

VIRGINIA

Charity aids classrooms

DonorsChoose.org allows people to fill schools', teachers' wish lists

By Zinie Chen Sampson
ASSOCIATED PRESS

RICHMOND — Teachers across Virginia are turning to a charity group's Web site to have their wish lists fulfilled for students and their classrooms.

A teacher at an inner-city school in Richmond wants to trade the cassette tapes that first-graders are using to boost their reading skills for a new listening center and six books on compact discs. Price: \$374.

In Newport News, a teacher wants a set of seven puppets to help first-grade English learners really "get" the meaning of the classroom's books. Price: \$507.

A fourth-grade teacher at a Lynchburg magnet school is just seeking basic school supplies, including notebook paper, pencils, glue, scissors and a pencil sharpener. Price: \$348.

Their classroom wishes are rather simple. And they hope DonorsChoose.org can make them come true.

The Web site went live in Virginia last month, and as of yesterday, public school teachers across the state have posted 277 projects to be funded. Started in 2000 by Charles Best, a Bronx, N.Y., high school history teacher, DonorsChoose has expanded to allow what it calls "citizen philanthropists" to fund projects in all 50 states.

Donors can search projects on the site by state, subject, grade level, cost, or specific keywords such as "autism" or "Shakespeare." Site visitors can also purchase gift certificates to allow friends and family members to fund the school projects of their choice.

"Someone can read your proposal and invest in your children," said Cheryl

see LIST, page B4

P. Thompson, a pre-kindergarten special-education teacher at Blackwell Elementary School, in Richmond, whose

request was funded.

Miss Thompson sought a digital voice recorder so she could capture her pupils — many have pronounced language and speech difficulties — saying words and singing songs, and play back the recordings for the children and their parents. Along with the recorder she requested software, a CD player and blank discs at a total cost of \$411.

"A lot of the parents say, 'They don't talk at home,' and I'm able to let them hear what they say during the day," said Miss Thompson, who gives parents CDs with recordings of their children, and lets them borrow the CD player if they don't have their own. Hearing repeated words and phrases also helps with language learning, she said.

"Parents ask children 'How was your day?' and some of them can't really express themselves," she said. "The parents will actually get to hear the songs and the stories."

Gov. Tim Kaine yesterday marked the launch of DonorsChoose in Virginia, saying the site "enables any citizen to be a philanthropist."

Teachers submit requests on the site for their projects. Before posting a proposal online, the site's staff and volunteers verify the availability of the resources, negotiate for discounts and determine each project's price. When the project is funded, contributors receive photographs and thank-you notes from the classroom they've supported.

Mr. Best, who was in Richmond yesterday, said when he started the site seven years ago with his students' help, "we never imagined that our experiment would one day become a national nonprofit organization."

Since the inception of DonorsChoose, contributors have given \$15.8 million to projects, and supporters say the site especially helps schools with a high percentage of students from low-income families.



Blackwell Elementary Principal Conrad J. Davis III said 30 teachers from his school, which has a high percentage of children from low-income families, have submitted DonorsChoose proposals, the largest number from any city school. Though the site isn't meant to solve

public schools' funding ills, it does help ease the burden on teachers, who often spend their own money for classroom items. Miss Thompson said she spent \$850 last year, because "the children in your class become your own."



Associated Press

A special-education teacher at Blackwell Elementary, Cheryl P. Thompson's request on an online charity's Web site was granted.