

Teachers
Raymond
Esterheld
and Hillary
Shifrin, and
Supt. of
Schools
John Ramos
unveil items
donated to
Wilbur
Cross
Elementary
School.



Brian A. Pounds/Connecticut Post

Web site empowers educational donations

By **LINDA CONNER LAMBECK**
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BRIDGEPORT — Margaret Santhanam, of Greenwich, doesn't know Wendy Johnson, a fifth-grade teacher at Wilbur Cross Elementary School.

But when she read Johnson's "Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear, Touch the Ground" request for jump ropes, basketballs and other playground essentials on DonorsChoose.org, it touched her.

Every school should have playground equipment, she said.

So Santhanam pulled out her credit card and became a "citizen philanthropist," making a tax-deductible donation that will supply Cross with playground staples.

In seven weeks, Bridgeport public schools have been flush with similar donations: guitars from Texas, educational games, books with titles like, "An Octopus is Amazing."

Some of the bounty was laid out Thursday under red plastic tablecloths in the Cross School library during a news conference to promote the district's partnership with DonorsChoose.org

"Obviously, we're very grateful for this," said Supt. of Schools John Ramos.

Every year, teachers spend hundreds of dollars out of pocket to augment classrooms, he said.

Since September, 490 city teachers in 34

schools have registered projects on the Web site. Of those, 63 projects, costing a total of \$17,215 have been fully funded.

On top of that, officials from DonorsChoose.org Thursday gave \$1,000 each to principals of 24 schools that had eight or more proposals posted to the Web site by Oct. 15. Principals can use the money to fund projects of their choosing at their school.

The Charter Oak Foundation of Westport also announced a \$10,000 donation to fund elementary and middle school projects listed on the site. Thalia Theodore, deputy Northeast director of the site, said they likely will fund projects at schools that have yet to attract private donations.

Until now, the most consistent resource for city teachers hoping to fund special projects has been the Bridgeport Public Education Fund's mini-grant program. That program is being phased out.

Marge Hiller, executive director of BPEF, said DonorsChoose offers the opportunity for teachers to get grants quicker and with less paperwork.

DonorsChoose was started seven years ago by a teacher in Bronx, N.Y. This fall, the site went national, and is open to any public school teacher who wants to post a funding request to benefit his or her students. Bridgeport was tagged as the flagship district in Connecticut.

In most cases, the site will provide the

materials directly to the teacher instead of cash. It also sends teachers a disposable camera to document how the donation was used. Students are asked to write thank-you notes.

Donors on the site can use a search button to look for projects by any number of criteria, including geographic region, subject area or material requested. They can fund all or part of a proposal.

"What's not to love about people giving us money?" Mary Beth Lang, president of the Bridgeport Education Association, said at the news conference.

Lang said teachers have a hard time when they get wonderful ideas but don't have the money to move forward. One of her favorite proposals is from a third-grade teacher at Classical Studies Academy who wants 60 disposable cameras her students can use to take pictures for reports and presentations on historic buildings in Bridgeport.

Johnson, who now has playground equipment, said her beginner's luck has inspired her to post more proposals.

Santhanam, who made the donation, plans to donate again. She also bought her mom a gift certificate to the site that will allow her to fund a project that speaks to her.

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