

Better Schools

Use the brainpower of business leaders

Mobile, Ala.

In 2001, Alabama's largest school district was so troubled that it was scheduled to be taken over by the state: Test scores were terrible, and voters hadn't approved new funding for the district in 41 years. The business community was feeling the failure too. "When we'd work on recruiting businesses to come to Mobile, one of their first questions was, 'Tell me about your education system,'" says Leigh Perry Herndon of the Chamber of Commerce. "We knew it wouldn't improve unless we got involved."

Business leaders joined civic leaders to push for a new property tax to fund the schools: 10,000 people turned out to rally before the vote. The tax passed. Next the business community wanted to help turn the schools around. "A lot of people cared but didn't know what to do," notes Herndon. "We told them, 'Your money is great, but let us have your brainpower. Help make real-world business lessons translate into the classroom.'"

One such initiative by the Chamber of Commerce created an apprentice program that brought students into local hospitals and clinics to learn about health care. As a result, in the last two years, 7% more students have pursued studies or careers in that field.

In addition, businesses have sent employees into the schools to help develop lesson plans. Across Mobile, test scores are up and college scholarships are at a record \$54 million. "People are getting genuine ownership of their public schools," says Carolyn Akers of the Mobile Area Education Foundation. ■