

An illustration showing a man in a brown suit climbing a steep, rocky cliff. At the top of the cliff is a large, stylized dollar sign (\$). The background features a blue sky with white clouds and a yellowish ground area with some green grass and rocks. The overall style is that of a hand-drawn cartoon or graphic novel.

Looking for a Boost

Outside funders are critical to schools, but as donors' fortunes sink along with the economy, districts are digging deeper for help

The booster club at Oregon's Aloha High School has always been an expansive donor, funding everything from student scholarships and teacher requests to annual festivities and facility maintenance.

"We are a booster club for everybody," says Marcia Loggins, the club's president.

As the country sinks deeper into recession, needs are far greater than resources at schools like Aloha, located in the 37,500-student Beaverton School District. Like other districts across the country, Beaverton is contending with rising unemployment, plummeting home values, and a massive state shortfall.

Grassroots fundraising, corporate sponsorships, government grants, and foundation awards are important to

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school districts even in tight times. But the places districts can turn to are seeing their fortunes sink along with the economy. Foundations have lost an average of 30 percent of their wealth as the stock market has tumbled, a drop that does not bode well for public schools.

Kathleen McCarthy, director of the Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society at City University of New York, says education usually is "at the top of the list" of philanthropic endeavors. But, she says, giving to K-12 schools is different; education, in the world of corporate philanthropy, usually means colleges and universities.

"With public schools, people immediately think it's the responsibility of the state, no matter how much trouble the state is in," she says. "As the economy continues to worsen, social welfare needs will grow, the needs directly embedded

in your life will grow. Public schools will have to work harder or else [donations] might be the thing that drops off."

While states still fund roughly 80 percent of K-12 education costs, the pressure is being felt all the way down to local school foundations (there are roughly 7,000 today, compared to just 120 in 2005) and booster club leaders such as Loggins, who has to work twice as hard to help her school maintain the status quo.

"We're kind of the last place for people to go for money," she says, "because the district certainly doesn't have any."

On the forefront of uncertainty

It's doubtful the staff of Massachusetts' Pittsfield Public Schools could work any harder to raise outside funding. Some \$10 million of Pittsfield's \$60 million budget comes from more than 30 different grants the district has received.

Barbara Malkas, the district's deputy superintendent, says grant writing "is really a part of the culture here." But because grants are competitive and vulnerable to economic shifts, Malkas and others are afraid the downturn could undo the progress the district has made toward improving student achievement.

"Right now, everyone is holding their breath, waiting to see what the domino effect of this will be," she says.

For example, the district has received a federal Safe Schools/Healthy Students grant that has helped fund violence prevention, safety promotion, and healthy student development programs. The funds have allowed Pittsfield to do community outreach, hire additional school counselors, and launch peer-mediation and dropout prevention efforts.

The \$3 million annual initiative is concluding its third and final year. District officials are uncertain and, frankly, anxious about the ramifications of losing their funding.

"I don't think the impact of that grant coming to a conclusion and the inability of the district being able to pick up what has come to be expected has hit the community yet," Malkas says. "I think that's an area where we will really feel the significance of its loss."

Pittsfield already has felt the impact of the recession on area businesses. Each of the district's dozen schools partners with a local company that provides everything from release time for employees to tutor students to funding for after-school programs.

A local toy company, hit with massive layoffs, has eliminated such projects. The same goes for a local hospital, which no longer is supplementing after-school programming at one of the district's high schools or supporting a teaching position in an allied health program.

Meanwhile, the district started its budget process far earlier than usual to bring more people and ideas to the table.

"We're really looking at what's worth saving, where we can trim to maintain that, and how we access funds more

creatively because it's becoming more competitive and harder to find," Malkas says.

Charity in the information age

In a down economy, the competition for benefactors likely will get more fierce, but creative minds are using technology to develop new ways to promote charitable giving. Websites like adopt-a-classroom, iLoveschools.com, and Goldstar Registry are examples of virtual venues that match classroom needs with donors who can supply money, equipment, or materials.

The sites piggyback on the growing trend among established nonprofits to tap into the ubiquitous nature of the Internet. One such site, the international relief and development organization Oxfam America, sent an e-mail plea to 400,000 people after an earthquake shook Peru last year. The organization raised \$355,000 within 24 hours.

The situation wasn't quite so dire for Charles Best, who was working as a social studies teacher at a Bronx high school in the spring of 2000. But the fact that so many students came to school without the materials they needed was troubling enough that Best founded Donorschoose.org.

"Our website was born out of teacher frustration at the school level, in terms of not being able to do all of the projects we needed to do, and it grew from an instinct that people were growing more distrustful about just writing a check for \$100 and not knowing where the money went," Best says.

At Donorschoose.org, teachers must write one-page proposals on their projects and list the necessary resources they need. Projects have ranged from providing dictionaries for students to use at home to incorporating cooking across the curriculum.

