



The Times

It's a hard sell - Page 2

In a state where the tax burden is legendary, it's a hard sell:

Asking business owners and corporations to dig deeper into their pockets voluntarily to support "extras" for local public schoolchildren at a time when their own companies are struggling.

But just as the rhythms of summer are starting to take hold for schoolchildren newly freed from their classrooms, Marcia Smith Fleres is making plans to go door-knocking for corporate sponsors for education programs.

Fleres is the executive director of the New Jersey Education Foundation Partnership, a West Windsor-based group that advises community nonprofit organizations that fund enrichment programs in local public schools. She performs a similar role for the West Windsor-Plainsboro Education Foundation.

She expects a difficult fund-raising environment this year.

Nationally, corporate giving is on the decline and many nonprofits are struggling, according to the Giving USA Foundation. The group's annual survey found that corporate giving declined 4.5 percent last year.

As it stands now, most of the education foundations are working with donations from last year's corporate budgets, said Fleres. This year will be different.

"Everybody's cutting back," Fleres said.

Fleres, who has more than 30 years' experience in nonprofit management and fundraising, says companies also are changing the nature of the support they are willing to provide. As a result, she is seeking to develop partnerships with corporations so business leaders feel their donations have tangible results.

"Companies now are no longer saying, 'We'll support a golf outing, we'll support a gala, we'll support a fun run,'" she said. "It's important for them to see the kids actually benefitting from where their money went."

Many business leaders are most interested in programs that promote science and technology, particularly in the Princeton corridor, with its concentration of pharmaceutical and high-tech companies, Fleres noted. Some companies are willing to provide support through mentoring, such as the increasingly popular high school robotics competitions.

Indeed, U.S. corporate leaders are expressing fresh concern about the nation's ability to nurture the talent needed to maintain its competitive edge in the global economy. A recent survey of executives in the nation's largest science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) companies showed more than half report a talent shortage now.

The rationale for corporate support of education programs is that tax dollars do not underwrite the enrichment programs students need and that the local foundations help defray the school-tax burden.

"We bring in programs that are above and beyond the education that's provided with tax dollars," Fleres said.



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As arguments over property taxes have grown in New Jersey, the nonprofit education foundations have become fixtures in many communities. Nearly every school district in the Mercer County area has a group.

Usually formed by parents, the foundations run on shoestrings. In fact, Fleres, who works part-time role for both the statewide and the West Windsor-Plainsboro groups from an office in her Plainsboro home, says overhead is kept intentionally low. The NJEFP, for instance, only charges \$100 a year in dues.

The rewards reaped by the programs the groups support, though, are rich in large and small ways.

Among recent examples, the Trenton foundation purchased materials for a financial literacy course for city high-schoolers, the Princeton group mounted an exhibit on the town's public education history and the West Windsor-Plainsboro organization awarded grants to help establish an outdoor classroom at one school and a tadpole pond at another school.

The West Windsor-Plainsboro group, which is among the most established in the region, has issued more than \$187,000 in teacher and student grants since 1995.

Among the staunchest supporters of the education foundation movement has been the Educational Testing Service in Lawrence. The organization, which is itself a nonprofit, donates to local school groups and awarded a two-year grant to get NJEFP rolling in 2007, Fleres said.

But communities don't need corporate headquarters in their backyards to support an education foundation, Fleres said. She believes any community, including rural and economically depressed areas can craft a plan that works for them.

"You tell me about you community and we'll take it from there," she said.

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