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SPECIAL REPORT BEST OF THE WEB

SCHOOL AID IT TAKES A WEB SITE

IN CHICAGO, A HIGH SCHOOL SOCIAL studies teacher needs 10 globes for hands-on geography lessons. Cost: \$1,134. In Winston-Salem, N.C., a first-grade teacher wants the technology to let her young readers listen to books on tape. Cost: \$667. And in Flushing, N.Y., a fifth-grade teacher at Public School 165 is trying to scare up five beanbag chairs for her library. Cost: \$189.

Thanks to a charity called DonorsChoose.org, these teachers' wishes are coming true. In a move that redefines traditional philanthropy, DonorsChoose uses the Internet to connect teachers directly to donors. Teachers who once spent their own money for supplies, or simply went without, can now turn to donor support to roll out creative lesson plans. Meanwhile, rather than writing checks blindly, donors of any scale can decide which projects they wish to support. Like eBay or Amazon.com, DonorsChoose eliminates the middleman.

DonorsChoose has become something of a template for charitable giving in education. It was founded in 2000 and focused solely on New York City until last year. Then, with additional financial backing, it began a rapid expansion to Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and several cities in North and South Carolina. As far away as Hong Kong, entrepreneurs have developed a Chinese version, at edexchange.com, to connect Chinese teachers with donors. All told, DonorsChoose has funneled nearly \$4 million to more than 8,000 projects. Nearly 70% of requests are funded within two months.

DonorsChoose is the brainchild of a former public high school teacher, Charles Best. A soft-spoken Yale University graduate with a shock of brown hair, the 29-year-old thought up the idea during his first year as a teacher at Wings Academy in Bronx, N.Y. He and his colleagues often sat around the staff lounge dreaming up projects they couldn't afford. Best figured there were probably plenty of people who would rather fork over a bit of cash for a specific classroom project than write a check to a traditional charity. So he moved back to his parents' home to save money and designed the Web site. He persuaded colleagues to post the first requests, then used his savings to fund them anonymously.



BROOKLYN
DonorsChoose paid for many books at P.S. 24

The Web site reads like a "Dear Santa" list from teachers. Educators submit a few paragraphs describing their ideas by way of request. Projects range from as little as \$49 (clipboards) to several thousand dollars (laptop computers). Volunteers vet the requests and post them for donors to browse. Once donors select a project, DonorsChoose staffers purchase and deliver the materials. One hundred percent of the money goes to the classrooms; DonorsChoose's 17 staffers are paid through grants and corporate sponsorships.

The results are powerful. The first year that Tracy Corsano taught fifth grade at P.S. 24 in Brooklyn, she spent \$1,500 of her \$32,000 salary on basic supplies for her students, more than 90% of whom qualified for free lunch. After hearing about DonorsChoose two years ago, she tried it out by posting a request for \$396 to buy four sets of Scholastic's 100-volume library set. Within weeks, her bookshelves were full. Now, Corsano turns to DonorsChoose for many of her classroom needs. Last May she requested \$300 for earth science books. That proposal has just been fulfilled, and this fall her students will research projects about the planet's crust, rivers, and lakes. Says Corsano: "If it weren't for DonorsChoose.org, I wouldn't have most of my library."

Donors like the charity because they can target their funds and see their gifts at work. After Durham (N.C.) investor Michael Brader-Araje first heard about DonorsChoose, he donated \$814 to fund a map and related teaching materials for a Bronx classroom. Two months later, Brader-Araje received photographs and thank-you letters from the students, written in scratchy pencil. "I was hooked," says Brader-Araje.

That kind of enthusiasm means that students this fall will be mapping out trips on newly purchased globes, learning new words from books on tape, and lounging in beanbag chairs, reading. For DonorsChoose, that is the true measure of success. ■

—By Jessi Hempel in New York