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Record, The (Hackensack, NJ)

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April 12, 2009

Section: NEWS

Edition: All Editions

Page: A01

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Column: THE BIG PICTURE

Caption: 1 - PHOTO - DAVID BERGELAND/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER - Programs such as this after-school jump-rope activity at Washington Park School in Totowa often rely on outside funding.

2 - PHOTO - KEVIN R. WEXLER/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER - Ashley Brown, a seventh-grader at Ramapo Ridge Middle School in Mahwah, exercising in the weight room that was funded by the school foundation.

3 - PHOTO - DAVID BERGELAND/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER - Charlie Butler studying with counselor Angela Rada in an after-school program at Totowa's Washington Park School.

4 - PHOTO - DAVID BERGELAND/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER - Cresskill sixth-grader Caroline Woo using a digital microscope during class. The Cresskill Education Foundation supplied two microscopes for the science program.

Costs up. State aid down. Surplus restricted. Mandates. Mandates. Mandates.

That is the financial reality for most New Jersey school districts. And the faltering economy is delivering yet another blow.

But in dozens of North Jersey districts, the children still have a shot at getting the latest technological gadgets and innovative programs, thanks to local education foundations. In these hard times, the number of foundations is increasing and districts will be relying on them more.

These not-for-profit groups act as a rich uncle, supplying districts with gifts that could never be wrung from already squeezed school budgets — wireless computer networks, robotics labs, musical instruments, field trips and more.

Districts across the state have grappled for years with dwindling aid from Trenton, a 4 percent cap on budget increases, mandated programs and restrictions on how much cash they can stow.

"It's very frustrating," said Mahwah Superintendent Charles Montesano.

"There's a very finite, and more and more restricted, limit to what we can do."

"We're trying to hold onto existing programs, let alone fund new ones," he said. "After awhile, it becomes demoralizing to teachers. Why should they come up with new programs if they're not going to get them implemented?"

For the roughly 300 districts statewide who have this additional source of revenue, "it's obviously invaluable," Montesano said.

Although starting a foundation is not that easy — as organizers in Wayne found — tens of thousands of dollars are raised each year through education foundations. These charitable entities collect money from businesses, parents and residents through direct solicitations, events and fund-raisers. They are most often managed by a core group of a dozen volunteers.

Unlike parent-teacher organizations, education foundations are usually set up specifically to raise money to support activities like arts programs, curriculum and technology. In most cases, they seek advice from district officials about funding priorities.

While PTAs and foundations both raise money, PTAs raise it for specific schools.

Education foundations are designed to enhance children's school experience.

"We felt that there were projects and programs not being offered to the kids," said Ruth Pomerantz, co-president of the Cresskill Education Foundation, which was started in 1990. "If we came in and did this, it could only enhance and expand their opportunities."

"We wanted our children to have the best that they could have," she said.

Golf outings, raffles

These days, school budgets don't have much room for creative programming — about 90 percent of spending plans pay for salaries and other contractual items. And fund raising is an impossible task for board of education members or administrators.

"There are a lot of protocols and legal burdens and everything else it takes to run a school district," said Jim Collogan, interim executive director of the National School Foundation Association and a former superintendent. "They don't have time to be outside-the-box thinkers."

In North Jersey, foundations make their money by hosting golf outings and galas, collecting membership dues, selling advertisements and 50/50 raffles, among other things.

"This past year, we held a concert for the arts with professional musicians who perform on Broadway and in different symphonies," said Pomerantz, of the Cresskill group. The musicians, some of whom live in the borough, volunteered their time. Residents paid \$10 to \$20 to attend.

That one event brought in \$9,000 for the group, which last year doled out \$53,750 in grants.

"We ... try to fund programs and projects that expand the curriculum, modernize existing programs and [for] programs that take initiative whenever possible," Pomerantz said.

Most schools foundations accept grant applications from teachers once or twice a year and confer with administrators when deciding where to spend their money.

"We ask where they think the need is greatest," Pomerantz said.

But in order for these foundations to thrive, they need people willing to devote their time as well as a steady influx of money from donors.

"It's a lot tougher than I thought," said Bob Ceberio, a Wayne school board member who campaigned on the idea of instituting an education foundation for the township in 2006. Ceberio is also executive director of the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission.

The Wayne BEST Foundation has been "dormant" for about a year now after failing to get off the ground. Still, Ceberio believes in the concept. "They work very well when there is a lot of community support," he said.

Private school model

Many of the foundations serving local districts were established 20 years ago, during a time when the economy was sputtering and schools were being forced to make cuts.

"People decided there has to be a better way to fund public education," Marcia Fleres, executive director of the New Jersey Education Foundation Partnership.

The foundation formula is borrowed from universities and private schools. "If you have a student at a private school or a university, you know you're always doing fund raising on top of paying tuition," Fleres said. "With public education, people work under the assumption that their tax dollars are paying for education. There have been times when I've been soliciting donations and I get the reaction 'I pay really high taxes. I'm not going to give you a donation on top of that.' People take things for granted."

