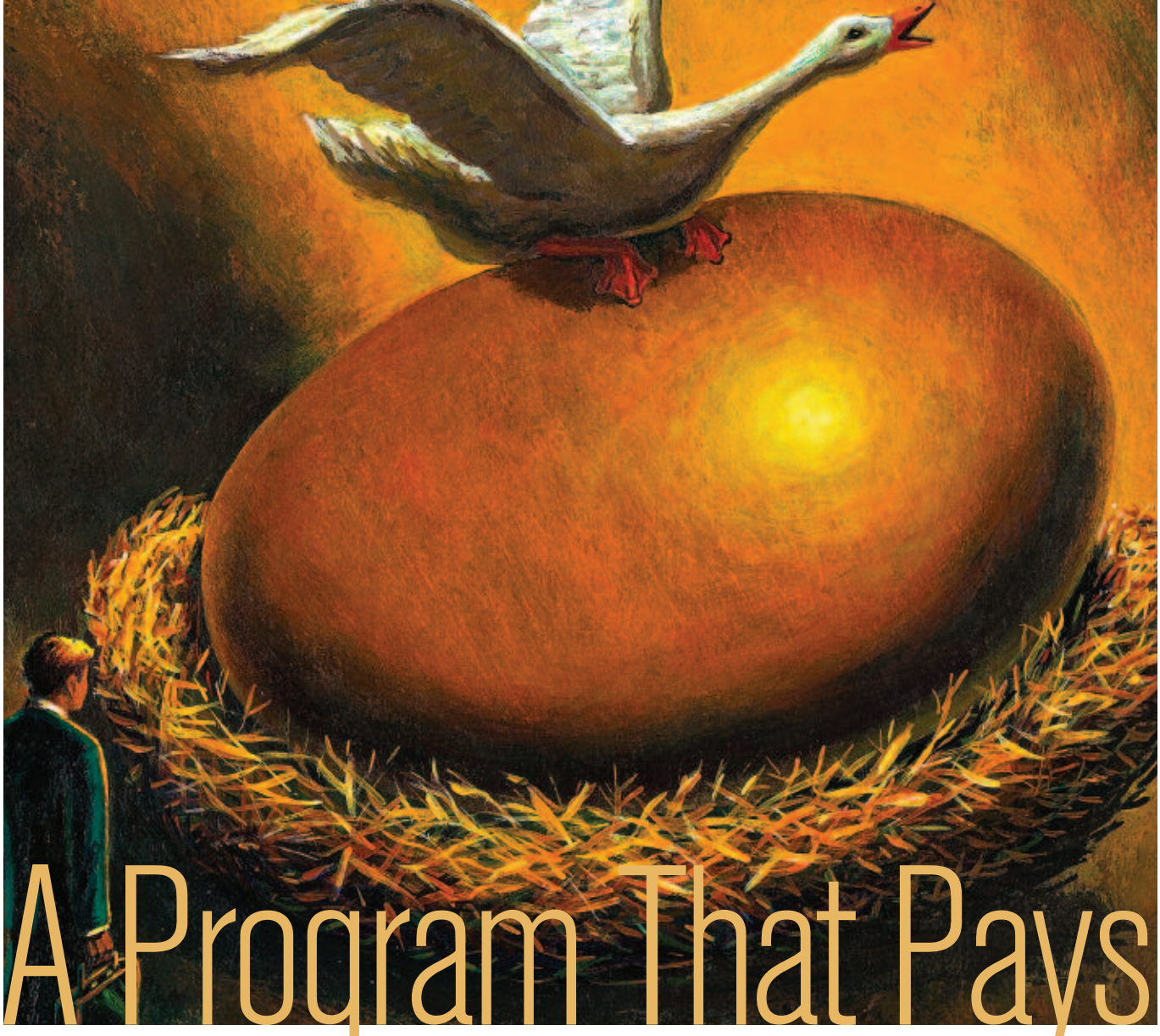


A Program That Pays

Caught in the budget crunch? Developing a large-scale fund-raising program could be the answer to your woes

Stan Levenson

Providing a world-class education for all kids may no longer be possible without outside financial help. Administrators, parents, and school board members have discovered that nickel-and-dime fund-raising tactics like bake sales, candy sales, and car washes can no longer carry the financial burden.

