

PERSONAL JOURNAL.

© Copyright 2007 Dow Jones & Company, All Rights Reserved

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Thursday, March 29, 2007 **D1**

Parents Rebel Against School Fund-Raisers

Tired of Being Forced to Sell Wrapping Paper and Raffle Tickets, Some Opt Out While Others Devise More-Effective Alternatives

By **JEFF D. OPDYKE**

WANT TO BUY a bucket of cookie dough?

Like so many parents, Beth Eagleson has grown weary of that question, the sign that another school fund-raiser has arrived, invariably requiring that she do much of the selling for her sons in elementary and middle school.

"Someone is always trying to raise money," says the San Clemente, Calif., mom. "It's to the point that it's almost a competitive sport—'My school can raise more than your school.'"

Like Ms. Eagleson, many parents gripe about fund-raisers—the time required to sell and deliver the products, the time taken away from classroom studies, and that some go to pay for events like school dances instead of educational needs. Chief among the complaints: the fact that schools often receive, on average, less than 50% of the money raised, according to the Association of Fund-Raising Distributors & Suppliers, a trade group. The rest goes to the for-profit fund-raising companies supplying the products.

"Parents are tired of getting hit up by fund-raisers," says Ms. Eagleson.

How to Fund-Raise

Here are some tips on raising money for your kid's school:

- **Be informative.** Surveys show schools raise more when detailing a specific need—such as funding a music program.
- **Use technology.** Internet sales make ordering and delivery easier, and emails reach more people than phone calls.
- **Be creative.** Parents are rebelling against traditional fund-raisers; consider other options, such as business directories and home tours.

It is a backlash reverberating in many homes across America. From band clubs peddling gift wrap, to school auctions, raffle tickets and charity car washes, to Girl Scouts flogging cookies, parents feel increasingly besieged by fund-raising appeals.

It's not just parents who are disenchanted. A survey to be released today by the National Association of Elementary School Principals reports that 64% of school principals would stop fund-raising if they could, worried that the duties have become too much of a distraction, place too much pressure on young children to sell, and are burdensome to teachers and parents.

Now, some schools and parents are taking action against traditional fund-raisers, each of which, on average, raises about \$3,000 for schools, according to the industry group. Instead, they're donating money and gift cards directly to teachers, skipping fund-raisers altogether and giving cash to schools, and, in some cases, starting new fund-raising businesses that are also attracting interest from schools around the country.

Ms. Eagleson, for one, says she has become "the school jerk" because she no longer lets her

Please turn to the next page

Parents Rebel Against School Fund-Raisers

Continued from the prior page nine- and 14-year-old sons, Cooper and Nathan Reynolds, participate in fund-raisers. Instead, she donates cash and gift cards directly to their teachers so they can afford supplies for the classroom.

When Kathy Hernandez took over as PTA president in 2002 in La Cañada Flintridge, Calif., she took aim at fund-raisers, and the larger PTA council ultimately scrapped events like the fall poinsettia sale.

She is now PTA president at a local junior high that runs just one fund-raiser a year, a home tour, in which four locals open up their houses for the day to people who buy tickets that cost between \$30 and \$35. "This takes less parent time to raise a similar amount of money," says Ms. Hernandez.

Bradley International Elementary School, a public school in Denver, held its first "spelling challenge" in February, raising more than \$6,000 by having kids solicit donations for each word spelled correctly on a special test. All the money went to classrooms. To raise a similar amount, the school's PTA estimates it would have had to sell roughly \$15,000 worth of other products.

The spelling challenge, says PTA president Nadine Davis-Green, "is now our No. 1 fundraiser, so that we don't have to ask parents to sell other stuff."

At Dutch Neck Elementary School in West Windsor, N.J., more than two-thirds of the school's families voted to do away with traditional fund-raisers two years ago and to instead rely on a "Just Write a Check" campaign. The school raises about \$15,000 annually with the new campaign, slightly less than a traditional fund-raiser, "but parents like this program so much better because they don't have to solicit donations," says Anita Grueneberg, the school's PTA president.

The upshot: Even as fund-raisers proliferate, industry-wide sales of products sold at these events are falling. The latest data show sales dropped 11%, to about \$3.7 billion, between 2001 and 2005, according to the Association of Fund-Raising Distributors & Suppliers. Of that amount, schools kept about \$1.7 billion.