One way private schools have been extremely successful is by tapping alumni. "Now, public schools are starting to understand that," Fleres said.

As the economy stumbles again, the two-year-old New Jersey Education Foundation Partnership finds its roster of 55 members continually growing and is working to start groups in five other districts.

Among them is Hillsdale.

"It's not going to be easy," said Maria Triantafillou, the parent of two middle-schoolers who is spearheading the Hillsdale effort. "I think if everybody works hard and reaches out to all their business friends, we'll be able to do some nice things."

Already the group has gotten support from Bergen County Garden Center, a Hillsdale business that is donating all the money raised through its annual 5k run. The run saw nearly double the number of participants this year. "I'm so thrilled they stepped up and were able to help us," Triantafillou said.

Fleres, of the state organization, stresses that there is no "boilerplate template" for foundations. "When people come to us, I ask them to tell me about the demographics, the school structure, if they have their own high school, is it regional or local," she said.

Business support

Rich, poor, urban, suburban — any type of district can have a successful education foundation, said Collogan of the NASF. "Corporations, foundations and other grant makers prefer to fund low-income districts," he said. "Individual parents who have means fund their districts. ... People in suburbia like to go to things."

In some situations, administrators or school employees play an integral role in the organization.

The Totowa Education Foundation, for example, "couldn't be more closely tied to the school district," said Superintendent Vincent Vacardipane, who leads it.

The foundation earns the bulk of its money — about \$100,000 annually — through fees it collects from parents for before- and after-school programs and a summer program. The money goes back into the K-8 district to fund traveling basketball and volleyball teams, a ski club, computer upgrades and an annual musical.

In Hackensack, the city's 21-year-old Hackensack Education Foundation uses its budget — raised through a dinner and a brunch — to give mini-grants, paying for things such as digital cameras, Shakespearean plays and a scholarship ranging from \$1,000 to \$1,500.

The Mahwah Education Foundation, however, takes fund raising to the extreme. Last year, the nine-year-old organization handed out its one-millionth dollar.

The MEF has the good fortune of having a town population of more than 25,000 people and a slew of corporations to draw upon. "We've really made a big effort to get our name out there and bring awareness to what we do," said

Angela Clarkin, president of the MEF.

About 75 percent of the foundation's money comes from corporate donors, she said.

Groups in towns that don't have a large number of businesses tend to have more difficulty. "There were a number of years where we were struggling," said Pomerantz, of the Cresskill foundation.

Today, the group gets much of its funding from parents and other residents, who pay from \$25 for membership up to \$1,000 for patron status. "It's taken many years to become a presence," Pomerantz said. "But at this point, I think many parents are not only receptive but tremendously grateful for what we do."

The inability to attract corporate interest is what hurt the Wayne BEST Foundation, Ceberio said. "Being the new kid on the block and not established, we were looking for that one big opportunity and to showcase it," he said. "But we never got it."

The foundation was hitting up potential donors who had long been committed to the many other charitable organizations in town — including the Police Athletic League and the Boys and Girls Club. "Wayne is a very generous town," he said. "If you take a look at a lot of those programs, it takes a lot to run them."

The timing, with the crumbling economy, didn't help. "Companies that once could've given a check for \$10,000 now are on the verge of bankruptcy," Ceberio said.

The organization is still incorporated, for which Ceberio invested \$5,000 of his own money. I believe in this kind of thing," he said. "Not to get if off the ground was very frustrating. If I see the right mix in the future, I'll probably jump on it again."

(SIDEBARS)

By the numbers

* There are approximately 35 school foundations in Bergen County and approximately seven in Passaic County.

* There are about 6,500 foundations nationally and more than 14,500 school districts.

* The average U.S. foundation raises \$10 to \$20 per student.

* The average elementary school principal has about \$2 per student in

discretionary funds annually.

Source: Jim Collogan, National School Foundation Association

Benefits for North Jersey schools

Tens of thousands of dollars are raised each year through local education foundations. Below is a look at the grants awarded by several North Jersey groups.

District Collected Awarded Big-ticket item (cost)

Cresskill Education Foundation \$34,315 \$53,750* Reading materials (\$30,000)

Mahwah Education Foundation \$203,735 \$163,083 Promethean boards (\$55,000)

Totowa Education Foundation \$191,063 \$169,089 Payroll** (\$111,648)

Hackensack Education Foundation \$10,000 \$4,100 Scholarship (\$1,000)

*Money raised in a previous year was added to the award.

**Payroll refers to the amount paid to team coaches, directors for the school musical, workers for the after-school program.

Tips for starting a foundation

* Organize an exploratory committee including the initiator, a business owner, alumni school board members and school administrators.

* Establish a purpose and objectives.

* Assemble a board of directors and set operating rules (frequency of meetings, agenda for meetings, etc.).

* Apply for non-profit status with the New Jersey Division of Revenue and the IRS.

Source: National School Foundation Association

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