Everywhere we look, schools and districts are feeling the budget crunch. Worthwhile programs like music, art, and foreign languages have been curtailed or eliminated. Extracurricular activities and sports have been dropped, and teachers have been let go.

What's needed to alleviate the budget crunch? Consider a large-scale fund-raising effort coordinated and articulated across district lines.

Why start a foundation?

Tax-supported state colleges and universities have faced similar budget constraints over the years, yet have figured out how to deliver world-class programs by establishing

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development offices. These offices are staffed by people with experience in conducting major campaigns to raise funds through corporate, foundation, and government grants, as well as grants and gifts from individual donors.

Colleges and universities also have discovered that a coordinated effort utilizes the services of professional and volunteer staffs, top administrators, board members, and the university president. These development offices are good role models for the public schools, and we can learn from them.

Some school districts have recognized that development offices are good investments that bring in more money than it costs to establish and maintain them. With realistic expectations, development offices should pay for themselves in two years or less. School and district 501(c)(3) foundations have become popular, with more than 10,000 established across then U.S. and more in the development stage.

Parent and civic groups, chambers of commerce, alumni, booster clubs, and friends of the schools have established foundations. School boards and districts also have developed their own.

Public schools have many supporters. Millions of people have attended and graduated from schools all across the country. Many of these same people have children and grandchildren in the schools and want to give back to show their appreciation and support. While all can't give money or other assets, many can donate time as volunteers. Go after these people with gusto and learn how to ask for their help!

The role of the staff and board

As you begin to plan an articulated large-scale fund-raising effort, it is imperative that roles and responsibilities be delineated to smoothly transition into this new and exciting adventure. Here is a job description for each person or group:

- **Superintendent:** With the board's blessing, the superintendent is the overall leader in a big-time fund-raising effort. This would include, but not be limited to, the establishment of a districtwide development office including the employment of competent, experienced development office staff.

Working with the development staff, as well the local education foundation, central office staff, principals, teachers, parents, volunteers, consultants, and the school board, the superintendent can bring power, prestige, and creativity to the district's overall needs and vision.

Recently, a superintendent and I visited two foundations in the San Francisco Bay area. In both instances, the foundations' executive directors said this was the first time that they had met with a superintendent on their turf. Both were very pleased that the superintendent felt it was important enough to make a personal visit. Needless to say, both foundations provided major support, and the superintendent discovered that when CEOs meet and work together, good things start to happen.

With training, the superintendent should learn how to ask for gifts from wealthy individuals and others within the school community. A solicitation team—used so effectively by college and university presidents—that includes the superintendent will reap major rewards. Meeting with potential donors personally is the key to money rolling in to your district. Remember, if you don't ask for it, you won't get it.

- **School board members:** Individual board members are key players in the effort as well. Most board members I know have many friends and contacts in the community and elsewhere, including key people in the business world. Use these contacts by soliciting cash and noncash gifts from friends and colleagues. If you can make cash or noncash gifts yourself, why not do it? Board members in the nonprofit world as well as at the private school, college, and university levels contribute regularly to the good causes they represent. Why not in the public schools?

Board members should be strong supporters and advocates of large-scale fund-raising efforts. They should approve the establishment of a development office and expect it to be a profit center in two to three years.

Remember: More than 80 percent of all grants and gifts to good causes come from individual donors. Therefore, encourage and support the superintendent and the development office staff to seek big grants and gifts from individuals. Assist in identifying and soliciting others in the community who have the ability and interest in contributing. By setting a good example of contributing yourself, you will create a lot of excitement and interest.

