

# Strategic Partnering: Debunking the Myths

**D**istricts across the country—urban, rural, suburban, large, and small—are teaming with external service providers to consider out-of-the-box approaches to the many challenges they face, from better using shrinking budgets to improving the quality of the learning environment and advancing student achievement. Yet, misperceptions about outsourcing cause some administrators to shy away from the potential benefits.

Although many district leaders understand that outsourcing nonacademic functions like custodial, maintenance, and food service can help manage costs, they may not realize that it can also improve results in other areas, such as employee development, facilities quality, nutrition education and awareness, and student lunch participation. Bringing in outside expertise and resources can also help districts plan better, use resources more efficiently, reduce risk, inspire innovation, and develop a more motivated workforce.

One common misperception about external partnerships is that the district will lose control over its operations. In reality, school districts that outsource these functions continue to oversee the entire operation in partnership with the service provider, using a collaborative approach to develop strategy and service delivery models that will achieve the district's objectives. What's more, external partners can help districts optimize resources, develop and implement new ideas, and identify needed employee skill sets. The outcome is actually more time, flexibility, and control.

## Maximum Financial Management

School district leaders who are considering outsourcing nonacademic support functions are often drawn to the potential for cost savings. The ability to maximize the effectiveness of every dollar spent has always been a pressing concern, but outsourcing can lead to other benefits as well.



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By Cathy Schlosberg

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For example, districts that outsource food service operations often see increased student participation, which may generate surplus funds for reinvestment back into the district; districts that outsource facility services often enjoy more innovative equipment, improved workforce use, and other improvements in systems and processes. The savings can be used to enhance academics or facilities, replace dated equipment, renovate outdated cafeterias, or redesign kitchens. The opportunities can be monumental to a district and can reinforce the key mission of improving student achievement.

### Food for Thought

School officials today are looking for creative solutions to achieve financially and nutritionally sound food service programs. An external partner can transform cafeterias into enriched dining environments that offer nutritionally balanced entrée choices and multiple serving lines to feed a large number of students in a short time, engaging education for students about the benefits of healthy eating, and employee training to ensure delivery of a quality food service program.

In many districts, food sales have increased dramatically when new, student-focused dining programs have been introduced. External partners can also help capture additional revenues for the school district by expanding service to include breakfast and snacks.

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A district's decision to outsource its food service program can have a positive effect on student satisfaction and the district's ability to generate significant revenue. Increased meal participation also allows districts to receive more government reimbursement through the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs.

### Safe Learning Environments

Research shows that a school's appearance can affect student learning and behavior positively. Many districts rely on external partners to help them maintain attractive, clean, comfortable school environments that enhance learning and school pride. Partners can bring expertise, operating efficiency, best-practice programs and processes, and economies of scale that can take district operations to the next level.

Many districts have old school buildings that require major renovation and resources to convert them into well-run, safer environments. An outsourcing partner can support



the district with an investment in new materials, equipment, and training. New construction projects can also benefit from outside expertise. An external partner can serve as an on-site manager of facilities maintenance, act as an in-house adviser to the district, attend construction meetings, and ensure that building systems perform to specification.

### Golden Opportunities

Outsourcing partners make a long-term commitment to school districts and their communities by supporting community improvement programs, participating in district and community activities, engaging local companies for new business opportunities, contributing to student scholarships, and hosting school health fairs or nutrition education programs that reinforce a healthy lifestyle at home.

In short, with a soft economy, tight budgets, and close public scrutiny of how taxpayer dollars are spent, outsourcing nonacademic functions can be a golden opportunity worth evaluating for any district. Beyond improving food service participation or enhancing the school environment, partnering with a professional services provider contributes expertise to a district and vital support toward achievement of a district's primary mission of educating students. ■

Cathy Schlosberg is vice president of marketing for ARAMARK Education, based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.