Promising News in Education

How Chambers of Commerce, Businesses, And Other Sponsors Are Working with Schools to Create Leaders, One Child at a Time

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What the world needs is more models and less critics.

No one is blind to the fact that there are problems in today’s schools. But amidst the challenges, there are some very encouraging things happening. Among them is what is taking place in schools that are teaching principles of personal leadership to elementary school students, and how visionary sponsors are supporting them.

The approach originated at A.B. Combs Elementary in Raleigh, North Carolina in 1999. The school looked and felt like so many other public schools. It had a fifty-year-old building, and a racially and economically diverse population. Test scores and teacher morale were low. The principal, Muriel Summers, had tried multiple programs to ignite improvements with little lasting success.

About that time, Ms. Summers attended a 7 Habits seminar, held mostly for business leaders. As she engaged in the content and observed the 900 adults in the room, she kept thinking, “Why do we wait to teach these concepts until people reach adulthood? Why don’t we teach them to children when they are young—before their habits become set?”

Before long, Ms. Summers had her entire staff trained in the 7 Habits. The school took on as a mission, Developing Leaders, One Child at a Time, and began teaching the habits to students in very creative ways. The aim was not on making CEOs, but on helping children learn how to lead their lives.

Of the 7 Habits, the first three focus on helping children to be self-reliant. They emphasize taking personal responsibility for one’s life, having a plan, and making good use of time. The next three habits focus on helping children to interact effectively with others. They include skills for seeking win-win solutions to problems, skills for listening and speaking, and skills for working in teams. The seventh habit supports the need to address the whole child, including their physical and social/emotional needs.

It wasn’t long before A.B. Combs’ teachers and parents began noticing a dramatic difference in the school’s culture. Discipline referrals dropped significantly. Students learned to set goals and solve problems on their own. Teacher satisfaction rose, and teachers reported being more effective in the classroom as they applied the habits. In the process, parent satisfaction and involvement went up. And, though the new emphasis was not on academics, students passing end-of-grade tests rose from 65 percent to 97 percent. Upon seeing these types of results, the teachers sensed that they were on to something.
In 2006, A.B. Combs was named the #1 Magnet School in America. That’s when other schools started to take note. At the end of 2008, *The Leader in Me* book was published telling the A.B. Combs’ story, along with the successes of eight other schools that had adopted the leadership approach. In the short time since the book was released, more than 600 schools have implemented the process in the U.S. and abroad. Consistent outcomes that are being reported include:

- Increases in students’ self-confidence
- Decreases in discipline problems
- Increases in teacher satisfaction and effectiveness
- Acquisition of practical life skills for the 21st century
- Improvements in academic scores

While all of these outcomes are impressive and encouraging, what has the business community most excited is the life skills the children are developing. They are the same workforce skills for which parents and business people have been begging for years. They include skills for taking responsibility, planning, time management, conflict management, communication (both listening and speaking), getting along with others, problem solving, creativity, and balancing life.

### The 7 Habits of Happy Kids

As Muriel Summers, principal of A.B. Combs Elementary, sat among business leaders, she could not help but wonder why the 7 Habits were not taught to young people. Read the following synopses of the habits in kids’ language and see if you come to the same conclusion.

#### Habit 1: Be Proactive

I am a responsible person. I take initiative. I choose my actions, attitudes, and moods. I do not blame others for my wrong actions. I do the right thing without being asked, even when no one is looking.

#### Habit 2: Begin with the End in Mind

I plan ahead and set goals. I do things that have meaning and make a difference. I am an important part of my classroom and contribute to my school’s mission and vision. I look for ways to be a good citizen.

#### Habit 3: Put First Things First

I spend my time on things that are most important. This means I say no to things I know I should not do. I set priorities, make a schedule, and follow my plan. I am disciplined and organized.

#### Habit 4: Think Win-Win


#### Habit 5: Seek First to Understand, then to be Understood

I listen to other people’s ideas and feelings. I try to see things from their viewpoints. I listen to others without interrupting. I am confident in voicing my ideas. I look people in the eyes when talking.

