

I have been asked to come here today to talk to you about Partnerships with Business.

It seems quite strange to me that this phrase is being discussed as if it were something new. But it isn't. That's because, as we all know in business, partnerships have been the cornerstone of many successful organisations. Organisations which have had the foresight to make a virtue of their intrinsic disparateness.

Organisations like ***example required****.

So the concept of partnership within business is certainly not a new one. In recent years partnerships between business and public services have become increasingly common with tangible benefits. And partnerships spanning the virtual gulf between business and

education have a long and successful track record. Particularly within the Further and Higher Education sectors, on sandwich and day-release courses, where the common ground in utilitarian and vocational training is easily identified.

Why do I use this term ‘virtual gulf’? Because many people still have a problem with marrying what they see as the irreconcilable prime-movers of business and education. Because they have problems with understanding how a commercial venture with an intrinsic mandate to make money can assimilate the lofty goals of the most altruistic pedagogue. And because, to be fair, there’s an air of conservatism within education which – quite rightly – is protective of all that is good in a system which has taken decades (if not centuries) to evolve.

What I’m going to do today is, I hope, dent that conservatism.

What I’m going to do is explain how companies like Nord Anglia Education Support are spanning that virtual gulf. What I’m going

to do is present evidence that partnership can be prudent, principled and progressive.

A typical definition of the word 'partner' is 'a person associated with others in business in which he shares risks and profits'. 'Risks and Profits'! And the definition of 'partnership'? It's 'the state of being a partner, persons who are partners, joint business, associates'.

'Risks and profits', 'joint business', and 'associates'. They're all terms which, one supposes, might stick in the craw of the educator.

But the times they are a-changing. There's a prevailing liberalism in this country. And by that I mean liberalism with a small 'l'.

There's a confluence of political manifestos, a shedding of outdated ideologies and prejudices about how things should be done. There's a realisation that what we need - in all walks of life - is to be able to pick and mix from the best of what is available.

And there's a realisation that education is no different, that it can and must benefit from commercial influences, that it too has to have a bottom line.

The bottom line in this business isn't profit per se. That's a by-product. No, the bottom line is a standard of educational excellence that will profit our children throughout their adulthood. A standard which will profit their employers. A standard from which we all, as citizens and as friends, as taxpayers and colleagues, will profit.

Companies like my own are not, I assure you, to be myopically viewed simply as saviours or scapegoats. We're contributors to optimal collectives, contributors with a unique contribution to bring to the table, contributors that understand our need to not only raise standards but to exceed them. And, more importantly if we are to endure in an age when public scrutiny is the acid test, we need to be seen to exceed them.

The service we need to provide must be delivered within clear guidelines and to strict targets. It must be entirely accountable, and not overtly profitable. Accountability isn't something new to business. And, certainly amongst genuine educators in at least an academic sense, achievement-testing has never been a problem.

We've long since realised that testing is fundamental as a diagnostic tool. But now answerability has to be applied to determine the efficacy of educational management. Because, if we don't deliver, we don't satisfy our clients. If we don't satisfy our clients, we lose business. And, if we lose too much business, we lose our business and our jobs.

Our clients aren't only the LEAs and the DofEE. Our clients are the young people of this country. They're mature. Mostly. They're incredibly sophisticated. And they have ever-expanding demands and expectations. Don't just think of the many subjects which were never dreamt of, never mind offered, when we were young. Think of the entirely new industries which have sprung up in the

meantime. And think of the element of choice in an ever-more-diverse working world for which we must adequately prepare our youth.

Meeting those demands, pushing back those boundaries, anticipating the needs of business and commerce and industry, are not tasks to which the academic is best suited. This is where commercial savvy is paramount, where enterprises spanning that virtual gulf are so vital to the team effort.

And, indeed, it is a team effort. We all - everyone here - should not under-estimate our own personal responsibility to stimulate young people to want to learn. And by learning I'm alluding to learning in the liberal as well as the utilitarian sense. That's why we need to nurture and develop a raft of key abilities in communication, presentation, confidence, self-belief, decision making, relationships and social responsibility. These are assets that are

needed not just in the working environment but in society as a whole.

