School districts engage with a variety of vendors and consultants to help them on the road to transformation. Many of these engagements remain purely transactional and address a short-term goal or one-time need. Other engagements begin as transactional relationships and evolve into formal partnerships. These partnerships are a dynamic component of the district’s long-term strategy for change. In their most evolved form, they are part of a larger ecosystem, where partners work synergistically to accelerate district change.

Support Your District with the Right Ecosystem of Partners

Partnerships are beneficial in the following key areas of education transformation:

- System and pedagogy reform
- Teacher and administrator development
- Infrastructure expansion
- Classroom technology
- Assessment and curriculum development
- Fundraising
Characteristics of a Good Partnership

Good partnerships have defining characteristics that set them apart from other relationships:

- **Essential to transformation** – The partner provides products or services that are integral to the change process.

- **Mutual benefit** – Each partner understands the needs of the other, sees the value of working together, and benefits from maintaining the relationship. They have realistic expectations and create an agenda that fulfills the needs of both parties.

- **Sense of shared destiny** – Both partners share a common vision, set of goals, and values. They strive to deliver measurable value as a team.

- **Long-term commitment to success** – Each partner works diligently to meet the other’s needs, build a relationship, and work together to resolve challenges.

- **Deep bonds** – At the organizational level as well as the personal level, the district devotes more time and attention to building the relationship than would be possible to devote to a multitude of transactional relationships.

- **Trust** – Mutual trust and respect help create an environment that encourages innovation and risk taking on both sides of the relationship.
Ecosystem Development Process

The following discussion provides an overview of the steps involved in making a strategic transition from a transactional relationship to a partner relationship, and cultivating an ecosystem of partners. Many of the steps are also good practices for selecting and engaging in transactional relationships.

- Assign an ecosystem manager or team
- Clarify goals and establish criteria
- Collect basic information about potential partners
- Prioritize list of potential partners
- Initiate dialogue with potential partners
- Create a win-win environment
- Evaluate partnerships regularly
- Handle transitions proactively
- End partnerships consciously

Success Factors

The following factors help ensure a successful partnership:

- **Support for district’s vision** – The partner neither dictates constraints, imposes its own vision, nor detracts from the district’s primary goals.
- **Sense of ownership** – Partners have a stake in the relationship and are invested in the district’s success. They have been involved in decisions from the beginning and have received visibility for their involvement.
- **Selectivity and focus** – Leaders understand the district’s capacity to absorb new relationships and properly nurture them. They limit the number of partnerships to those that address an immediate, critical need.
- **Stability** – The partner demonstrates stability and strength as reflected by funding; qualified and committed staff; clear and aligned mission, goals, and strategies; public evidence of success; maturity; successful completion of projects; and satisfied customers.
- **Strong management** – One individual or cross-disciplinary team oversees the overall execution and creation of a partner ecosystem, while partner liaisons manage individual partnerships.
Assign an Ecosystem Manager or Team
Appoint one individual or cross-disciplinary team to oversee all partner relationships within the developing ecosystem. This individual or team will share information among departments, guide partner interactions, maintain alignment with the district's goals, and help ensure that the district maximizes the potential of each partnership as well as the entire ecosystem of partners.

Clarify Goals and Establish Criteria
Clarify and prioritize your goals for a partnership and for an ecosystem of partners, based on the district’s overall vision and goals for education transformation. Then, construct a criteria model that can be applied to multiple partners.

Collect Basic Information about Potential Partners
Identify and investigate product or service providers that appear to be aligned with your goals and partnership criteria. Collect the following information:

- Parent company; international, national, or local; private or public
- Articles, case studies, or other documents published by or about the candidate
- Reference customers
- Competition and market position
- Financial stability; patents and trademarks
- Ethical issues, potential conflicts of interest

Prioritize List of Potential Partners
Prioritize the list of potential partners according to what is most important to the district. Identify candidates that may be able to collaborate with one another to advance specific goals. Look for strategic engagements that address multiple needs, amplify the value of existing strategies, and have the highest overall impact. Look for opportunities that are easily within reach or fit naturally with what the district is already doing.

Initiate Dialogue with Potential Partners
Use this phase to illuminate potential areas of strength and weakness, including how well the various personalities interact with one another. Be sure to assess alignment with the district's interests and goals, financial stability and maturity, past experience, and total cost of ownership.

Create a Win-Win Environment
The best partnerships are based on trust, mutual goals, and honest communication. After you have decided to formalize a partnership, write a statement of work (SOW) or memorandum of understanding (MOU) to document a shared understanding of agreements. Then work with the partner on the following tasks:

As Soon as You Start
- **Establish goals** – Document each party’s goals for the relationship and expected outcomes.
- **Create a timeline** – Include deadlines for accomplishing specific tasks as well as checkpoints for assessing progress.
- **Specify engagement criteria** – Include roles and responsibilities, weekly meetings, monthly reports, and reporting structure.
- **Identify metrics** – Identify criteria for assessing the partnership’s progress and outcomes; focusing on quantifiable metrics.
- **Assign a partner liaison** – This individual oversees goal alignment and progress, and acts as a single point of contact for decision-making and important communications. Encourage partners to also appoint a partner liaison.

In the Early Stages
- **Check alignment** – Regularly check for alignment with each party’s goals and expectations, and realign as needed. This is especially critical in the early stages or when one team is involved in initial discussions, but another team executes the plan.

“Our sustainability model includes going beyond the school and working with the business community and the municipality as a whole to utilize their resources. Doing so over time, you develop community ownership, adoption, and support around utilizing technology to move people into the economic mainstream.”

Rodney Jordan
One Economy Corporation
• **Find early wins** – Identify early successes or synergies and build on them to strengthen the relationship.

