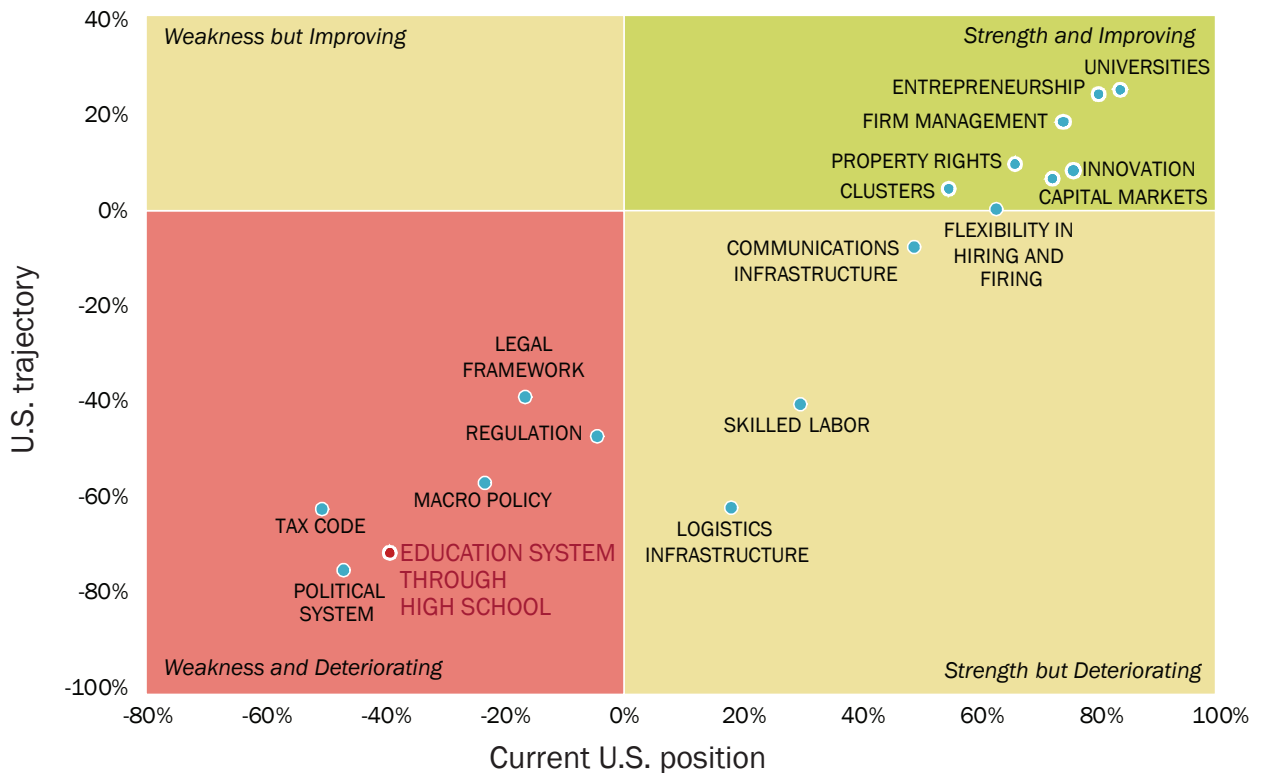


FIGURE 13: ASSESSMENT OF ELEMENTS OF THE BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT: BUSINESS LEADERS IN 2012



The stark difference on education is especially striking because on most other elements of the U.S. business environment, education and business leaders saw eye-to-eye. For 10 of the 17 elements, superintendents and business leaders agreed on the quadrant in which the element lies. For instance, both superintendents and business leaders felt that the political system and the tax code are weak and deteriorating. Five other elements (clusters, capital markets, property rights, entrepreneurship, and communications infrastructure) were in different quadrants in Figures 12 and 13 but were not far apart. Compared to business leaders, superintendents saw flexibility in hiring and firing in the United States as much worse. The difference may reflect the heavily unionized and regulated environment in which superintendents manage.

The best objective data suggest that the reality of America's education system lies somewhere between the assessments of superintendents and business leaders. For example, on international tests administered in 2012 by the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), American students scored 17th among 34 OECD countries in reading, 21st in science, and 26th in mathematics. The comparable U.S. rankings in 2009 PISA results were 14th, 17th, and 25th, respectively. Overall, then, the PISA scores of American students are somewhat below average, and their relative scores have deteriorated slightly over time. PISA results alone would place America's K-12 system in the lower left quadrant of Figure 13 or 14, though probably not as low or left as business leaders put it. Of course, standardized test scores are not the only measure of an education system's quality. The favorable assessment of the average superintendent might factor in other important dimensions of quality, including the ability to foster student creativity.

