

## Movers & Shakers 2009: Education

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Think of our schools as a target. In the bull's eye are the urban schools, where the overwhelming majority of children are from low-income families. Economic and social circumstances often overwhelm their ability to learn.

Of course, there are underprivileged children everywhere. But many analysts believe the ills of poverty multiply in an environment where almost everyone is poor. As a [York County Commission](#) put it in 2007: "A school district can't succeed when poverty and its related problems are concentrated the way they are in the York City schools."

Move out a few circles. Here's the dropout epidemic. It's more intense in the cities than elsewhere, but many suburban schools also are struggling to keep students.

Zoom out again. Here's the rest of the dartboard, the group of kids who stay in school and graduate with solid diplomas. Even here, some observers see a problem. They say the quality of the education we are giving these children still must improve. And they say not enough of them are discovering science, math and technology.

Businesspeople across the region are taking aim at these problems, which threaten not only the well-being of midstate youth but our economy, too.

### How can we change?

It can start with simple things. Nathaniel Gadsden recalled a dropout prevention program in which business owners told the students staying in school was essential to success.

"To have a business person come in to say that ... I thought was pretty critical," said Gadsden, a pastor and community impact manager for the [United Way Of The Capital Region](#). He also has worked for the state in educational positions, including as a dropout prevention coordinator.

During Sharron Nelson's tenure as superintendent of the Manheim Township School District in Lancaster County, she wrote to businesses in the area and asked them to encourage their student employees to do well in school. An employer could even tie hours or compensation to how well a student is doing, she said.

"It's a little thing, but it says to the kid, 'I'm paying attention to you,' " she said.

Some businesses chip in money or donations to brighten the lives of school-age children in little ways. Their contributions may be small, but can temporarily help ease the burdens that make it hard for many children from difficult backgrounds to succeed in school.

Other companies host field trips or visit school career days to teach children about jobs in their industries -- an especially important cause among companies that need workers strong in math, science or technology.

Or you can get involved with broader efforts. In York County, for example, the YorkCounts quality-of-life coalition has called for millions of dollars of investment in dropout-prevention programs. In Lancaster County, a study commissioned by the county Workforce Investment Board recommended ways to improve educational results among Hispanic students.

### Leading by example

#### **Martin Rodgers**

*owner, Family Chiropractic of Lancaster County*

Family Chiropractic of Lancaster County doesn't do things halfway at Christmas. This office gives big presents -- bicycles, MP3 players and the like.

For years, the practice has been giving presents to needy children in the Lancaster and Conestoga Valley school districts. The districts give the office a first name and gift suggestion for each child. Then practice owner Martin Rodgers and his team go shopping. Patients contribute, too.

The motivation is simple.

"It just tears your heart out to think that there's kids out there that aren't going to have something for Christmas," Rodgers said.

It also could be a way to inject something positive into the lives of kids who see a lot of trouble, he said.

Family Chiropractic's employees never meet the kids they are helping because of privacy concerns. But it's good to know the donations are making an impact locally, Rodgers said.

"It's going to kids right here in Lancaster," he said.

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**Bob Rhoads**

*vice president of manufacturing and human resources, Precision Medical Products Inc.  
Lancaster County*

Bob Rhoads was talking to a group of high school students about his medical-products company several years ago and decided to liven it up with some show-and-tell. When he showed the students a hypodermic needle, Rhoads said, one of them fainted.

"I don't take the products in anymore," said Rhoads, vice president of manufacturing and human resources at [Precision Medical Products Inc.](#) in East Cocalico Township, Lancaster County.

But even if his job makes some children faint, Rhoads still pushes the message that there are big opportunities in science, technology and related fields that do not require four-year degrees.

"There is a high demand and a very high level of wage that comes with the technical degrees," he said.

The firm has sent a handful of employees to Reading Area Community College to burnish their technical skills. It also has hosted teachers to help them incorporate real-world concepts into their classes, and Rhoads still makes the rounds at career days.

The future of manufacturing depends on it, he said.

"If we're going to be competitive in the future, we're going have to have a lot of high technology and people (to) develop and maintain that high technology," he said.

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**Steve Gohn**

*president, CBY Systems Inc.  
York County*

Steve Gohn attended York schools and runs [CBY Systems Inc.](#), a credit bureau and collection agency in the city. He's also a member of a committee proposing a new charter school in the city that would serve three school districts and offer the rigorous International Baccalaureate curriculum.

The YorkCounts quality-of-life coalition originally proposed the charter school as a way to start breaking up the concentration of poor students in the city by bringing in students from other districts. Gohn agreed to serve on the committee charged with fleshing out that proposal.

"Studies have shown, when you take urban kids and mix them with more affluent kids, their ability to learn increases," Gohn said.

Meanwhile, all the charter school's students would benefit in the way of life experience by mixing with people of different socioeconomic backgrounds, he said.

The school would have other benefits, too, he said. It would help York County turn out a crop of highly qualified graduates who might choose to settle in the area after college, Gohn said. And it would be a recruiting draw for people from outside the region considering whether to move their families here, which in turn could be used to attract new businesses to the area, he said.

Businesses have an obvious interest in the quality of local schools, Gohn said.

"Our work force is only as good as the education they receive, from the production line worker on up to the white collar worker," he said.

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