• **Advocate for the partner** – Ensure staff, the community, and other stakeholders understand the rationale and expectations for the partnership, what is happening within the partnership, what is required of stakeholders, and how they will benefit.

**On an Ongoing Basis**

• **Maintain open communications** – Use technology such as video conferencing and online collaborative workspaces to communicate efficiently. Structure meetings to share progress, discuss challenges, and identify opportunities.

• **Meet in person** – Plan face-to-face meetings to establish stronger bonds.

• **Be alert to opportunities** – Take advantage of each party’s strengths and the dynamism of the relationship to develop new ideas, solutions, and strategies.

• **Allow for mistakes** – Partnerships provide a safe environment for testing new products, ideas, or approaches, yet most innovations require refinement. Prepare for and learn from failures. Refrain from public discussions about challenges.

**Evaluate Partnerships Regularly**

Regular assessment allows each party to evaluate whether the relationship is continuing to meet its objectives and to correct the course if necessary. Every three months, meet with each partner to revisit goals, review partnership criteria, assess progress, and evaluate the partnership. Assess and address opportunities, challenges, strengths, and weaknesses. Perform the same type of evaluation for the ecosystem as a whole.

**Handle Transitions Proactively**

Changes in personnel and leadership are inevitable throughout the life of a partnership—both within the district and within the partner organization. The most successful transitions occur when the incoming person is in agreement with the existing partnership strategy and is fully informed about the partnership. 

**Proactive steps for dealing with internal changes:**

• Communicate openly to the partnership team about the planned transition.

• Continually reiterate the overall goals and values of the partnership.

• Provide the resources and support needed to get the person operating at full capacity as quickly as possible.

**Proactive steps for dealing with changes in the partner organization:**

• Work with the partner to develop a transition plan.

• Reiterate the district's commitment to the partnership.

• Be prepared for a change in partner management style or the end of the partnership.

**End Partnerships Consciously**

Partnerships change over time and may end for any number of reasons. Ideally, each party can preserve good will after a partnership ends.

Keep in mind the following suggestions when ending a partnership:

• Clearly articulate the reason for ending the partnership.

• Create a plan for transitioning out of the partnership.

• Communicate changes and plans to those who will be impacted.

• Resolve any outstanding financial, contractual, or legal issues.

• Document important communications.

• Where appropriate, write letters of referral, commendation, and appreciation.

For more information about Cisco Global Education, please visit our website at [www.transformglobaleducation.org](http://www.transformglobaleducation.org).

“The success of high school reform depends upon the collective leadership of numerous entities, from government to education institutions to advocacy organizations.”

*Results that Matter*

Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2006
Resources for Building an Ecosystem of Partners Within a District

Resources – Partners

- **Digital Opportunity Trust (DOT)**
  ([www.dottrust.org](http://www.dottrust.org)) – International organization that creates education and economic opportunities through the use of technology; places interns at each 21S school site

- **Education Development Center (EDC), Center for Children & Technology (CCT)**
  ([http://cct.edc.org](http://cct.edc.org)) – Global nonprofit organization that investigates the roles technology can play in improving teaching and learning within classrooms; key evaluation partner for 21S program

- **Harvard Graduate School of Education**
  ([www.gse.harvard.edu](http://www.gse.harvard.edu))
  Leader in education research and professional development; home of Project Zero, a group that investigates how children, adults, and organizations learn; developer of WIDE World online and onsite professional development workshops

- **Metiri Group**
  ([www.metiri.com](http://www.metiri.com))
  Education consultant that promotes a broad range of services that empower educators to advance effective teaching and learning, use technology in powerful and meaningful ways, and foster 21st century skills

- **November Learning**
  ([www.novemberlearning.com](http://www.novemberlearning.com))
  An organization that promotes the effective use of information and communication technologies to support and enhance learning for children and communities

- **One Economy Corporation**
  ([www.one-economy.com](http://www.one-economy.com))
  Global nonprofit organization that helps bring broadband, affordable PCs, and community resources to low-income communities

- **Partnership for 21st Century Skills**
  ([www.21stcenturyskills.org](http://www.21stcenturyskills.org))
  An advocacy organization that is focused on infusing 21st century skills into education; Cisco is a founding member

- **Schlechty Center for Leadership in School Reform**
  ([www.schlechtycenter.org](http://www.schlechtycenter.org))
  Private nonprofit corporation that works with public school districts and their leaders to transform the existing system of rules, roles, and relationships that govern the way resources are used in schools to a system that focuses on the quality of work provided to students

Resources – Technology

- **Berbee Information Networks**
  ([www.berbee.com](http://www.berbee.com))
  Provider of IP-enabled paging and clock systems used in some 21S schools

- **IBM Reinventing Education Change Toolkit**
  ([www.reinventingeducation.org](http://www.reinventingeducation.org))
  Program created to provide educators with real, actionable tools to support leadership development and change management expertise

- **Promethean**
  ([www.prometheanworld.com](http://www.prometheanworld.com))
  One of the leading providers of interactive whiteboards and accessories used in many 21S classrooms

- **SchoolMessenger**
  ([www.schoolmessenger.com](http://www.schoolmessenger.com))
  Provider of notification services for parent communications and emergency services

- **Wireless Generation**
  ([www.wirelessgeneration.com](http://www.wirelessgeneration.com))
  Provider of hand-held reading assessment devices that increase assessment efficiency and timeliness of feedback and remediation exercises

Resources – Content

- **Smithsonian American Art Museum**
  ([http://americanart.si.edu](http://americanart.si.edu))
  Provider of education resources such as state standards-based, multidisciplinary lesson plans that encompass the fields of art, design, science, technology, history, culture, and language arts