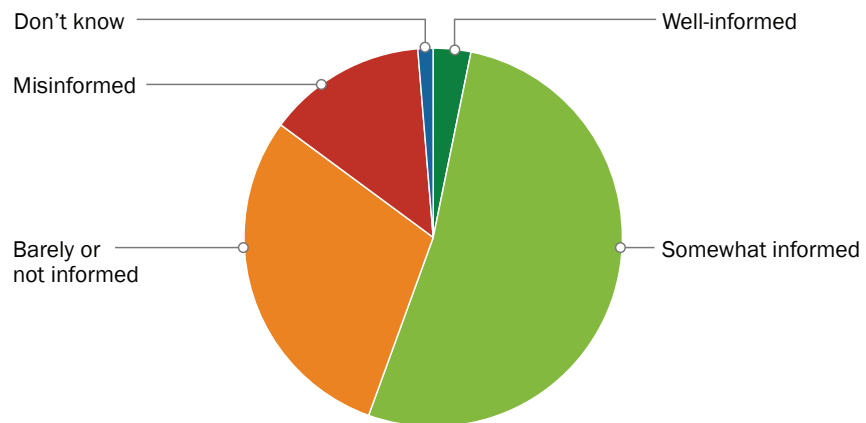
The sharp contrast in perspectives can be a significant barrier to mutual understanding and deeper partnerships. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that most superintendents appear unaware of business leaders' pessimistic view of K-12 education. When asked how most business leaders in their districts view the state and trajectory of education in America, only 22% of superintendents predicted "weak and deteriorating." A plurality (25%) expected "strong and improving."

At least part of the contrast in perspectives may arise because business leaders are not well-informed about the education system. They may be especially unaware of recent progress in areas such as teacher development, personalized learning technology, the advent of higher standards, the prevalence of new data systems and measurement approaches, and professional development of district leadership, for instance. Indeed, far more superintendents characterize business leaders in their districts as misinformed (14%) than well-informed (3%) about education (Figure 14). Most superintendents describe local business leaders as only somewhat informed (52%).

The contrast in perspectives on education is not the only barrier to greater engagement by business. When asked an open-ended question, superintendents identified the wide range of barriers shown in Table 4. Among those barriers, two related factors stood out: time and understanding. Busy executives and educators lack the time to develop deep partnerships. And partly because they spend little time with educators, business leaders rarely understand well how school districts work and how educators see the world. The sidebar on page 18 describes, in superintendents' own words, the barriers to engagement they perceive.

**FIGURE 14: BUSINESS LEADERS' KNOWLEDGE OF K-12 EDUCATION**

How knowledgeable are the business leaders in your district about K-12 education?



Superintendents do, however, see steps they can take to make business more effective in supporting schools and students. The types of steps that respondents identified most frequently are shown in Table 5. In particular, the superintendents emphasized that education leaders should communicate schools' needs more clearly, be more welcoming to business leaders, and be open to deeper

alliances with business. As one superintendent put it, educators should "look beyond 'partnerships' as 'give me money.'" Another reflected on the evolving relationship between the school district and the business community: "We have been dancing for years. Now it is time to hug."

**TABLE 4: SUPERINTENDENTS' VIEWS OF THE MOST IMPORTANT BARRIERS PREVENTING BUSINESSPEOPLE FROM SUPPORTING K-12 EDUCATION EFFECTIVELY**

Category of barrier	Portion of responses
Business and/or education leaders lack the time to engage deeply with each other	27%
Business leaders don't understand education and/or don't share perspectives with educators	23%
Business and/or education leaders lack the money to engage deeply with each other	9%
Politics, regulations, and bureaucracy get in the way	8%
Business and/or education leaders lack people, resources, and channels to engage deeply	7%
Educators are not open, are suspicious of business, or have not asked for help	6%
Business leaders do not know how best to support education	4%
Business doesn't see supporting education as its role or responsibility	4%
The local area has few businesses	3%
Education is not a priority for business	3%
Other	6%

**TABLE 5: SUPERINTENDENTS' VIEWS OF STEPS THEY CAN TAKE TO HELP BUSINESSES BE MORE EFFECTIVE IN SUPPORTING K-12 EDUCATION**

Category of step	Portion of responses
Communicate educators' needs, requests, and/or perspectives more effectively to business	39%
Be more open to change or more welcoming to business	23%
Understand what business needs and/or align education to career paths	16%
Invite the business community to visit schools and/or work with students	7%
Listen to and be patient with business leaders	3%
Improve curriculum, standards, expertise, and professionalism	2%
Combat the policy and systemic barriers to business engagement	2%
Other	8%

