

Schools needing supplies appeal to online angels

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A lucky bunch of New Jersey teachers are getting their classroom wish lists filled, thanks to a charity Web site that matches their pleas for equipment with donors across the country.

DonorsChoose.org, a growing national non-profit, began taking requests from New Jersey teachers in September. As of last week, citizen philanthropists from 38 states had granted more than \$100,000 worth of goods, from encyclopedias and computer printers to pencil sharpeners, to cash-strapped schools in New Jersey.

In October, a Paterson teacher asked for mats so her kindergartners could rest more comfortably on the cold floor of their classroom trailer. It took 12 days for her \$535 wish to come true.

An Elmwood Park teacher received whiteboards and markers worth \$370 to give her special education students more writing practice and self-esteem.

And a Hackensack teacher made a successful pitch for basketballs and board games to reward children for good behavior. A campaign to publicly applaud acts of kindness and courtesy has helped her fifth- and sixth-grade school halve its suspension rate since

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2003, when 22 percent of students were suspended at least once for fighting or defiance.

"When you pay attention to the positives, they increase," said Aurelia Zitman, the teacher who wrote that winning proposal. "Catching these kids doing even little things well is important for their success."

DonorsChoose.org aims to enrich classrooms and unleash teacher creativity at a time when public school districts can't afford all the tools they need. Its leaders also aim to fight the inequities faced by the poorest schools, some of which don't even have enough paper and

pencils to go around.

Last week, the Legislature passed a controversial new school funding plan, which Governor Corzine promised would make state aid to districts more effective and fair. That's been a huge challenge in a state with wide disparities in achievement between suburban and urban districts.

"No matter what scheme the politicians come upon, in whatever state, there will always be children left behind, classrooms left behind and teachers who need more support," said Mike Everett-Lane, executive director of the Northeast region for DonorsChoose.org.

"That's what we're there for, to try to address some of these imbalances that are going to happen no matter what school funding scheme is put forward."

DonorsChoose.org has raised more than \$18.7 million nationwide, affecting almost 1 million students, since it was pioneered in 2000 by public school teachers in the Bronx.

Organizers say its success shows how generous people can be when they're confident their money will go straight to projects they find worthy, without getting lost in administrative overhead.

Charity Navigator, a watchdog site that evaluates charities on accountability and efficiency, gives DonorsChoose.org its highest rating, four stars. New Jerseyans are among the most frequent contributors, and have made more than 2,000 gifts to schools across the country.

Most gifts go to impoverished areas but even some teachers in wealthy towns have posted requests.

A technology teacher at a middle school in Upper Saddle River, for example, asked for a digital camera and tools to make podcasts. They have been partially funded.

So far, three projects in Bergen County and eight in Passaic County have won full funding. Others are waiting for attention.

The Web site lets donors search proposals by subject matter, grade level, price, region and a school's poverty rate.



Some teachers try to catch browsers' eyes with catchy slogans. A Garfield High School teacher, for example, described how his students in chorus and band needed an audio system to hear quality music; he called his proposal "Silence of the Lambs."

Donors can pledge to cover all or part of a proposal, and can add an optional "fulfillment fee," usually 15 percent, for processing. Then DonorsChoose.org buys the supplies and ships them to the teacher, along with a disposable camera so photos of the students enjoying the gift can be sent to the donor. Students write thank-you notes as well.

Charles Creed, of Highlands, likes scrolling through the passionate requests online, and hopes to use the site to teach his 5-year-old daughter about helping others. He recently gave whiteboards to Elmwood Park students.

"I really love whiteboards and know how powerful they can be as a demonstration tool," said Creed, who retired at 35 from a lucrative job at Microsoft.

"I was the youngest of six children and worked full time to pay my way through college. I know that education is the great equalizer."

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At a glance

Tenants of Bellus Gardens must wait until Lodi gives them the approval to return home. A recent letter from borough engineers states that the building should remain unoccupied. As of the end of December, here is what has been done, and what is yet to be completed at the apartment complex:

What has been done:

- The bottom retaining wall located at the lower end of the slope was constructed.
- A second wall, which is centrally located between the bottom of the slope

and the apartment complex's steel columns, is partially constructed.

What remains to be done:

- A third wall, which will be adjacent to the exposed building's columns, and a fourth wall, which will be half the size of the other three, remain to be built.
- The parking lot, which is being used as a staging area for construction equipment, material and debris, must be paved.

Source: A letter to Lodi Manager Tony Luna from Neglia Engineering Associates, engineers for the borough.

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