

THE *I AM LEARNING PARTNERSHIP*:
BUILDING BUSINESS IN PARTNERSHIP
WITH COMMUNITY

Arnerich Massena, Inc.

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A primary objective of the *I AM Learning Partnership* is to exemplify business in partnership with community. We feel that, as a model for other corporate citizenship programs, the *I AM Learning Partnership* offers a unique and remarkable strategy with far-reaching impacts. As we move forward into the twenty-first century, it may be necessary for corporate America to step forward and help fill in the massive gaps caused by a lack of government funding for education. Resources being directed to educating our population are among some of the hardest-hit budget items each year. Education is one area in which corporate programs can provide the greatest support. In this paper, we provide a blueprint for businesses wishing to develop similar community programs.



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Students drift into the library in the early morning, some still yawning and sleepy, some carrying breakfast trays. After a moment of affectionate banter with Kate and Marisa, they head to their individual tables where their mentors await. In a short time, signs of drowsiness have vanished and are replaced with sounds of enthusiasm as children read, are read to, explore math problems, and play learning games. The tutoring mentors are clearly having as much fun as their tutees, playing and chatting while they gently guide their students through challenges. When it's time to head to class, the volunteer mentors walk their students to their classrooms and then head to the office to start their day's work.

This is Arnerich Massena's *I AM Learning Partnership's* Before-School Math and Reading Club, one of many programs Arnerich Massena runs at Irvington School, an elementary school in Portland, Oregon.

The *I AM Learning Partnership* has developed over the past 20 years into what it is today: a robust series of programs serving students in kindergarten through 8th grade who are underperforming in critical skills. Through literacy intervention, before- and after-school mentoring programs, afternoon clubs, and summer camps, Arnerich Massena provides academic intervention and support to assist these kids in meeting grade-level benchmarks. All of Arnerich Massena's programs are provided at no cost to students and their families.

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A BRIEF HISTORY

When Tony and Christine Arnerich founded Arnerich Massena, Inc., it was their intention for the business to contribute to the community in a meaningful way. Each felt strongly that one of the most impactful means of achieving this objective was to support the development of the next generation of citizens. They quickly settled on education as the overall context, but the next step was to figure out how to make a substantial difference. Direct participation of the firm was a prerequisite; human and financial resources would both be part of the equation.

“WE CANNOT LIVE ONLY FOR OURSELVES. A THOUSAND FIBERS CONNECT US WITH OUR FELLOW MEN; AND AMONG THOSE FIBERS, AS SYMPATHETIC THREADS, OUR ACTIONS RUN AS CAUSES, AND THEY COME BACK TO US AS EFFECTS.”

~ HERMAN MELVILLE

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The first step was to contact the school district and identify the greatest need. Kate DeGraw, already employed by the firm, set to work to accomplish this task. She met with district officials, presented the firm's budget guidelines, and discussed how they could best utilize the resources of time and financial assistance. The outcome of that conversation generated the first element of Arnerich Massena's community service program: math and science summer camp.

In the summer of 1995, Arnerich Massena and the Portland Public School district hosted a couple of two-week summer camps (at two different elementary schools), at no cost to families. Focused on math and science, these camps were designed to engage and excite students about these subjects, as well as offset the typical academic decline in the summer. The district assisted in hiring teachers and setting up the framework for the program, with Kate DeGraw coordinating and managing it.



The camps were so successful that it was immediately decided to continue the program into the fall with a somewhat different structure. The after-school math and science club was created, meeting for an hour one day a week in the afternoons. The program again met its objectives; however, Tony Arnerich felt that the schedule required more flexibility to provide volunteer opportunities for all of the firm's employees. The company began sending volunteers into classrooms once a week for teachers to put to work mentoring and tutoring various students.

At the end of this inaugural year, Kate DeGraw began managing Arnerich Massena's community service partnership full-time as the firm and the schools looked for ways to establish a workable framework around the partnership programs. A slow evolution occurred over the next year as Tony, Christine, and Kate worked to find ways to make the most significant impact with the tools at hand. The programs were re-focused on a single school — Irvington School — and Kate began working directly with the school's principal rather than the school district as a whole. She submitted proposals for programs designed to meet the unique needs of the school and created a robust, company-wide volunteer program, while working diligently with the school to make the plan a reality.

