



Northern Kentucky

# Business Contributions to Schools Add Up

*New data tools track time and money donations to help measure impact.*

For years, businesses in Northern Kentucky have contributed uncounted hours to help local schools – by activities such as making employees available during work hours to tutor students, raising funds to rebuild playgrounds and providing internships to promote career readiness. The “uncounted” part was frustrating: No one measured or coordinated all that work, leaving business leaders unable to tell the story of their contributions or know if they were putting their resources where they were needed most.

Now they’re using data to solve that problem.

A new data collection tool developed by the Forum for Youth Investment has given Northern Kentucky its first glimpse of the total value of business contributions to local schools. And the Northern Kentucky Education Council (NKYEC), which coordinates the Ready by 21® initiative in the region, is building on that tool to create a system for measuring the impact of those contributions and filling gaps.

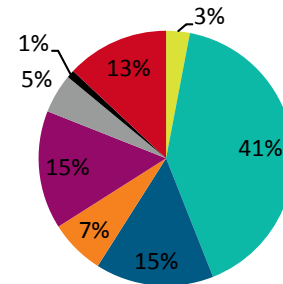
“Ultimately, the success of our schools aligns with filling the talent pipeline” of young people who will take jobs in local businesses, says Rhonda Whitaker, director of government and community relations at Duke Energy, one of the businesses involved in the project. “If we can better understand/inventory all of the touch points within our schools, we can align limited resources in a more strategic manner.”

## A Team Idea

The seeds of this effort were planted in 2010, when the nonprofit NKYEC underwent an ambitious overhaul to broaden its mission beyond a traditional classroom focus. Through the Ready by 21 Southeast Cities Challenge, the council used Ready by 21 tools

and technical assistance to become the region’s umbrella organization for the alignment of education initiatives that support young people from birth to career. (This [story](#) explains how the council made the change.)

Activities by Goal



- Adults Ready for Career
- College and Career
- Culture of Contribution
- Graduate from High School
- Hope/Engagement/Well-being
- Not Sure
- Prepared for Kindergarten
- Proficient in Literacy and Math

*A breakdown of the activities businesses provided.*

The council created six action teams to focus on specific education outcomes, each composed of a diverse group of business, education and community leaders. The Business Engagement and Service Learning Team wanted to help businesses tell the stories about their contributions to schools.

The challenge: Even within the businesses themselves, almost no one was tracking the many kinds of engagement. The action team worked with the Forum to create an online survey to help each of the 56 businesses involved track what it was doing. Among the objectives:

- Give each business data to quantify and report what it was doing, for which schools and how often.
- Use the findings to coordinate efforts among



businesses and fill gaps.

- Help ensure that the contributions of businesses aligned with priorities established by the council.

## How It Worked

About twice a month, a reminder went out to businesses to record their contributions on the survey. They recorded what they did at which schools, the time involved and how often the activity was held. The survey focused on in-kind contributions (mostly volunteer hours) but also counted dollars. Businesses provided information on company policies that affect engagement in the schools, such as paid employee release time and access to internships.

The survey generated reports at the business, school and regional levels. For the first time ever, leaders could begin to grasp the amount and value of resources that businesses were devoting to the schools. During the 2011-12 school year, the businesses contributed almost \$60,000 in cash, time and supplies.

Each business received data and charts showing its contributions by goals (such as boosting literacy and increasing student engagement) and by schools.

Overall, the largest area of contribution was for college and career readiness – a council priority. The survey also found gaps in services in middle schools, where many children can benefit most from the help.

Perhaps most important for the long term, the survey showed business leaders the value of measuring their contributions – so much so that they set out to build a data collection tool that will give them even more information. The goal: to assess not just the volume of the work, but its impact.



Melanie Frey

Rhonda Whitaker

“What started out as a desire of the council to understand the level of business engagement in our schools is becoming what could be a much more universal tracking tool,” says Melanie Frey, account executive at Turner Construction and co-chair of the Business Engagement Action Team.

## Seeking New Answers

The council is spearheading the effort, in collaboration with a local university, to create the tracking tool in hopes of answering such questions as: Are schools with high level of business engagement performing at higher levels? How many students are placed in internships? Are resources being invested in the most critical areas? Are the investments affecting reading proficiency, graduation rates, and college and career readiness? The team knows it can’t make a direct correlation between business engagement and student achievement, but believes the tracking tool will generate meaningful data.

Whitaker (from Duke Energy) hopes to use the findings “to determine what initiatives appear to be having the greatest impact on student achievement and student engagement.” She believes that with this information, business leaders can better align their financial and volunteer contributions.

To help engage more businesses in contributing to schools and recording their contributions, the action team produced a toolkit that highlights high-impact opportunities for businesses and provides a link to the data tool.

“People really respond to numbers, and some respond to success stories and hearing directly from kids or schools,” says Heather Abbott, coordinator of academic support services and professional development at Gateway Community and Technical College (one of the most active users of the survey). “A combination of the two would be a really powerful recruiting tool.”

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**For more information, visit [www.readyby21.org](http://www.readyby21.org)**