

Parent Fundraising Focuses on Ed Tech

By Jennifer Roland



As state and local governments debate education funding, school districts face the tough task of trying to make budget cuts that don't affect student achievement. Against this backdrop, technology projects can be a hard sell, with their high initial investment, ongoing need for upgrades, and perceived lack of a direct link to improved test performance.

But National PTA President Betsy Landers believes now, more than ever, is the time for schools to make that investment. "Technology is very relevant for students," Landers says, "and they are more apt to perform better in the classroom because of this engagement and innovation." Landers stresses the importance of technology in preparing students to enter the workforce with the skills to use current hardware and software.

A growing number of parents not only agree that educational technology is a necessary budget item, but also they're banding together to find unique ways to raise money for these initiatives themselves.

Ride for a Reason

Part political activism, part fundraiser, the Ride for a Reason began in 2008 when Mike Napolitano and three other parents rode their bikes the 100 miles from Oakland to Sacramento, to raise awareness of a funding crisis in California's schools.

As the ride grew in popularity over time, Napolitano and the event's organizing team added the fundraising component. The 2012 ride raised more than \$60,000 for four Oakland schools. They split the money evenly, and each school chose how to spend it. Project Seven, a seven-year elective curriculum at Claremont Middle School and Oakland Technical High School, was among the initiatives funded by the ride. Targeting students who are in the middle academically, Project Seven uses a "very sophisticated set of professional-level software tools" used by animation studios, video-game producers, and law-enforcement agencies, says parent Michael Mages, who participated in Ride for a Reason and spearheads the project. The goal of the program, Mages says, is to give students highly sought-after skills that could help them find a job or pay their way through college.

Although the district paid for Project Seven's lab space at Oakland Tech, parents built the rest of the program from the ground up through software donations and their own contributions, says Mages. Project Seven launched at Claremont in January 2008 and at Oakland Tech in February 2012.

Tech Search Party

On the other side of the San Francisco Bay, parents have used mobile-phone scavenger hunts to raise funding for two elementary schools and one middle school.

Tim Smith, who has organized the fundraiser, sits on Alvarado Elementary School's technology committee. When he joined the committee, "nearly 80 percent of the computers weren't working," he recalls. Through the Tech Search Party and other fundraising efforts throughout the year, the school has replaced the outdated computers and energy-sucking CRT monitors with thin-client computers, software to manage them, and LCD monitors.

Each February, teams and individuals have followed clues delivered on their mobile phones on a scavenger hunt through San Francisco's Noe Valley. "Part of it is a trivia event, part of it feels like a crossword puzzle, and part of it is a scavenger hunt," Smith says. Teams pay a small fee to be part of the contest, but that accounts for only about 10 percent of the total money raised—more than \$18,000 in 2012's event. The rest comes from donations from the area's tech companies, including Google, Verizon, and Smith's own company, Element PR. Sponsors see the value of proving their community support to the "concentrated group of highly connected consumers" who take part in the scavenger hunt each year, Smith says.

Turning Trash to Cash

Schools don't have to be part of the tech-friendly Silicon Valley for parents to get involved in raising money for ed tech. At Allenwood Elementary School in Allenwood, New Jersey, parent Karen Gunthner introduced kids to the concept of recycling in 2010 and earned a \$10,000 fourth-place award in a statewide Trash to Cash contest hosted by TerraCycle and Wal-Mart. The contest recognized schools that collected the most waste items through TerraCycle's various collection brigades.

Gunthner knew little about recycling when she began the program. "It all started because I wanted to get rid of the styrofoam trays in the cafeteria," she says. Soon it evolved into a school-wide effort to collect everything from wine corks to obsolete laptops. Allenwood participates in 32 different brigades, including those targeted toward used inkjet cartridges, keyboards/mice, and laptops. The school has recycled 200 items of e-waste and thousands of other items. In addition to collecting items at school and from parents, Gunthner has collected waste from nearby businesses.

The award funds had to be used for green purchases, so the school replaced all of its outdated CRT monitors with flat screen monitors. "As an elementary school," says Gunthner, "we get the hand-me-downs from the other schools." She says it was not hard to convince school personnel and her cohort of 30 volunteers of the importance of replacing the monitors. And, she adds, "the kids think they got all-new computers."

For the record, the school continues to use styrofoam trays, but it has decreased its daily cafeteria trash collection from ten 55-gallon trash bags down to two.

Raising Funds for Your Own School

Parent groups that are considering starting their own fundraisers for educational technology can learn from the successes of Napolitano, Smith, Gunthner, and other parents, who offer these tips.

1. Look at your interests. Napolitano and the core group that started the Ride for a Reason are cyclists, so they organized a cycling-based fundraiser. Another Ride for a Reason is a motorcycle ride to raise money for the Penrickton Center for Blind Children in Taylor, Michigan.
2. Partner with local businesses. The San Francisco area has a huge technology sector, so the high-tech Tech Search Party is a perfect fit. Look at the types of businesses you see locally and approach them about partnering. The Salem-Keizer Education Foundation in Oregon partnered with a local pizzeria for a Pi Day fundraiser, which netted \$500 for the school district, according to Executive Director Krina Lemons.
3. Try online. eBay auctions can be a great way to allow parents to participate in fundraising, no matter their schedules or budgets. And local businesses get excited about online school auctions because they reach far more people than in-person events, says Melissa Hartley, community relations director of the Horizon Community Learning Center in Phoenix.
4. Look for methods beyond direct cash sponsorships or donations. Funding Factory and TerraCycle offer cash for recyclable and non-recyclable trash. Parents and local businesses can partner to collect trash in exchange for cash. Saint Anne Elementary School in Webster, Massachusetts, earned more than \$4,500 in the 2011-12 school year collecting printer cartridges.

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