The programs evolved and eventually grew to the list on the following page. Presently, two full-time employees, Kate DeGraw and Marisa Izzard, run the *I AM Learning Partnership*, with volunteer help from Arnerich Massena employees. In addition to the before- and after-school programs that utilize firm volunteers as mentors, the core of the *I AM Learning Partnership* is literacy intervention; during the school day, Kate DeGraw and Marisa Izzard provide guided, small-group literacy services to identified students. Overall, the programs are focused on students who currently are not meeting state benchmarks but do not qualify for

I AM LEARNING PARTNERSHIP PROGRAMS

Literacy Intervention Program

The Literacy Intervention program is at the heart of the *I AM Learning Partnership*. Under the supervision of Irvington School staff, Kate DeGraw and Marisa Izzard administer direct literacy instruction to small groups of students currently not meeting Oregon state benchmarks for literacy. Each school year, about 50 students in kindergarten through 5th grade are serviced through this critical intervention in literacy.

Before-school Reading Club

This program is for select students who are not reading at grade level. Volunteers devote one morning per week for a half hour, tutoring the same student one-on-one for the entire school year. The curriculum focuses on building phonic skills and vocabulary, improving sentence fluency, developing comprehension, and elevating motivation and confidence.

Before-school Math Club

This program supports students who are not testing at grade level on state math benchmarks. Volunteers devote one morning per week for a half hour, working with the same student or pair of students throughout the school year. Emphasis is on building fundamental math skills, as well as cultivating motivation and confidence.

Homework Club

Students meet after school weekly to receive support in understanding and completing their classroom homework assignments. The availability of resources and the participation of volunteers assist students in different subject areas, such as math, writing, and social studies.

Girls' Club

Girls' Club meets after school weekly and offers girls mentorship and enrichment activities. Common themes include character and friendship building, anti-bullying

efforts, healthy living, community service projects, and arts & crafts. By providing new experiences and establishing healthy habits and positive social networks, we encourage and support girls to develop as confident, independent-thinking young women.

Math & Science Club

Math & Science Club meets after school each week and guides students through the scientific process and provides opportunities to build math strategies. In an effort to elevate knowledge, comprehension, and motivation in the areas of math and science, students participate in hands-on activities and experiments, as well as extensions of the classroom curriculum.

Math & Science Summer Camp

For two weeks each summer, students attend a fun, all-day camp centered around a single theme, such as volcanoes or rainforests. Hands-on activities, experiments, group projects, and field trips all help to build and reinforce fundamental skills in math and science.

Writer's Workshop Summer Camp

Writer's Workshop Summer Camp takes place for several weeks during the summer and is an intensive course focused on helping students develop and refine writing skills. At the end of the program, students' work is showcased by publishing their own zines or newspapers.

Summer Enrichment Camp

This one-week summer camp focuses on a single extracurricular theme, which changes annually. For instance, one year the camp focused on art, helping students develop their creative talents, while another year, students learned about healthy cooking. Whatever the theme, students engage in hands-on learning and derive inspiration from learning about resources in the community around them.

“AN INVESTMENT IN
KNOWLEDGE PAYS
THE BEST INTEREST.”

~BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

additional support due to lack of funding. This population is the most underserved but also has great potential to succeed with extra support. Arnerich Massena’s goal is to fill this gap. Incorporating both morning and afternoon programs makes possible a variety of volunteer opportunities to fit different schedules, with enough regularity to foster connecting and bonding with the students. School administrators, teachers, firm volunteers, and parents will testify that Irvington students benefit invaluablely from the enrichment programs the *I AM Learning Partnership* offers.

WHAT MAKES THE *I AM LEARNING PARTNERSHIP* SO SUCCESSFUL?

