

School Beat: Drumming Up Dollars

by Lisa Schiff, 2006-09-14

The school year is new but some of the challenges are familiar, especially the need for more dollars at our schools and in our classrooms. While there has been an increase in state funding for targeted programs (such as playground equipment and tutoring to help kids pass the California High School Exit Exam), discretionary dollars are still hard to come by. This type of money is what can really make a difference for students. When their teachers and principals are given sufficient resources to implement the programs they know will work for their school communities, kids learn and grow.

Tight budgets and increased needs have combined to make school supporters more creative and tenacious in their private fundraising efforts. Schools are no longer limiting themselves to the traditional candy bar sales or car washes. Silent and live auctions, carnivals, and sophisticated grant writing programs are becoming more and more widespread at schools all over the country and all over San Francisco. While such efforts have been effective at some schools, they are difficult and labor intensive and not every school has a sufficient pool of community members to pull off these kinds of activities.

On the flip side are individuals not connected to specific schools who recognize and want to help mitigate the funding gap but don't know how. Pledging a dollar a lap for a walk-a-thon or buying something from a catalog for a neighbor's child is one way, but people making donations usually want to contribute to something that is more closely connected to the actual cause they hope to support.

A unique non-profit organization called [Donors Choose](#) has stepped in to fill the gap between funding needs at schools and the desire on the part of education supporters to help out in addition to the taxes we all pay. Started in 2000, Donors Choose specifically targets teachers who have projects for which they need a specific amount of funding.

Teachers describe their project and how much money it will take to make it a reality. Accepted proposals are put up on the website, and then individual donors can search for projects to contribute to. Proposals are reviewed for appropriateness, including two basic criteria: they must be for resources that either go directly to students (such as books) or to a direct student experience (such as a camping trip) and "...cannot foster discrimination or proselytize a religious or political viewpoint."

Donors can find proposals by state, topic area, total funding required and more. One of the best parts is that individuals can support a project by contributing what they are able, as opposed to having to contribute the entire required amount. So a proposal that needs hundreds or thousands of dollars can be funded by many small donations, rather than waiting for, and quite likely never finding, the one individual who has the requisite financial capacity and interest.

Donors Choose offers a brilliantly simple, though partial, solution to a difficult problem--teachers have ideas for their students they want to put into place, but those ideas are considered extras these days, and so are rarely covered under our basic budgets. Complete collections of books that may not be part of the standard reading list for the year, a color printer to help students produce a magazine, money for buses for a hands-on geology lesson. These are all examples of real requests from real teachers trying to provide excellent opportunities for their kids.

Through September 30th, Donors Choose is offering a pledge matching program on many, many projects in a variety of states including California, and for schools in San Francisco. Some of the projects have already reached full funding, but many are still waiting. Check out [the list](#) to see if there is a project you want to support.

Of course not all projects at Donors Choose are successfully funded. And, the presence of this

program does not eliminate the need for increased dollars flowing directly into our school budgets from the state and federal government. While this is no doubt a significant way to meet some needs and does make it easier for school communities who don't have a strong fundraising base to finance desired programs, we still need to keep the pressure on for sufficient base-line funding.

Parents can learn more about both ends of this funding continuum, along with other important school related issues, this Saturday at the [Parents for Public Schools'](#) Back to School Kick off. Beginning with keynote speaker Janis Keyser (co-author of *Becoming the Parent You Want to Be*) addressing the crucial role of involved families in a thriving school community, the day will be spent looking at how to empower and support parent involvement in a variety of ways, from fundraising, to making sure school communities are inclusive to how to get the most out of parent teacher conferences.

Several of the workshops are squarely focused on giving parents information and tools to aide them in the financial roles that they are increasingly playing, including how school site budget works to looking at tips for grant writing and other fundraising efforts. Stepping back to look at the role of the City, a lunchtime presentation on the upcoming Proposition A School Facilities Bond will be made by Board of Education President Norman Yee. Proposition A is instrumental for pushing forward the next phase of facilities renovations for our school buildings, and is an example of the kind of large-scale, government funding that is absolutely required for a functioning school system.

Changing the financial situation of our public schools is a long-term process. While we consistently organize for and demand increased, sufficient public funding for our classrooms and school systems, we will also be working on the ground filling the gaps wherever and however we can.

Lisa Schiff is the parent of two children who attend McKinley Elementary School in the San Francisco Unified School District and is a member of the board of directors of Parents for Public Schools of San Francisco (<http://www.ppssf.org>).