

## **Fran Meininger, Executive Director of the Sonoma Valley Education Foundation Interviewed**

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### **District, ed. foundation relations supplement school programs**

Working with an education foundation that provides programs and not direct cash donations may seem like a raw deal for some school districts. But with the right relationship and communication, schools districts can secure the very same programs they sought funding for in the first place.

The Sonoma Valley Education Foundation, founded in 1993 by parents and community leaders in Sonoma Valley, Calif., is one example of a foundation trying to make a bigger impact through the development of districtwide programs created side-by-side with the schools they serve.

"We are now more viable because we are working with the district to find out what kinds of programs they need to supplement," said Fran Meininger, executive director, Sonoma Valley Education Foundation. "Donors recognize this and feel more confident that their donations are being put to the most beneficial use. They know that when we say we are going to do something that it will get done because we've made commitments to each other."

Meininger, a former nonprofit executive, business owner, and consultant and management analyst for the City of Sonoma/Sonoma County's Sheriff's Department, joined the Sonoma Valley Education Foundation in August 2007. She helped focus the foundation as a leader in program-driven educational support in partnership with the local school district, and in concert with their strategic plan.

"We are not in business to function in spite of our district; we fund in support of it," Meininger said.

To help establish such a relationship, she suggests:

- **Find out what's happening.** Not only is it important to get the school district involved, but it is important to get the foundation involved within the district. "Our district superintendent attends all of our board meetings," Meininger said. In return, Meininger attends district meetings of the trustees and invites them to every event that the foundation holds. "We have a lot of time to talk," she said.
- **Ask for and give input.** Meininger said the biggest impact comes out of knowing the districts needs. "We are not the authority of what is needed and is going on in schools — we go to the authority," she said.

- **Keep it friendly.** Establish a personal relationship, so that when you need something at your school, you just have to pick-up the phone. "Communicate in a fun, friendly manner. These relationships don't happen in board meetings," Meininger said.

- **Support each other.** Provide help when it is needed. "We found a grant that we wanted to apply for, but it only funded school districts [not foundations]," Meininger said. The district served as the lead, and the foundation wrote the grant and got the program funded.

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