The *I AM Learning Partnership* serves a number of stakeholders: the school district, Irvington School, the students, the parents, the volunteers, and the firm. It’s a win, win, win, win, win situation. Every party is a beneficiary of the programs: the school district and school find underserved students’ needs being supported, volunteers gain the opportunity to be of service on company time, students have access to no-cost extracurricular and academic-based enrichment programs, and the firm benefits from having an inspired staff and positive public relations. All of these factors contribute to the success of the *I AM Learning Partnership*, but the deepest triumph comes from the student-centered nature of the programs.

The programs have been designed to address very specific needs of the students in terms of meeting state benchmarks in reading and math, but are not entirely directed toward elevating test scores. Educators know that the best way to help a student is to create excitement and engagement in the learning process. The *I AM Learning Partnership* administers its clubs and programs to provide opportunities for exploration, play, and discovery. The greater flexibility of non-classroom-based education allows exposure to new experiences. Students participate in community fundraisers, service learning projects, and in-school education projects. They bond with volunteer mentors, gaining adult support and friendship that may not always be available at home. Hands-on learning techniques are employed to enable students to craft their own science experiments or create personal literary publications. The goal is to help students thrive on all levels and foster a love of learning.



STRUCTURING A COMMUNITY SERVICE PROGRAM

The logistics of designing, creating, and running a community service program can present a profound obstacle for business involvement. Establishing a direct connection to the work, rather than merely organizing or supporting the effort, is essential. A program as robust as the *I AM Learning Partnership* requires one individual dedicated to managing the program in its entirety. Many organizations attempt to have community outreach administered by a committee of people who possess other jobs requiring their full attention. This dynamic can be too cumbersome to establish focus and facilitate the desired outcomes. The *I AM Learning Partnership* started out much smaller and evolved to this magnitude over the course of two decades. Starting with a scaled-down version and utilizing available school staff may be a more approachable option when considering a service model in education.

“EDUCATION IS
THE MOVEMENT
FROM DARKNESS
TO LIGHT.”

~ALLAN BLOOM

The first step is to select a school or schools in which to develop a program. Maintaining a narrow focus will generate greater impact. Identify the most urgent needs with the school district, the school principal, and faculty. Then, ascertain where additional support can be accommodated by the school. An openness to serving the needs of the school is paramount for success and is the path to integration with the school and its unique culture.

Once you have identified the needs, it is important to take into account the resources that will be directed to designing and implementing your educational program. Your budget will help determine the scope of the partnership. Next, determine where your organization possesses the ability to add the most value. For example, a healthcare organization might opt for health and wellness education as the core of its program, or an engineering firm could focus on bringing math and science to girls. Experts can always be engaged in any subject matter; however, if the resources and expertise are readily accessible in your firm, it is worthwhile to take advantage! Some other resource considerations may include:

- Are personnel available to facilitate programs or is it necessary to hire this help?
- Identify employee volunteer resources and company time that can be dedicated to service. Employees must choose service; it cannot be mandated.
- Establish timeframes that maximize employee participation and minimize work flow impact. Consider incorporating before-school programs, after-school programs, summer camp programs, or different combinations of these.
- Bear in mind the number of students in the selected school who fit the profile of the targeted need being addressed.
- Make sure you have a firm understanding of legal and regulatory limitations or constraints. Many schools require background checks for volunteers who work unsupervised with children, or that a licensed teacher oversee instruction. Work with the school administrators to understand the rules that may govern your partnership.



Establishing clear, consistent, and mindful communication with the administration and teachers is the next essential element for success in instituting a program. Arnerich Massena community service coordinators continue to meet with school administrators a minimum of four times a year to discuss space, scheduling, and other logistics. At the beginning of each new school year, our coordinators inquire about the school's needs and whether our programs are adequately addressing those concerns. Throughout the year, the principal, other administrators, and faculty are encouraged to observe the programs, and their input and suggestions are actively solicited at all times.

Having the space in which to conduct your programs is critical, but space is not always easy to find and often comes at a premium. Ideally, you will want to conduct your program somewhere convenient to both students and volunteers. There may be rental fees associated with using space on the school grounds. However, if programs directly support student achievement, it may be possible to seek an exemption and waive the fee, allowing resources to be centered on the actual

programs. Be prepared to be flexible and adaptable where space is concerned, as well as ready to continually negotiate for better options.

