

# Downtown Idea Exchange

## Perspectives

### Some BIDs should go back to school

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New York City has the largest, most diverse network of BIDs in the nation. The City's 46 BIDs represent areas both large and small, and their annual budgets range from \$53,000 to over \$11 million. They provide the City with over \$70 million in supplemental services that typically fall into four main categories: sanitation, security, capital improvements, and marketing and promotion.

Smaller BIDs — those on "Main Streets" and smaller commercial districts — should stick to these core services because trying to do too much too quickly is a recipe for spreading resources too thin. However, some BIDs are ready to go beyond the "bricks and mortar" of district management to play a greater role in the community, specifically when they invest in a pillar of neighborhood development often overlooked — public schools.

People might wonder what BIDs and the schools in their communities have in common. Too often, the answer is too little. It's no secret that public education in inner

cities across the country is hurting. Over and over again, when neighborhoods improve and attract new businesses and residents, the students and their schools are left out.

I experienced this firsthand when I worked at the Union Square Partnership in New York City in the early 1990s. The atmosphere at the local high school, Washington Irving, was typical: little or no after-school programs, few opportunities for personal growth, and low expectations of the students. Self-esteem was difficult to promote among the 2,600 students, 70% of whom came from low-income families. The perspective of residents, businesses, and property owners — many of whom viewed the school as an impediment to economic development — didn't help. Some even argued that it be shut down.

When the school's principal asked local businesses to help, however, we responded by creating the Washington High School Business Advisory Council. Rather than continuing to allow the business community and the students to exist in different worlds, we built a bridge between the two, infusing a student's high school experience with

the opportunities available after graduation. We established a mentoring and tutoring program, solicited summer jobs for students, and secured funding from the AT&T Foundation to wire classrooms with high-speed Internet access. Students interested in journalism worked with professional publishers. Area experts provided tours of local landmarks to art students.

By bringing the local business community to the school, students discovered the wealth of resources at their fingertips and the opportunities right in their own backyard, and business leaders learned that they had both a role to play and a responsibility to uphold in shaping the school's mission.

This partnership continues, and other organizations have pioneered similar efforts.

The Lincoln Square BID, located on the Upper West Side, began an after-school program in 1999 to build a relationship between the neighborhood's thousands of students and its merchants and cultural organizations. Today, the program provides students with critical academic support, including tutoring, homework assistance, SAT prep, computer and writing support, recreational activities, and real career and job opportunities through valuable internships.

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You know you've formed a strong community bond when getting businesses to participate is no longer a matter of twisting arms. When one of New York's favorite restaurants, the Union Square Café, had to shut its doors temporarily because of serious water damage, the owner sent his kitchen staff to Washington Irving High School to work in the cafeteria for the week. Not only did the kids

have a great time but so did the cooks (needless to say, expectations in the cafeteria have never been the same).

Successful community outreach, done right and with passion, can be a critical component for neighborhood renewal and economic development. BIDs throughout the United States that have the capacity to take on this level of commitment should seriously

explore playing a real role in their community's education. It's for the betterment of not only the businesses they serve but also our community as a whole.

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