Until the early 1980s, many East Baton Rouge Parish public school educators didn't want anyone in the business community meddling in their field of expertise. But then a 1981 federal court desegregation order mandated forced busing.

"The community pretty much turned its back on education," said Jenola Duke, vice president and a founder of Volunteers in Public Schools.

And so, Duke said, the education community turned to businesses for help, charting a path that has led to lasting relationships.

The first partnership formed in 1982 between Ethyl Corp. and Capitol High School, said Patsy Seguin, who coordinates the Partners in Education program.

Today, there are 263 partnerships, mostly between schools and businesses but also with churches and other groups, she said.

"Now, people love having businesses in their schools, but at that point they weren't too sure what it was all about," said Duke, who in the early 1980s spent many hours trying to show schools the benefits of partnerships.

Willy Johnson, senior vice president of community development for the Greater Baton Rouge Chamber of Commerce, said that when she started work at the chamber in 1994, the organization reviewed the relationship between the business community and schools.

One thing it found was that partnerships had suffered because the position of coordinator of the Partners in Education program had been eliminated several years earlier because of school system budget cuts.

The position was revived two years ago and is jointly funded by the system, VIP's and the chamber.

"The chamber has recognized the importance of quality education in general," said Johnson, who used to be an assistant principal at Woodlawn High School. "When we recruit businesses to Baton Rouge or businesses expand here, they expect to have a trainable work force."

School Board President Roger Moser said that when he was recruiting for Ethyl Corp. in the mid-1980s, he saw another link. Without an attractive public school system, out-of-town recruits were reluctant to move their families to Baton Rouge, Moser said.

He said that was the reason he got involved with the chamber and then chaired a committee that focused on education.

"That was at a time when the chamber said, 'We are not going to be able to carry out economic development here until we get this education problem straightened out,'" Moser said.

Johnson said she believes the chamber has "put its money where its mouth is" on public education. And, she said, she's seen an attitude shift over the years that has strengthened the relationship.

"I think everyone has become more knowledgeable about the fact that education is such a complex area," she said. "People are beginning to realize that education should not be left up to the educators because it extends beyond the classroom walls and into the community."

Johnson said technology has fueled the idea.

"The classroom environment can't possibly have all the resources needed to teach children," she said. "They need hands on, workplace-type experience."

Duke said that when partnerships first started, many schools just wanted donations, but the relationships are more sophisticated now.

Some firms ask employees to mentor students who may not have other positive role models.

Others teach children lessons, like the firefighter who set up a booth at one school's Family Math Night to talk about estimating the amount of hose needed to fight a particular fire, Seguin said.

And some companies have become involved in decisions made about the school. Improvement teams at each of the parish's 99 schools involve parents, teachers and community and business leaders.

Business representatives were on a 1997 committee that developed a school tax proposal and were in a group that helped develop the parish's technology plan, Duke said.

One of the newer trends, she said, is for companies to give workers time off to volunteer at a public school.