Creating a curriculum

A wealth of resources is available to assist in structuring, managing, and maintaining an educational curriculum. The education system of the selected school or schools is often a reasonable place to begin; the school district offers a variety of materials to support literacy instruction, and teachers can assist with ideas for curriculum. Vast resources are available online, from books to curriculum guides to helpful tips.

The *I AM Learning Partnership* programs are academic at their core, based on supporting students in acquiring the skills they need to succeed in school. However, curriculum is also focused on building confidence, motivation, hands-on experiences, and making learning fun. We continually strive to correlate learning to students' lives, incorporating field trips into the programs frequently. Below are some online resources; some of the materials on these sites require a paid subscription.



- Scott Foresman Reading: www.sfreeding.com
Curriculum for literacy intervention, resources for educators and parents
- www.education.com
Activities, printable worksheets, and workbooks for a variety of age groups and grade levels
- www.teachervision.com
Lesson plans on a variety of subjects for different age groups, as well as classroom management tips
- www.superteacherworksheets.com
Variety of worksheets
- www.enchantedlearning.com
Curriculum material on hundreds of subjects, as well as topical websites for online learning

“EDUCATION IS THE
TRANSMISSION OF
CIVILIZATION.”

~ARIEL AND WILL
DURANT

FINDING THE RIGHT TARGET STUDENTS

Once the structure of your partnership is in place, you will need to find the students who will profit most from the service being provided. Our services are often also structured around the actual requirements of these targeted students. The process we follow makes use of several indicators to help identify these students. The first filter is to select students who are not meeting state benchmarks but do not qualify or have access to additional support. Next, we solicit teacher recommendations, wherein classroom teachers determine student candidates uniquely suited to our service. The economic status of students is then considered, giving priority to students on the free lunch and breakfast programs. Finally, choosing students with a strong attendance record is essential to maximize our resources and ensure that the students who enter our programs will be present as much as possible.

In addition to pinpointing students to participate in your programs, their successful exit also requires consideration. What will trigger a “graduation?” How will testing and data collection be managed? Are plans in place to cope with absenteeism or behavioral issues? What additional resources might be needed to facilitate these pieces?



As an example, our school day literacy program benefits from an independent education consultant who is a retired teacher. This specialist tests and evaluates the students in our programs periodically. This is an invaluable service, allowing access to test scores and data that make it possible to determine when a student needs additional assistance or is ready to graduate, opening up a new spot for another student. This expert also assists in the selection process of students for the programs.

Working with families

Tony Arnerich felt strongly that Arnerich Massena's partnership programs should encourage family involvement, and indeed, this is one of the strengths of the *I AM Learning Partnership*. Coordinators communicate frequently with parents and host periodic events during the year where families can come in and meet the volunteers and interact with other program participants. Our coordinators interact daily with many parents via email, phone, in person, or other written communications. The majority of these touchpoints are informal, such as checking in with parents to solicit feedback or update them on their child's progress.



The programs do require parent participation, whether it means an earlier morning drop-off, a later afternoon pick-up, or packing lunches for summer camp. In general, parents are appreciative of the opportunity our programs provide their child and family and are enthusiastic about being involved themselves. Establishing and maintaining connections with the parents in our programs is vital to our success. The *I AM Learning Partnership* is serious about our role in enriching the broader community and including families in our process.

EMPLOYEE VOLUNTEERS

One of the most rewarding aspects of the *I AM Learning Partnership* is the involvement of Arnerich Massena employees as volunteers. Annual surveys repeatedly demonstrate that our volunteer mentors find the experience to be of enormous value. It is not mandatory for Arnerich Massena employees to volunteer in our partnership programs, but typically we have about 50% to 60% of the staff participating each year on some level. Arnerich Massena employees, including the two full-time coordinators, contribute about 5,500 volunteer hours annually on company time.