There is a price to pay for not adequately preparing youngsters. We see and hear of that price every day in the news. Because if youngsters are unprepared they perceive themselves, rightly or wrongly, as being under too much pressure. Because they'll never realise potential of which they're entirely unaware. Because they make irreversible mistakes. And it all happens before they have really started out in life. It all happens in schools. And we're all culpable.

Sometimes it's their own fault. There's no denying it and bucks can't always be passed. But, let's be right, often youngsters are rarely given a real insight into what will be expected of them in industry.

This is where businesses have a key role within education and a responsibility. A responsibility to not only work in partnership to mould the educational experience for young people but to subsequently provide employment opportunities for them.

Look, you don't need a special scheme to go into school you know. To ease the joint. Because most directors, personnel managers and entrepreneurs will be welcomed back for an afternoon in the classroom with open arms. Try it. Take a day, please, all of you. Go back to your alma mater and tell the kids what they ought to be doing. Wallow in the feel-good factor if you will. But it's not just public-spirited. It's pragmatic. Because before you know it you'll be so awash with job applicants with useful skills that your employees' starting salary levels will have to fall to accommodate the upturn in availability. Market forces! Don't you love 'em?

Apprenticeships. Remember them? Well, it may date me to say it, but they worked. And at the same time I'd advocate a flexible

approach to educating youngsters because they need to be as dynamic as the world which will continue to change around them for all of their working lives. A world in which they may be expected to retrain several times during their working lifetimes, and a world in which they need to have a relish to do so. But, most of all, they need opportunities to sample working life whilst still at school. And opportunities to secure an early entry to useful, satisfying and gainful employment.

I believe that every individual has a contribution to make and that there are no small jobs - only small attitudes. There are many young people who have left school this year who haven't even taken (never mind passed) the GCSEs or NVQs they ideally ought to have. It's little wonder so many are still being advised - even when unemployment is at a relatively low level - that their chances of getting a job are slim.

If anybody doubts just how wrong we're going, I challenge them to do this. Step into any college of FE. Button-hole a few dozen students and find out what course they're on. Then find out what course they actually wanted to do and why they're not doing it. And then you'll know why the bums-on-seats policy has bred a generation of shallowly-skilled people with no real commitment to self-improvement.

For anybody here who hasn't got the time to do that, I'll let you in on the big secret. It's that a lot of the teaching is entirely directionless because the courses and places on them in no way reflect the jobs on offer nor the entry-qualifications that students will need to be taken on by employers. It's that a lot of teaching is simply done to keep teachers in jobs. It's that the non-teaching hierarchy of so many establishments is more concerned about empire-building than it is about the tremendous waste of resources (and time, which can never be replaced) which such malpractice represents.

Anybody who thinks that traditional educational establishment is above self-enrichment, self-enrichment at the hands of its management and at the expense of efficiency, is not well-informed.

We cannot afford this. Nobody is saying that we should expect full employment Nor, indeed, that all school and college-leavers should be fully-employable. But we're deluding ourselves if we don't admit that our system is failing. Failing the kids. Failing the staff. Failing society. Failing big-time.

Anybody who disagrees should go and take a look at, say, Switzerland. Anybody who disagrees should look at how their mean levels of attainment so clearly exceed ours. Anybody who disagrees should consider why it is that the Swiss state produces so few individuals who are illiterate, who lack numeracy, who haven't a single recognisable skill or ability which can be commercially harnessed.

What we've been achieving here - and it has to change - is an embarrassment. There was a time when the education system we built was fit for the heroes for whom it was designed. But any system has to evolve with changing circumstances if it is to survive.

As a member of the Business Mentor programme, and having worked with young people, I all too often come across disaffected school-leavers who are already branded as failures and who lack purpose and prospects. That's not entirely their fault; they have no idea about what choices are available to them, and we've only ourselves to blame that it's so.