Yet traditional fund-raisers are likely to remain part of the



Beth Eagleson won't allow her sons Cooper, 9, and Nathan, 14, to take part in fund-raisers.

Beyond the Bake Sale

Parents are growing increasingly weary of traditional school fund-raisers that typically demand parents, rather than kids, hawk everything from gift wrap to cookie dough. Here are some of the newer alternatives:

- **School Directories:** Parents provide names of reputable local businesses they use, and a small group of PTA members calls each business to solicit inclusion in a school directory that all parents receive free. Directory costs schools nothing to produce, parents and kids sell nothing, and schools keep about 80% of the sales.
- **Spelling Challenges:** Kids of various grades solicit donations for each word spelled correctly on an age-appropriate test graded by teachers. The school keeps all the money, kids have no products to deliver, and the fundraiser is educational instead of product-driven.
- **Opt-Out Programs:** Schools provide parents a way to write a check to fulfill obligations they'd otherwise have selling products for a fundraiser. Schools benefit by not having to split the money with a fund-raising company; parents get a tax write-off.
- **Online Donations:** Kids and schools send emails to parents, grandparents, family, friends, businesses and alumni providing a link to their fund-raising campaign. Sales and delivery are easier to track, and don't require door-to-door selling or numerous phone calls. In another arrangement, teachers can post funding needs for projects at Web sites such as www.donorschoose.com, and students can send emails to friends and family to help fund the project online.

Source: WSJ research

educational landscape, given that governmental cutbacks mean schools must tap other sources to pay for programs and services that otherwise would wither. Fund-raisers have become "a necessity," says Cheryl Baughn, the principal of Bernice Ayer Middle School in San Clemente. Indeed, Bernice Ayer typically holds just one fund-raiser a year, a magazine drive in the fall, but will add a second fundraiser later this spring.

"To maintain the technology and other programs to the level that students deserve, we have to do fund raising," Dr. Baughn says.

The association of principals survey shows that 76% of schools expect to hold between one and five fund-raisers during the 2007-08 school year—and 3% of schools could hold as many as 15.

Recently, a crop of new Web sites has popped up, hoping to benefit from the parental backlash. Gene Haba, whose daughter attends the St. Ann School in Bridgeport, Conn., created a Yellow Pages-like school directory in which local businesses pay \$35 to \$50 a year to be listed. The directory costs St. Ann's nothing to produce and is given to parents free.

More than 80% of the businesses listed in the St. Ann's directory "had never sponsored our school before," Mr. Haba says, and between 70% and 80% of the money raised ended up in school coffers. Now, schools elsewhere in the country are calling Mr. Haba, who has set up a school-directory business, myschool-directory.org. He expects to do about 75 directories this year.

Last fall, the Calvary Christian School music booster club in Columbus, Ga., put together a directory with Mr. Haba and sold space to 50 business in less than three weeks. The club expects to clear about \$4,000 when a new directory comes out in the fall. "We'd be hard-pressed to make that with some of our other fund-raisers," says Phillip Blackmon, the club president.

Later this year, Denver-based **Game 7 Entertainment Inc.** is set to launch a new fund-raising model, called pledgeplay.com, built on Internet gaming technology. Kids and parents will be able to solicit donations by sending emails to friends and family who, for their contributions, will be able to play a range of videogames built for everyone from kids to retirees. The company expects that schools will be able to keep about 80% of the money raised.

Charles Best, a former high-school social-studies teacher from the Bronx, N.Y., created donorschoose.com, a not-for-profit Web site that teachers in more than 5,900 schools have used to raise nearly \$12 million in the past few years. The site lets teachers, students and schools alert parents, friends, families and businesses via email and word-of-mouth to the individual projects that teachers need help funding. The philanthropically minded go online, read about the project and its needs, and then contribute. The site currently works with schools in just 10 states. It will roll out nationally in the fall.

Meanwhile, Entertainment Products Inc., a unit of New York's **IAC/InterActiveCorp** and one of the nation's leading fund-raiser companies, says it's revamping its business to focus on goods and services parents use every day. "Parents are just overwhelmed, burned out and just tired, and they want a better way to help their schools," says Entertainment Products CEO MaryAnn Rivers.