

COLD, HARD CASH

WITH BUDGETS TRENDING LEANER AND MEANER, SCHOOL FUNDRAISING IS A BIGGER PRIORITY THAN EVER—YET PARENTS ARE GETTING FED UP WITH FEELING OBLIGATED TO PITCH IN. WHAT'S THE LESSON HERE? BY ALINA TUGEND

When the school district in Mount Vernon, New York, faced a dire budget crisis, officials decided to eliminate all high school sports teams for the 2008–2009 school year.

Parents were outraged. Students were devastated. In this working-class Westchester County community, sports are a crucial way to keep kids in school.

To the rescue: the Mount Vernon Educational Foundation. Like similar organizations around the country, it was formed by parents specifically to raise money for enrichment programs. The coaches and school district asked the group, started in 2003, to spearhead a fundraising campaign to restore the highly ranked athletics lineup.

The response was swift—and awesome. A rival high school contributed \$800 from ticket and raffle sales. Former Mount Vernon residents Denzel Washington and Ben Gordon of

the Chicago Bulls made highly publicized donations. A couple from a neighboring community asked that wedding guests give money to the foundation rather than buy registry gifts, netting more than \$15,000.

In the end, nearly \$1 million was raised and the kids were back in action. The following year, the school district lost some middle school teams, but managed to find money in its budget to preserve sports at the high school level.

"The goal was to keep the athletes in school, help them graduate and attend college," says Ronnie Cox, president of the foundation.

There was no question of going back, hat in hand, to ask for more private donations.

That's because while it can be relatively easy to whip up support for a one-time campaign, it's much harder to score big donations on an ongoing basis.

"I made it very clear to the school board

FOR
D IS FOR

Development Office

A IS FOR

ACHIEVEMENT GAP

H IS FOR

HAVE-NOTS

S IS FOR

CORPORATE SPONSORSHIP

G IS FOR GIVE


F IS FOR

?
BAKE SALE
CAR WASH
FUN RUN
FUNDRAISING FATIGUE

I IS FOR

IMPOVERISHED COMMUNITY

P IS FOR

PAY TO PLAY

B IS FOR
BUDGET CUTS


C IS FOR




BUY THE WAY

Sales-wise, there are worthwhile alternatives to same-olds like candy, candles and frozen cookie dough. A few to check out:

- **FAIR TRADE FUNDRAISING** Funky finds include wallets made from recycled billboards, banana-leaf greeting cards and reclaimed-paper bracelets created by Guatemalan, Rwandan and Ugandan communities. Schools can order goods at a discount, sell at a markup and bank the difference. fairtradefundraising.org
- **GREENRAISING** Started by a mom who was tired of schools preaching environmentalism, then selling wrapping paper made from nonrecycled paper. Eco-conscious reusables like totes and water bottles, along with fair-trade items such as coffee and jewelry, are sold here. greenraising.com
- **NAUMES FRUIT GIFTS** Offers fruit baskets to pre-sell, with schools receiving 20 percent of the profits. The company then donates, pound for pound, the amount of fruit your organization sells to a local food bank. naumesfruitgifts.com

and the superintendent that this was a one-time emergency that should not have to be repeated," says Cox. "It's the responsibility of the school board and superintendent to manage the resources to meet the community's needs. The foundation will partner with the school district, but not replace it."

The Mount Vernon story exemplifies the best and worst of school fundraising in these tough times. People can be incredibly generous. But you can't repeatedly ask everyone to open their wallets.

HISTORY LESSON

Bake sales, car washes, raffles, auctions—fundraising is nothing new. But the reality of multiple years of slashed budgets means schools aren't just trying to cover extras like arts, athletics and field trips but core necessities. In some

cases, parents have banded together to raise money to literally keep schools open and pay teachers' salaries.

Such activities raise not only money but serious issues. When a wealthy suburban area is affected by budget cuts, the parents have the wherewithal to step forward to do pretty much whatever it takes to retain a teacher, program or athletic team, says Dan Domenech, Ph.D., executive director of the American Association of School Administrators. In poor communities? Not so. "That lack of resources is a major factor in terms of widening the achievement gap," says Domenech.

However, raising money for photo equipment is a far cry from selling cookies to pay teachers' salaries. In 2009 the West Lafayette Schools Education Foundation in Indiana raised \$217,000 to bring back five teachers who had been

laid off due to budget cuts. Chuck Saylor, immediate past president of the National PTA, who is also a school board trustee in Greenville, South Carolina, worries about relying on fundraisers to essentially subsidize educational needs.

"That's very dangerous," according to Saylor. "Five years from now, when funding is more stable, state and county elected officials are going to say, 'We don't need to put more money in. The parents will pay.'" And relying on fundraising to cover basics makes it nearly impossible to do long-range planning, adds Domenech, because schools can't count on a similar amount of money coming in every year.

FACING THE INEVITABLE

Most people view school fundraising as necessary and are more or less okay with it. But some parents question recent methods. Blogger Laura Wellington, a New Jersey mother of five, found plenty of fodder in 2010 when her fifth-grade daughter came home from school with a letter stating that she was to earn \$20 doing household chores, which then had to be contributed to the school to make up a budget shortfall.