This shortcoming cannot be blamed on academics. But it can be blamed on the ingrained inadequacy of executives who may be well-trained educators but who are not the well-trained managers that society has expected them to become (with no training) since

they were appointed. It is these executives who are never likely to get the best from the staff, pupils, school, governors, facilities or funds.

But I'm not interested in blaming others. I'm interested in picking up that gauntlet. Whilst the public and private sector, unions and government are busily passing the buck, the system is perennially failing to deliver a basic level of competence in the management of education. And it's companies like Nord Anglia that can give the system the shot in the arm that it needs.

Yes, we'll do some things that you might not like. We'll raise sponsorship. You can more offers and incentives from businesses. But I suspect that if you ask most teachers whether they'd care a jot if brand names are stamped all over their much-needed computers, software, sports equipment, trophies and so on they'll tell you that as long as it's a freebie they'll take it off your hands.

Look here, I'm not here to argue the rights and wrongs of commerce in education. But I'll tell you this: good education is a right and one should provide it as necessity dictates. It's the fundamental right of every individual. "Education is the soul of a society as it passes from one generation to another and," as one famous politician put it, "one must not look upon education as something which ends with one's youth. It is the key to many doors; doors both of knowledge and of wisdom."

Many young people don't get a second chance and it is our duty and responsibility to deliver a first rate service, first time round – not a second rate service, second time round. And, then, only if you stay on.

An unacceptable number of schools are failing inspections and are under special measures. But they're the tip of the iceberg, because the sad truth is that the standards themselves are lamentably low.

Our qualifications are not the universal, portable currency that they

once were. And their worth is being constantly eroded, whatever the arguments are to the contrary. We can't blame the kids for that. And, until we put it right, until we've reintroduced across-the-board sustainable standards and stability, we can't complain that we don't enjoy their respect.

We therefore need to identify the right partnerships and the right leaders to sit around the table and develop a clear strategy for education. We also need to communicate this message to young people and their parents to gain their full support and commitment and a sense of ownership and involvement. We need to listen more to the needs of our children and understand what motivates them. To make education a hands-on affair. And we need to do it now.

I'd like to cite here as an example an exercise conducted by an inner city school, a school which is currently under special measures. It's headmaster has initiated a programme called 'Switch on to Learning' which encourages the kids to meet and

interview many leading figures from the area during assembly.

Now he's gone out on a limb here because the children take nominal responsibility. They construct the questions and run the programme. And the intention is for them to derive an understanding of how post-school society ticks and how individuals, who after all were once school-kids just like them, can play a part in it.

It's been a resounding success, but a lot of the credit's due to the kids for seizing the opportunity and displaying more canniness than anybody had anticipated.

Pity the poor vicar, for example, who blithely passed up the head's offer to reflect in advance on the barrage of questions he would face. Because, put on the spot, he didn't find it easy to explain how he represented Christ in his job. Nor was he any more comfortable describing his feelings when he had to conduct the funeral of a child.

I've mentioned this example for several reasons. Perhaps most importantly because it demonstrates that we have a circumspect interest in developing rounded individuals rather than the factory-fodder that our detractors might expect of calculating commercial educators. And to my mind it is vitally important that we aren't erroneously perceived as bead-counters who think education begins and ends with the 3 Rs. We have to live in this society too!

That's why we do our own bit. At our own expense. What I like to call 'Intangible Education'. For example we've been involved in sponsoring a filming project and CD Rom which has been written, designed, filmed, presented and delivered by a school on the theme of their choice. They happened to choose a very well known Birmingham football club. Not surprisingly attendance at the school improved to nearly 100% during this period and the involvement by usually somewhat-disaffected children was incredible. The footballers, support staff, catering and admin staff,

coach and managers were asked questions about choices they made and what they actually did with their careers etc.

