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Crowdfunding sites can help schools access classroom projects kids want with transparency

*By Kirk Smiley*

With the annual ebb and flow of state and local education budgets, teachers and administrators have long turned to alternative funding sources—from hosting PTA fundraisers to reaching into their own pockets—to enhance student academic experiences and fill financial gaps. In recent years, more educators have turned to online crowdfunding platforms such as DonorsChoose.org (**www.donorschoose.org**) to raise donations and meet classroom needs.

From art supplies and field trips to natural disaster relief, teachers are using crowdfunding platforms to support a variety of impactful projects in their classrooms. In turn, forward-thinking school leaders are empowering teachers to take advantage of crowdfunding while ensuring transparency, integrity, and security throughout the process.

Educators at Richland Elementary School in Memphis, Tennessee, have strategically leveraged crowdfunding to enhance teaching and learning at their school, where more than one-third of students come from low-income households. So far, Richland teachers have raised more than $187,000 on DonorsChoose.org to fund school resources.

But what are the factors principals must consider when using an alternative funding platform such as DonorsChoose.org? Below, we answer four key questions principals should reflect on when considering crowdfunding, including key insights from Richland Elementary School principal Sharon McNary.

### What is crowdfunding?

Crowdfunding is the practice of funding a project or venture by raising small amounts of money from a large number of people, typically via the internet. Crowdfunding websites range from general fundraising sites such as Kickstarter and GoFundMe, which transfer funds to a project creator and aren't designed with schools in mind, to education-focused platforms such as DonorsChoose.org and AdoptAClassroom.org, which allow district oversight and ownership of donated materials.

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### Why should teachers consider crowdfunding?

Today, online crowdfunding makes it possible for teachers to generate donations beyond their local communities. By tapping into a wider network of donors, schools can raise more funding for classroom resources, giving rural and low-income communities equal access. The best-in-class education crowdfunding platforms also allow teachers to request exactly what they need to support their individual learners, with full transparency for donors and school leaders.

"Teachers are given limited funds to purchase all the classroom supplies they need in one school year," McNary says. "Like all teachers, my teachers spend so much of their own money to purchase items for their classrooms. With DonorsChoose.org, they have been able to post projects to fund items such as iPads, sets of books, classroom furniture, listening centers, and so much more. When teachers share with me that they want something that we cannot afford to purchase from our school account, I suggest they post a DonorsChoose.org project. We all love how DonorsChoose.org has made it so easy for teachers to get much-needed projects funded."

### How do I know which crowdfunding sites to trust?

Look for the following features when assessing a crowdfunding site for your school:

- **Materials, not cash.** Crowdfunding sites that purchase and send resources directly to verified schools, instead of depositing cash into teachers' personal bank accounts, are best at ensuring accountability and integrity.
- **Transparency at every step.** Crowdfunding sites should publicly display details about each material funded (unit cost, vendor, etc.) and provide easy-to-understand explanations of fees and overhead costs.
- **Impact capture.** For every request funded, crowdfunding sites should require teachers to report on how the resources were used in the classroom and how students benefited, allowing donors to see that the project happened as intended.
- **School ownership of funded materials.** While teachers should be given discretion over the use of resources for which they earned funding, crowdfunding sites should designate that the school, rather than the teacher, ultimately owns the funded resources.

- **District visibility and reporting.** The best crowdfunding sites notify principals when items are being shipped to their schools and provide line-by-line reporting of every item to districts upon request.
- **Student protection.** Crowdfunding sites used by teachers should have built-in mechanisms for protecting student privacy, as well as a privacy policy that's tailored to the needs of students in public schools.

**How do I encourage teachers to take advantage of crowdfunding opportunities?**
If your school and district see potential benefit in a crowdfunding opportunity, there are ways to encourage its use:

- **Celebrate wins, big and small.** Celebrating your teachers' crowdfunding successes is important; it shows your support and encourages them to post more projects that enrich student learning. "I always congratulate my teachers who get their projects funded by posting in the 'Kudos' section of my Monday memo," McNary says.
- **Support collaboration.** Principals can work with teachers on schoolwide projects and encourage their staff to work together across grade levels. "When the kindergarten teachers saw a colleague receiving iPads, the entire team started posting projects together to get iPads funded on DonorsChoose.org," McNary says.

- **Spread the word.** You can help all of your teachers participate and get funded. "When a few of my teachers began posting projects on DonorsChoose.org, the news spread like wildfire," McNary says. "Now we have a teacher who serves as a DonorsChoose.org ambassador, and I refer my new teachers to her so she can help them post their first project. She even did a training during our professional learning in-service week."

The number of crowdfunding sites is growing, so it's more important than ever for school and district leaders to vet platforms to ensure they satisfy high standards for safety, fiscal accountability, and transparency. Additionally, principals should encourage teachers to use approved sites that actually accomplish the intent of crowdfunding: bringing in donations from individuals outside your school's community, city, and state.

To help with this, NAESP and DonorsChoose.org have partnered to create a Principal Toolkit (**www.naesp.org/back-to-school**) that includes case studies of principals who have implemented crowdfunding into their schools, tips on how to engage teachers, and guidelines on how to safely maximize crowdfunding. ▣

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