Organizations that are interested in incorporating employee volunteers into their community service programs must offer volunteer programs on a voluntary basis. It is not possible to mandate employee participation. There is work involved in marketing the program to employees and garnering participation; however, our experience is that a service-oriented culture fosters a uniquely connected workplace.

Communication with staff is essential in recruitment, training, coordinating, and supporting the volunteer effort, particularly if programs are removed from your organization's main location(s). There are a variety of ways to inspire employee volunteers and assist them in contributing to a thriving program:

- Hold staff meetings to showcase the programs and volunteer opportunities.
- Offer flexible volunteer options for varying schedules.
- Check in frequently with employee volunteers to assess needed levels of support or improvements.
- Offer training and handbooks to assist employee volunteers and create a framework for their work with students.
- Evaluate volunteer satisfaction via anonymous feedback on the programs and volunteer opportunities. SurveyMonkey.com is a wonderful tool for this.
- Utilize staff bulletin boards and newsletters to maintain a connection with the staff to the program.
- Arrange volunteer ride-alongs, in which non-participating employees join a volunteer to acquire first-hand knowledge of the program prior to commitment. This can be particularly useful for new employees or non-participating staff to better understand the programs and their benefits.

“HE WHO OPENS
A SCHOOL DOOR,
CLOSES A PRISON.”

~VICTOR HUGO

Finally, employee volunteers need not be the sole resource for support in your school program. Our partnership recruits middle and high school students who have graduated from our programs to participate as mentors. Our programs benefit from their participation, and the student mentors gain valuable experience. Some schools require community service hours for graduation, and volunteering for our partnership programs satisfies this requirement. We have also had the good fortune to attract clients, parents, and teachers to participate in our mentorship programs. Consider alternative avenues available to you for recruiting additional volunteers.

SHARING YOUR COMMUNITY SERVICE CONTRIBUTION

Most organizations have the intention and desire to accomplish good things for their communities. It is a mutually beneficial relationship. The community benefits from the resources being directed from a successful business venture back into the community that supports them. The company profits from creating a culture that beckons like minds, which in turn fosters a common sense of purpose and unity in the firm. An unintended consequence for Arnerich Massena is the influence our outreach programs have on our marketing and recruiting efforts. Clients and potential employees frequently reference our community service programs as an element that attracted them to our practice.

Just recently, after 19 years of service in our community, we have actively begun to include our programs in firm marketing. This is partly due to our commitment to do anything possible to increase the level of corporate assistance to our schools. It is our hope that by demonstrating the success of our programs, more businesses will become involved in educating our future citizens. It is also self-serving: the success of our business and the local economy depends on a well-educated citizenry. It just makes good business sense for all of us to participate. Here are a few suggestions for methods that may help to communicate your message:

- Find other people to tell your story, whether it be media or case studies or testimonials. School district communications and PTA meetings are great avenues for spreading the word too. When others applaud your work, it speaks volumes.
- Let the story tell itself. If there is glowing data or wondrous success stories, share them with your staff, on your website, and in brochures.
- Social media is a terrific avenue for messaging, as long as protocols and confidentiality issues in your business and with students and the school are addressed. Start a Facebook page about your program where interested parties can follow your progress; this is a great vehicle for communication. Blog about your activities with colorful and interesting stories.
- Showcase student program work in the school, your company offices, the local public library, or even a nearby coffee shop.

CONCLUSION

Education is fundamental to a vigorous and healthy culture; however, our priorities seem to have shifted as a country, and fewer and fewer resources are being directed to assuring a well-educated citizenry. Businesses and corporations are a natural fit for providing the additional support required to assist the next generation to succeed, academically and otherwise. Companies will benefit from having a well-educated pool of potential workers and consumers, as well as a culture that views service as intrinsic to the success of all. Those firms that take the lead will provide the template for the businesses of the future.

Arnerich Massena intends to be a model for businesses in partnership with community. It is our hope that business leaders reading this information will be inspired to work to develop their own educational service programs or templates for corporate citizenship. We encourage companies to participate in their communities at whatever level or in whatever way is most appropriate for them. At Arnerich Massena, we believe that educating our children is the most valuable investment we can make for the future of our community, our country, and our planet.

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