## Superintendents on the most important barriers to effective business engagements in education

*“Everybody’s **busy!**”*

*“The biggest barrier to working together is just having the **time to spend together** to really understand the complexities of both systems—having collaborative dialogue.”*

*“We speak a **different ‘language’** and both groups need to work at speaking in plain terms with one another. Educators are very guilty of being jargon-heavy!”*

*“Schools are **not businesses** and cannot be treated as such. We educate everyone. We cannot throw back imperfect raw materials like industry does.”*

*“What we have is a misalignment between the expectation of business leaders, who want to employ automaton to make widgets, and the SAT-ocracy, which tells every student that they need to get a four-year degree, after which a high-paying job in their chosen field will be waiting. We have a **drastic misalignment** between the business community and the education community regarding the relationship between the two.”*

*“Business needs to tell us what they need instead of telling us what we are doing wrong! We are professionals in our field. We want to be their partner. The business community needs to **talk to us and not down to us.**”*

*“Both businesses and educational institutions are very involved in their own **regulations and laws**, which prohibit them from carrying on a dialogue and having the options to make changes.”*

*“Whether it is true or not, there is a real perception in the educational community that the impetus behind the educational reform movement is privatization of education as a **profit source for business**. That is the elephant in the room.”*

*“We lack research and data for best practices and **best partnerships.**”*

*“Most business leaders don’t think it is their job or responsibility to support K–12 education. This **short-sighted view** is the most significant barrier to their providing critically needed leadership and support.”*

*“I am of the opinion that our business leaders are being incredibly **short-sighted about the level of crisis** that we are facing on a global scale (not unlike many educators who are not looking outside their district or state).”*

*“We hear that business wants, wants, wants, a better educated workforce; however, outside the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), I see no commitment. Business appears so focused on today’s bottom line and complaining how schools should be doing better, but **where are the corporate initiatives** to support local schools?”*

## Toward a stronger partnership

Taken together, the survey findings paint a picture of a partnership whose potential is only partially fulfilled.

On one side of the partnership stand America's business leaders, who realize that their future depends on the nation's schools. After all, tomorrow's skilled workers, prosperous citizens, and avid consumers must come from today's successful students. Business's commitment to education shows up in the broad engagement we observe—for instance, the fact that 95% of superintendents report some form of business activity in their districts. Yet we also find evidence that business has not yet engaged deeply in most districts. To the contrary, most business activity appears to focus on local efforts that meet the short-term needs of students but do not help educators strengthen the education system for the long run.

On the other side of the partnership are education leaders, including the superintendents we surveyed. They are enthusiastic about the impact of current business efforts on student outcomes, but they are also eager for business leaders to support the nation's schools in new and deeper ways.

At least two obstacles stand in the way of a stronger, more effective partnership between leaders in education and business. First, as the stark contrast between Figures 12 and 13 reveals, educators and businesspeople lack a shared view of the reality of U.S. education: superintendents are overly optimistic and business leaders too pessimistic about where we stand today. Moreover, superintendents fear that business leaders engage in schools without the knowledge to do so effectively. Clearly, progress will require educators and businesspeople alike to invest deeply in mutual understanding. Toward this end, our accompanying publication "The Brink of Renewal" aims to introduce business leaders to current issues, challenges, and advances in America's schools. It argues that markedly faster progress in student performance is in reach in America as never before, but it is far from assured.

A second obstacle to a stronger partnership is uncertainty about the most potent ways for business leaders to work with educators. How can business best partner with schools? We tackle that question in our publication "Lasting Impact." There, with examples drawn from across the country, we examine three powerful ways that education and business leaders are working together today to improve, perhaps even transform, America's schools.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Committee Encouraging Corporate Philanthropy, *Giving in Numbers*, 2013 edition.
- <sup>2</sup> For the presentation of survey findings, data were weighted to provide estimates that correct for differences between the responding superintendents' mix of district size (number of students) and district locale (city, suburb, town, or rural area) and the mix of all superintendents who were invited to participate in the survey.
- <sup>3</sup> Most of the survey questions asked superintendents about "K-12 education" rather than "PK-12 education" because many superintendents do not have prekindergarten programs under their supervision. To match the wording of the questionnaire, we refer to "K-12 education" when reporting specific survey results. Elsewhere in this report, we discuss "PK-12 education" in order to acknowledge the need for action and policy reform starting before kindergarten.

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