"Paying my children to do chores goes against everything I believe in," Wellington said. "It's stepping on parents' toes and teaching the kids a lesson about how not to stay on budget."

Her blog entry touched a nerve and was picked up by *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. She even appeared on several television shows. One San Francisco parent commented on the blog, "I can testify that the drumbeat of fundraising is constant, relentless and impossible to ignore."

Wellington was incensed again later in the year, when her daughter came

35%

OF PRINCIPALS SURVEYED REPORTED ANNUAL FUNDRAISER EARNINGS BETWEEN \$10,000 AND \$25,000. THREE PERCENT SAID THEY TAKE IN \$75,000+

(Source: National Association of Elementary School Principals)

(continued)

home with an info packet about how to have her artwork reproduced on a shirt or clipboard for \$12. "I understand they need the money, but I feel like every time a kid does something, it turns into an opportunity to fundraise," Wellington said.

To counteract this, some PTAs have started asking parents to make a specific one-time donation at the beginning of the school year. For example, Saylor says, his child's elementary school asked every family to contribute \$100. The concept met with "limited success," he says. "Not everyone can write a check for \$100, and the school's PTA still had to do a few fundraisers during the year."

Most parents—and kids—prefer actually doing something instead of just selling stuff. A car wash, a triathlon or a meal in a school gym where students serve and clean up are usually far better received than yet another candy sale. Auctions are popular, but again, income is a factor. In wealthier districts, parents can bid more and have the ability to donate (or fairly easily procure) desirable prizes, such as a week at someone's second home. Obviously, that is not a realistic option in poorer communities.

THE NEW DEAL

Stanley Levenson, author of *Big Time Fundraising for Today's Schools* (Corwin Press), takes an opposing view by arguing that typical time-consuming, labor-intensive fundraisers don't cut it anymore. Fast successes aside, car washes and carnivals can no longer carry the burden for financially strapped schools, he says. "If public schools are to compete for needed dollars," explains Levenson, "superintendents and others must aggressively apply the fundraising strategies used so effectively in universities and private schools."

That means creating district-wide development offices, conducting annual and capital campaigns and writing applications for corporate, foundation and government grants. According to Levenson, development offices can become profit centers in two years or less.

Of course, most districts will have a hard time implementing this model. For starters, it requires a certain amount of overhead. "In low-income communities,

the question could be, do you form a development office or put a teacher in a classroom," says Saylor.

In December 2010, the Los Angeles school board unanimously approved a plan to allow the district to seek corporate sponsorships. This could mean, for instance, arranged school visits to pass out samples of approved food products, or placing donors' logos in lunchrooms. But the board also drew a line—they will not do business with companies that sell alcohol, tobacco, firearms or high-calorie or high-fat foods.

While corporations can bring money into schools, they then potentially wield influence, which brings up a long-standing concern about school commercialization. "When companies get involved, it's not purely altruistic," says Faith Boninger, Ph.D., a research associate at the National Education Policy Center at the University of Colorado at Boulder. "They're trying to make the children customers for life." In other words, kids are bombarded by marketers in their regular lives. Schools should be a neutral zone.

In Levenson's eyes, that concern is overstated. As he sees it, companies already influence kids who go online, watch TV and look at magazines or billboards. By not involving corporations in

THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

Schools around the country have come up with unusual ways to generate cash. This is just a sampling from fundraising-ideas.org/DIY/index.html.

• **RAPPIN' TEACHERS** A week or so before a planned pep rally, set up a table with jars, each with a teacher's name on the front. Ask students to buy tickets for \$1 apiece, which they put in the jar of whomever they choose. The teacher who ends up with the most tickets lip-syncs a rap song of his or her choosing at the rally.

• **SCHOOL SPIRIT CHAIN** (Best for high school) Play on the natural competition between freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors and have a contest to see who has the most school spirit. During a specific week, students buy strips of paper for \$1 to contribute to the paper chain for their class, which is kept hidden. Then, at an assembly, have class reps bring out the chains. Members of the class with the longest chain win bragging rights for the rest of the school year. The only cost is paper and staples or tape.

• **ADULT SPELLING BEE** What kid doesn't like to see an adult put on the spot? Hold a spelling bee in the school auditorium one night and get an administrator to agree to give the words, which can easily be downloaded from the Internet. Each class selects three parents to represent them, either individually or as a team. Determine an entrance fee per person/team and ask a local business, such as a popular restaurant, to donate a gift certificate for the winner.

the total fundraising effort, a school or district is missing out on a good possible source of external cash.

Although establishing development offices, applying for grants and courting corporate sponsors requires resources and time—both scarce at most public schools—it appears to be the wave of the future. Even those who are resistant acknowledge there may be no choice.

Los Angeles school board member Steve Zimmer says corporate sponsors are a necessary evil and we must proceed with extreme caution. For example, in theory, a textbook company could make a sizable donation, then have a book chosen for class use even if it's not the best option. "This is a dangerous scenario, and that's why I'm so uncomfortable," says Zimmer. "But this is our new reality. Public funding is no longer funding public education." ●

FamilyCircle.com

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