#### Habit 6: Synergize

I value other people’s strengths and learn from them. I get along well with others, even people who are different than me. I work well in groups. I seek out other people’s ideas to solve problems because I know that by teaming with others we can create better solutions than anyone of us can alone. I am humble.

#### Habit 7: Sharpen the Saw

I take care of my body by eating right, exercising and getting sleep. I spend time with family and friends. I learn in lots of ways and lots of places, not just at school. I find meaningful ways to help others.

Students are naturals at learning the language of the 7 Habits.
Why Sponsors are Getting Involved

Of the 500+ schools that have implemented the process, over 40% have some type of sponsor involvement for all or part of their funding.

One of the first corporate sponsors to set the pace was the Decatur-Morgan County Chamber in Alabama led by John Seymour and Donnie Lane. They had read about *The Leader in Me* and decided to sponsor one school in their community. That school did so well that they determined to bring the process to all schools in the city. With the support of local businesses such as 3M, their vision is now set on bringing the *7 Habits* to all students in the county in an effort to change the culture of the community and enhance the readiness of the up-and-coming workforce.

More than 40 other chambers around the country have since followed Decatur’s lead and sponsored schools, mostly through their membership. Statesville, North Carolina, Chamber CEO, David Bradley, for example, worked with his community to sponsor four schools in its already award-winning district. David says that one of his biggest roles as CEO is to continuously demonstrate how the chamber is relevant. He says *The Leader in Me* is as relevant as anything his chamber has ever done since it is strengthening the youth of the community and supplying their future workforce with practical skills and critical life habits. The local police chief agrees, and used a drug-free grant to fund one of the schools. A similar occurrence is happening in Victorville, California where the police chief there says, “These kids are going to be buying cars, not stealing them.”

Consider other examples of how sponsors are getting involved:

**Panda Cares Foundation:** Founders of Panda Express, Peggy and Andrew Cherng, visited A.B. Combs and came away so impressed that they were determined to help spread the effort. They began near their corporate headquarters in Rosemead, California with six schools split between two districts. They have since expanded their reach to four other states and twenty-six schools.

**United Way:** After beginning with one school in Quincy, Illinois, the United Way determined to broaden the effort to all schools in their local district, as well as all county schools, and have now taken the *7 Habits* to all elementary and middle school teachers and students. High school students are next.

**Muscatine Connect:** After selling off his tire company to Bridgestone-Firestone, Marty Carver wanted to give back to his community. He had used the *7 Habits* to dramatically transform his company, so when he heard of the opportunity to allow students to get the same habits taught to them early on, he jumped on it. All eight schools are now underway in the local district.

**Staten Island Foundation:** The Staten Island Foundation opted to sponsor a new school that was opening up in its borough. That school was named the top performing school in New York City in 2011. As the local Chamber of Commerce viewed what was happening for the students, it determined the same *7 Habits* would benefit chamber members. This year it will sponsor its second *7 Habits* training event for adults.
The Leader in Me is designed to enable students to believe in themselves. But that requires more than an occasional pat on the back. It happens only as students are given the opportunity to use those skills and experience them in the day-to-day culture. It happens as they interact with living role models, and that’s why teachers and staff are the first to be taught the 7 Habits. Even parents become involved. It is a whole-school, whole-child effort that is built on a process that transforms the schools’ culture.

While FranklinCovey continues its quest to take the 7 Habits and other leadership solutions to corporate and government circles around the globe, nothing is more thrilling to us than what is happening in the classrooms. We know there are problems in today’s schools, but rather than simply joining the mass of critics, we choose instead to celebrate and applaud the schools and teachers who are doing much to make a difference in young lives and to improve our communities. We salute them and the tremendous sponsors that are working in tandem to make it all possible.

The world will always be stirred by the critics, but moved forward by the models.

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For information on sponsoring a Leader in Me school, visit www.theleaderinme.org, call your local FranklinCovey Education Consultant, or Joshua Covey at www.joshuacovey@franklincovey.com