CORPORATE social responsibility in education translates into grants, scholarships and in-house training, which has risen in recent times.

About 20 companies reported new education initiatives launched in the last two years under CSR banners, especially directed at youth.

Typically, sponsors include larger IT, banking and multinational corporations, which are providing for a more diverse audience.

Mrs Tan Chee Koon, chief executive of the National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre (NVPC), said "companies are teaching youth functional skills: IT literacy, financial management and entrepreneurship; they also share life skills including teamwork, self-confidence, social interaction and communications”.

In choosing to help the youth, they share one thing in common: “From a social perspective, it is to give these youth a future and a hope, from what the companies can bring to the table in this form of strategic community partnership.”

One such corporation is Citibank Singapore.

From 2002 to last year, it pitched in $2,542,000 to sponsor a range of educational programmes at more than 50 per cent of schools here.

Through the programme, students – from as young as 10 years old – learn about money management through comic books and interactive dramas.

Ms Sophia Tong, Citibank’s vice-president of community relations, said: “Children are exposed to a lot of things these days, including online fraud. They need to be educated on these matters. We don’t want them to think that money comes from a wallet every time they look at an ATM.”

IT company Oracle pumped US$661.3 million ($868 million) into youth education in Asia-Pacific from March to May this year.

Similarly, Microsoft and the Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore have initiated BackPack.NET.

Launched in 2003, the $18.8-million programme is driving the research, development and testing of innovative technologies in the classroom.

Other organisations are helping youth further their studies.

The American Chamber of Commerce’s fund-raising drive in 2004 generated $1.6 million – matched three to one by the Singapore Government – to fund an annual scholarship at the Singapore Management University (SMU).

This year, carmaker Honda offered a $1,000 scholarship and a month-long internship to four academically outstanding Institute of Technical Education (ITE) students.

For recipient Siti Haryati Salani, 21, the acknowledgement was also a boost in self-confidence. “They help us realise that ITE students can also win scholarships. It really helps dispel the notion that ITE is the end,” she said.

Through these programmes, bad grades do not mean lost opportunities.

Employers with a Heart (EWH), set up by Harriet Business Group’s managing director James Chua and the group’s international partners last year, aims to give youth a chance to upgrade academically while earning a living at the same time through its Work and Study Programme.

By collaborating with more than 50 companies, EWH has garnered support in the form of job opportunities, industrial training and sponsorship of workshops or scholarships.

Earning $2,000 despite faring badly in her O-level examinations, Atiq Syaliny Abu Bakar, 18, who is currently on the programme, said: “I wouldn’t have been able to sign up anywhere else to study with the grades I got.”

Academics aside, corporations like Coca-Cola – traditionally blamed for a host of ills caused by its high sugar, caffeine and phosphorous levels – want to repair that perception.

The soft-drink corporation sinks $100,000 yearly into its programme Step With It Singapore (SWIS), to promote a healthy lifestyle through three teaching modules and two workout modules.

So far, 90 primary schools have participated in the programme since it started in 2003. A study showed that after the programme’s pilot year, 77 per cent of the 14,095 student participants increased their daily activity levels.

As Coca-Cola chief executive Neville Isdell said: “We believe that we cannot succeed in a community if the community is not doing well. Therefore, we have a responsibility to discharge.”