Funding Opportunities for Teachers

Jack Ryan: Teachers and donors
Posted: Saturday, January 12, 2008 10:03 PM CST

Here is a no-brainer for public school teachers: You can apply on a web site for donations of school equipment and supplies, and the chances are good that somebody will send it to you.

The site is www.DonorsChoose.org. Created by some New York City teachers in 2000, a number of teachers in this area already are using it to get materials. Last February the paper did a story on a bunch of DonorsChoose gifts sent to Amite County teachers.

I have to wonder why more teachers arenôt doing this. Anyone whoôs thinking about it should talk to someone whoôs a real pro at using the site: South Pike Junior High School teacher Bobbie Felder. She learned about the site from her sister, Carolyn Williams, a Salem teacher.

In 2006 Felder got her first DonorsChoose gift, two sets of encyclopedias for the Summit Academy alternative school. But this school year, her first at South Pike, seven of her requests already have been fulfilled.

To submit a proposal, Felder said, ñYou have to write a little essay saying what you teach. You say what you need. ... Then the web site lets you go to what it calls their store, and it has all these manufacturers, and you pick out the materials you want. Itôs like filling out a purchase order.

ñIt automatically calculates your cost, and then you submit it, and they review it, and within 10 days they have it posted on their web site with a final cost, including shipping, taxes and all that stuff.ò

A teacher does not have to identify herself by name to make a proposal, but the site does list the school and its location.

At South Pike, one of Felderôs first donations was a life-size plastic skeleton.

ñWe call him Mr. Bones,ò she said. ñThis was donated by medical students in Ohio. A group of medical students got together, took up a collection and got this money.ò One of the students also sent some medical posters that werenôt being used.

Felder has found that many donors are anonymous. ñI got a package one day from a lady in Connecticut,ò she said. ñI had no idea who she was, she didnôt leave a name. She had tracked me down through DonorsChoose. She said she didnôt have money to put into a project, but she had some supplies and she sent

them to me ð pens, rulers and all that.ò

The encyclopedias, valued at about $3,000, are the most expensive donation Felder has received. She wanted them because the alternative center didnôt have a library, and she figured encyclopedias would be a good way for kids to research things.

At South Pike, the most significant gift sheôs received is a $1,200 digital document viewer. ñMakes the overhead projector look like a dime-store magnifying glass,òshe remarked. The viewer also can project videos of science experiments sheôs performing, which will save the school money on lab supplies.

Other gifts include detailed globes of the Earth and the moon, three-dimensional models of the DNA double helix and the atom, a model of the human lung and a set of X-rays of broken bones.

But Felder also has received the essential items that most of us would overlook: ña heavy-duty pencil sharpener and 1,000 pencils, plus 25,000 sheets of copying paper ð ña hard commodity for teachers. Not this year,òshe said. ñI am a photocopying fool, let me tell you.ò

Felder said it takes less than an hour to submit a proposal to DonorsChoose. It takes a lot more time to prepare the organizationôs required thank-yous to a donor. Students have to write notes, and the teacher must take photos of kids using the gift. DonorsChoose supplies a disposable camera for that. The only cost to the teacher is time.

ñIt does the kids good,òFelder said. ñTheyôre learning. I told them, somebody sitting somewhere at a computer said, ôI want to help these children.ôI say, ôThis is for yôall. Somebody thought you were worth this. Now one day you need to pass this on.ôThereôs a life lesson involved there.ò

Anybody can look at the DonorsChoose site to see pending proposals from teachers. Search the Mississippi file using the names of local towns and youôll see a few proposals under each one, but not a whole lot of them.

Come on, teachers. This is a golden opportunity. Local budgets are tight. We all know how teachers spend their own money to buy supplies for their students. They shouldnôt have to do that, and hereôs a way to get some much-deserved help, whether itôs for basic materials or for something imaginative like Mr. Bones.

If the experience of Felder and other teachers is any guide, there are a lot of people out there who are willing to pitch in. Mississippi education sure can use the help.

Teachers, the ballôs in your court.