Again, everything was planned and executed by the children. It may raise a few eyebrows and hackles amongst those who can't see beyond conventional education, but I'll tell you this: it gave them an invaluable experience and an insight into the real world. Moreover it brought home to them that their idols weren't superhuman but the products of sustained responsibility and sheer hard work and determination. In fact, nothing that any of them weren't capable of giving if they set their minds to it.

There's also a wonderful new project, the 'Young and Wrinklies', where mature people - usually the semi-retired and redundant - act as mentors to their younger counterparts in school. The kids benefit from invaluable advice and guidance, not just on life as you'd expect but on industry specialisms, and it gives new purpose to their elders.

This is creative education, isn't it? And creativity is what this island does best. It's strength is in its diversity, its versatility, its invention. That's why we should never have put a French-seamed straight-jacket on the curriculum. (The girls in the audience can explain later to the undomesticated precisely what I've meant by this.) That's why we need to stick with common-core subjects at national level yet locally utilise the unparalleled wealth of idiosyncratic talent which is our teaching profession.

There's nothing wrong with idiosyncrasy is there? It's easy to forget, isn't it, that it is individuals who usually create companies? But it's individuals who make jobs, individuals who tow lesser-mortals in their wakes. It's individuals who have made this nation the most inventive on earth, the winners of more Nobel prizes and designers of more patented inventions than most of the rest of the world put together. And those individuals are not the products of

conveyor-belt education. Nord Anglia, and companies like ours which have really thought out their policies, recognise this.

No, there's nothing wrong with idiosyncrasy. There's nothing wrong with meritocracy. There's nothing wrong with elitism.

There's nothing wrong with profit. And there's no reason at all why education, in keeping with the real world in which it assuredly exists (as long, apparently, as enough of us think it does) cannot reward those who are willing and able to pull it through its present crisis.

There's a kind of algebra at work here, and I'll explain it to you as my mum would. I remember before I was married how we discussed household economics and she assured me that a good housewife made enough savings to be able to pay her way. And that's how educational managers should work. It's all very clinical, very rational. It doesn't imply estrangement from your partner (in this case the teacher). It's just good housekeeping. You pay your

way and more. And you only get reined in if too many shoes start appearing in the wardrobe!

I'm alluding to profit, as you'll realise. Leastways anybody who's married! Well, in my book, profit isn't a dirty word. But 'indolence' is. 'Intransigence' is. 'Ineptitude' is.

I'm a mother. There, I've admitted it. Not just a career-girl.

Somebody who feels she has an intuitive grasp of what kids need.

Somebody who, I'd like to think, would never sell the system short for a fast buck. Certainly not a system that my own kid's future will depend on. Never mind my grandchildren's.

But money makes the world go round. Savings have to be made somewhere if incentives for schools, teachers and students are to be funded. And it can't all come from savings, from good housekeeping. Schools in deprived areas and those under special measures need additional grant support and donations from

business. Because it's only with more help that they can adjust the teacher/pupil ratios sufficiently to induce lasting change. Some of you out there in the audience have deeper pockets than you've hitherto admitted!

So where do we start? Well, not before time, let's clear the dead-wood. Let's sweep away the cobwebs of conservatism (with a small 'c', since this isn't a political speech with a large 'p'). Let's dispense with management by committees comprised of Oxbridge graduates who never cut the commercial mustard, who spent their entire lives pushing the same pens around the same papers on the same desks in the same county halls. Those who haven't clicked that, for those less fortunate than themselves, what you've learnt is what you are. And that, in more enlightened times, an obscure arts degree would be less use than a claustrophobic sardine.

Let's take some risks. Because nothing ventured is nothing gained. Let's modify our policy and act on it. Let's examine how this new

era of partnership can draw together the combined talents of local government agencies, social services, community services, the police, teachers and parents for the benefit of the kids who are all our futures.

Let's seriously look at whether franchise arrangements, which would involve the government delegating ownership, management and assets to a company, could work to our mutual benefit. Let's start the ball rolling with some prototypal arrangements and see how well they work. Because if they don't work I'll be the first to admit it.

Let's start today.
