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Education

Show, don't tell: Education initiatives get more personal

Involvement by employers and nonprofits in education during the past decade have moved beyond painting school walls and signing fat checks.

Today, people are getting into actual classrooms to teach students about the business world, entrepreneurship and life in general. Students are being asked to learn at an earlier age skills to help them prepare for college, hold a job and balance a checkbook, and lessons from adults can help.

It's easier to give money, but it's harder to get involved and actually make a difference," says Alan Meltzer, founder and CEO of the Meltzer Group, an insurance services company based in Bethesda.

As businesses and nonprofit organizations boost their efforts to improve education and literacy, they are faced with more choices that can lead to new models for philanthropists. Companies have become more willing to invest locally in, for example, charter schools and leadership initiatives to get more young folks interested in executive positions as the population ages and current CEOs begin to retire. After-school programs are also important to make sure students have a place to go while their parents are still at work.

What must happen, experts say, is businesses and nonprofits have to work together more frequently to meet the needs of students. "Literacy can't be addressed as a solitary issue," says Siobhan Canty, president and CEO of Greater DC Cares, a coordinator of volunteerism and corporate philanthropy in the Washington area. "It's a family, community and school issue."

Companies a decade ago would donate on a more general basis, for a variety of issues. "Just giving away \$1,000 [to everyone] under the sun," is how Cox Communications spokeswoman Tania Hindert describes the previous philanthropic thinking. Now philanthropic efforts are more specific. Cox, for one, focuses on education, youth and technology issues. The communications provider emphasizes Internet safety education for children.

With the immigrant population growing throughout the Washington area, companies such as Cox have developed programs to educate immigrants about life in the United States. Through Cox's program, kids take field trips to court to see how the judicial system works and they also meet firefighters and police officers. "This is so they feel like they belong," Hindert says.

Computer clubhouses in Northern Virginia give high-risk students in low-income families a chance to complete their homework and then learn more about math and science, as well as Web and graphic design, robotics and even music and filmmaking. "We're one of the wealthiest areas of the country," says Colleen Hahn, president and executive director of the Equal Footing Foundation, which is a partner in running the clubhouses. "Yet we have pockets of underserved. Bridging that gap is really important."