- **Principals:** Principals have critical roles as well, and they can make or break a program by their attitude and involvement. As school leaders, principals should take on a role similar to that of the superintendent, making personal visits to wealthy constituents and others in their attendance area. Principals should be part of the team that meets with program officers and CEOs of corporations and foundations that are interested in funding their specific school.
- **Teachers, coaches, and other staff:** Your staff is the heart of your fund-raising effort because they are on the firing line each and every day. They make the community proud of their involvement and commitment to kids. Band and choir directors, sports and academic coaches, and teachers in both core subjects and the creative and performing arts should be key players. Prospective donors probably know one or more of these people through their kids or grandkids, have been influenced by their good work, and want to help out.

The role of the development staff

School and district foundations are becoming more promi-

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nent in providing outside funding for schools. Foundation staff must work cooperatively with the district's development office in articulating and coordinating the total fund-raising effort. School board members in some districts also sit on the foundation board.

Depending on the district's size, the development office might consist of one or more staff members. A full-fledged development office staff includes a director of development, two coordinators (one for corporate, foundation, and government grants and another for individual giving), and one or more grant writers.

The director of development has overall responsibility for the district's total fund-raising effort. This includes supervising the development office staff and serving as the liaison with school sites and school and district foundations. The director will have extensive fund-raising experience at the school or district levels.

The coordinator of corporate, foundation, and government grants is in charge of prospect research. This person works cooperatively with school site personnel, volunteers, and grant writers and notifies them of available grants. The position requires grant-writing experience, as well as experience in working with corporate, foundation, and government funders.

Types of school foundations

There are four broad categories of school foundations:

- **School level:** These foundations support innovative classroom practices and supplement, augment, and complement programs and activities (art, music, physical education, and athletics) not provided in the budget. Some of these foundations also provide mini-grants for teachers.
- **Community-based:** These independent foundations see themselves as advocates for public education, school improvement, and school reform. These foundations look to broaden the constituency and keep the community informed about the schools' strengths, challenges, and needs. An example of these types of foundations would be the Public Education Funds sponsored by the Public Education Network.
- **Districtwide:** These foundations serve as an arm of the district just like those at colleges, universities, and private schools. This type of foundation coordinates and facilitates the district's total fundraising effort through a development office with full-time staff and board-approved financial support.
- A **combination** of any of the above.

Board members should be strong supporters and advocates of large-scale fund-raising efforts

The person responsible for obtaining grants and gifts from individual donors will be the key to opening funding doors to angels within your community. The people who make large gifts—more than $50,000—to your cause will bring about positive change within your school or district in the fastest and most significant way. Someone who has extensive experience in both obtaining big gifts, and in training others to obtain them as well, should fill this key position.

Depending on your district's size, having one or more full-time, experienced grant writers is essential. In large, urban school districts, a cadre of full-time grant writers is needed. A number of people across the country have experience in this area, and you should go after them with gusto.

To assist you in recruiting staff, announce these positions in the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, a journal read by most people with experience in the field.

The role of parents, volunteers, donors

Parents and volunteers are important members of your team and can help you reap major rewards in time and money. Most parents want to help the schools, but they are tired of nickel-and-dime fund-raising efforts. Many have good contacts in the school community and know where the outside money is. Invite them to make personal visits to prospects along with other members of the solicitation team and encourage them to make contributions as well.

Wealthy people and others with money, especially those who are graduates or former public school staff, should take an active role in giving and soliciting grants and gifts from their friends and family. A number of these people would welcome an invitation to give back to the schools by contributing time and money. Invite them into the schools and involve them in your cause. Ask them to assume leadership positions in your foundation. If they contribute large sums of money, consider naming a classroom or other part of a facility in their honor. It's being done everywhere else. Why not the public schools?

Because of the tremendous costs involved in developing world-class learning environments, it is imperative that everyone be responsible and help the schools in their effort to bring positive change. Our schools need your help. Show them that you care. ■

© 2008 Stan Levenson. Stan Levenson (stanleylev@aol.com) is a San Diego-based fund-raising consultant and author. His latest book is *Big-Time Fundraising for Today's Schools* (Corwin Press, 2007).

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