The Donorschoose.org staff vets all proposals against its own eligibility requirements before they are posted to the site. Individuals can search and choose projects based on cost, the school's location, subject or grade level, and the level of student poverty.

"Almost 90 percent of our projects come from low-income schools," says Best, adding that donors are encouraged in a number of ways to consider each school's resources. Each proposal includes the participating school's free and reduced-price lunch rate. Overhead costs associated with each project also are waived on a sliding scale. Donorschoose.org staff also purchase and ship the requested materials directly to the teachers.

Besides a tax write-off and a warm feeling inside, donors receive packages that include photos and letters from the teacher and students.

"The feedback process takes some real time," Best says. "But most teachers report that it becomes a great literacy exercise for the class."

The model obviously is working. About two years ago,

Donorschoose.org went nationwide, offering services to every classroom in the country. At press time, 115,443 individuals had donated \$30 million to 193,983 different projects since the site's inception.

"In one respect we're defying the recession because we saw an 80 percent year-over-year increase in giving," Best says, noting, however, that the average donation amount has declined from \$250 to \$150 due to the flagging economy.

That decline is an easy pill to swallow, when you consider that 68 percent of the site's donors have never made a donation to public schools.

"Rather than think that by giving money the problem is solved, this experience has opened their eyes, especially in low-income communities, so they feel much more aware and responsible for public education," Best says.

Time is cheapest, most valuable gift

Trying to drum up support for his economic stimulus plan, President Obama toured the country, making pit stops and speeches in communities that have been hit hardest by the recession. One stop was in Elkhart, Ind., a community with a heavy manufacturing base that, because of slowdowns in the boating and RV industry, saw its unemployment rate rise to 15 percent almost overnight.

The president's stop, and the media attention it received, quickly made Elkhart a poster child for the down and out. It's an image that irks the town's residents,

"The things we're getting attention for, that's not what we're about," says Ellen Moore, public relations and volunteer coordinator for Elkhart Community Schools.

Instead, she says, her town is a wellspring of entrepreneurship, holding down the record for the most patents in the state.

"Elkhart is a place where if someone has a good dream it can happen," Moore says. "There's an incredible passion for doing things different than what's been done before."

That might explain why, in the midst of a deep recession, most community leaders remain optimistic about the future, even when it comes to philanthropy for schools.

"The business climate is rough for a lot of companies," says Kyle Hannon, vice president of public policy for the Greater Elkhart Chamber of Commerce. "So it's hurt the giving and volunteer efforts because people are out of work and don't have a lot of money."

Still, Hannon says, Elkhart residents understand the need to partner and promote quality education. They know the town's ability to rebound successfully from this downturn depends largely on the skills of students coming out of its schools.

One example is a recent local United Way initiative to improve literacy among elementary students. Darren Bickel, vice president of community impact for the agency, says the project was identified during a long-term study on

the challenges Elkhart families face.

The review found, among other things, that the fourth-grade reading level is a critical benchmark that the town's students weren't meeting, compromising their opportunities for success in school and beyond. About a quarter of the town's kids drop out from high school.

Armed with this information, the United Way branch and an existing volunteer group partnered and launched the Daly Reading Camp in February.

"We'd hoped we could get 30 to 40 volunteers to match with a child over the course of 10 weeks," Bickel says. "But by the time we ended the push, we ended up with 100 folks."

Other calls for volunteers

Back in Oregon, Loggins wishes she had the same success. She has volunteered for 15 years in the schools, since her oldest child entered the system, and is no stranger to hard work. But she is "hitting a wall" when she tries to encourage others to do the same.

A recent letter writing campaign failed miserably, garnering not one response from 1,600 families. Meanwhile, the Aloha Booster Club's main revenue generator, concession sales, drew less than \$200 at the season's last basketball game.

"It is so disheartening to me," Loggins says. "We've been trying to get the word out, hit up bigger corporations and more businesses. I can't say it's worked. ... I'd like to know what everyone else is doing."

In Elkhart, turning to groups such as the United Way has proven successful. The local initiative is reflective of a shift within the national organization, which recognizes the United Way can't be all things to everyone and that donations of time are just as important as money.

Anecdotal evidence suggests volunteerism may be on the rise in part due to Obama's call for community service. That call has resulted in the website usaservice.org, which finds volunteer opportunities for people by area.

Volunteering also has become a popular option among the rising ranks of the unemployed, who have found themselves with time on their hands. Teach for America, for instance, received a record 14,000 applications by November, a nearly 50 percent increase from the year before.

Bickel says, however, he wouldn't characterize the folks who responded to the local United Way's challenge as out of work.

"It's a really broad spectrum of people that have stepped up," he says. "I think so many are feeling like they want to do something to help the situation, but they don't know where or how. Well, this is something that they can do. That does help." ■

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