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**Partnerships Help
Enhance Learning**

**Importance of a
Maintenance Program**

**Energy Efficiency
Through Benchmarking**

**Education
Design
Showcase**

Community Partnerships — Student Success and Community Vitality

Traditionally, school districts and schools have looked to community partners to supplement existing funding, enhance curricular offerings and provide technical equipment and support. Two schools in Washington state have turned this “community partner as benefactor” thinking on its head. At the Truman Education Complex, in Federal Way, and the Tacoma School of the Arts, community partnerships are proving beneficial to both school and community — and, in the process, fundamentally enhancing each city’s urban core.

Located adjacent to downtown Federal Way, and occupying an abandoned elementary school, Truman High School housed failing, high-risk students from throughout the district. Today, the school’s nine-acre site is home to three buildings: a newly-built Truman High School, King County Boys and Girls Club, and Head Start Center. A city park borders the site. Truman students use the Boys and Girls Club’s gym, computer lab, and art and music rooms; pursue internships at the Head Start Center; and use the park’s sports fields for physical education courses. The school district supplied the building infrastructure to both the Boys and Girls Club and Head Start Center; both pay \$1 yearly on 50-year leases. The district provides custodial services for all three buildings and district staff for minor repairs. After school and on weekends, the two community organizations and park have access to the school facility. Today, the city has three vital community assets where one failing school used to exist.

Ten miles south in Tacoma, students at the Tacoma School of the Arts (SOTA) attend classes in 10 downtown locations — the school’s core buildings (two renovated historic buildings and a former alternative school), the University of Washington-Tacoma campus and several cultural institutions, including the Tacoma Art Museum, the Washington State History Museum and the Museum of Glass. The school’s visual and performing arts spaces provide much-needed studio and performance space to Tacoma’s burgeoning arts community. University students take courses at SOTA’s Visual Arts Center, and the school’s newly-built theater is used after school and on weekends for a wide variety of dances, film festivals and concerts. During the summer, middle school students participate in an arts camp, taught by SOTA students in SOTA classrooms.

Taking classes on a university campus has demystified college for high school students, and the need to master the city’s public transportation service prepares them for urban life. Downtown business owners credit the school for helping to revitalize the neighborhood; museum curators note that the presence of high school students in their galleries makes their institutions more approachable to learners of all ages.

School leaders and facilities personnel agree that community partnerships require thoughtful planning, negotiation and compromise. All partners must possess a clearly defined vision of what they want the partnership to accomplish. Specifically, school leaders should ask themselves, “How will this partnership increase academic achievement, authentic learning and relationship-building for students?” Partners need to openly articulate their expectations of the partnership. These expectations, as well as more technical issues related to operational support, space-use, security and insurance should be delineated in formal agreements. Partnerships work best when envisioned as long-term rather than one-time collaborations. And finally, partners need regular communication to support ongoing cooperation and must periodically revisit the relationship in order to assess whether the needs and expectations of both parties are being met. Such communication is aided when all partners have dedicated a staff member to be responsible for facilitating the partnership. Like any successful relationship, community partnerships must be nurtured to best serve all involved.

For centuries, schools have served as the centers of their communities. The Truman Education Complex and Tacoma School of the Arts demonstrate that, by partnering with community organizations, schools and community can be simultaneously transformed. When prudently planned and carefully maintained, such partnerships serve the ultimate goal of helping all students achieve. **SPM**

Victoria S. Bergsagel is the founder and director of Architects of Achievement, a group partnering with the Small Schools Project and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to help educators and architects across the country integrate the work of facility design into school reform. A member of the Council of Educational Facility Planners International, Victoria serves on the Board of Trustees of the CEFPI Foundation & Charitable Trust.