The Principal’s Role in School Fundraising

Vickie Mabry

Let others handle the details. Your job is to be a coach and cheerleader.
When the alarm clock rings in the morning, the school fundraiser is not the first thing on a principal’s mind. He or she is more likely to be thinking about such high-priority concerns as instructional leadership, communication, student interaction, school safety, and community relations. But as school budgets get squeezed, principals find themselves increasingly involved in fundraising.

In a survey conducted by the National Association of Elementary School Principals, 81 percent of principals polled nationwide felt the benefits of fundraising justified the time and effort involved. However, 62 percent said they would end fundraising if possible (NAESP 2000).

How can principals who might feel jaded by fundraising learn to live with it? One way is to change their traditional policing role to more of an expanded coaching role in collaborating with parent organizations—PTA, PTO, or PTSA—that are responsible for fundraising in 65 percent of U.S. schools (NAESP 2000).

“It Goes with the Territory”

At Frey Elementary School in Acworth, Georgia, principal Joyce Piket allows the PTSA to manage her school’s fall fundraiser, including decisions on the best product(s) to sell and which vendor(s) to use. But she believes it is prudent for principals to guide fundraising teams. “Principals know that fundraising is necessary; it goes with the territory,” says Piket. “They can make the fundraising effort the best it can be by working together toward a meaningful common goal.”

Prior to any fundraiser at Frey, Piket and assistant principal Kathy Curran first meet with the school leadership team to identify and articulate the school needs. They then meet with the PTSA to whittle down the funding wish list. They also discuss what they intend to sell, what the motivating forces might be, and the expected outcomes. All agree that academic needs take precedence and that the fundraising effort must be focused on supporting the school’s academic agenda.

At present, Frey holds just one major schoolwide fundraiser each year—a gift-wrap sale for two weeks in the fall. “Parents don’t want a surprise every time their children open up their book bags,” says Curran. Piket agrees, adding...
that the principal’s role is to “stand strongly behind the one or two you are doing.” One of the things she does to support a fundraiser is motivate children to participate by promoting fun events like “Kiss the Pig,” “Principal on the Roof,” and dress-up days.

Teachers, too, need motivation to make a fundraiser successful. They get dispirited sending product sheets home with the kids and having to keep track of them. “People are turned off if you ask too much of them,” says Piket, who believes that asking people to do less is a great motivator. Other incentives for teachers, parents, and students to join in fundraising include pizza parties, field trips, reading contests, and discounted books and magazines as rewards.

**Keep Your Eye on the Goal**

Getting people focused on the end goal—raising money for a specific purpose—is paramount to a fundraiser’s success. This is where principals can act as both influencer and motivator when it comes to working with fundraising groups in determining the end goal and selling the physical and emotional benefits of what the fundraiser can do for the school.

---

### Fundraising Facts

- Schools and youth groups raise $2 billion each year through product sales.
- Eight out of 10 parents purchase items to support school fundraising.
- Six out of 10 parents help sell fundraising items.

*Source: Association of Fund-Raising Distributors & Suppliers (AFRDS)*

- 76 percent of principals report an increased need for fundraising over the last decade.
- 81 percent of principals say fundraising is worth the time and effort.
- 54 percent of schools have between one and four fundraisers every year.
- 27 percent of schools raise at least $10,000 a year.
- 65 percent of schools say the PTA/PTO is responsible for fundraising.

*Source: National Association of Elementary School Principals*

- 36 percent of parents always donate or buy items.
- 29 percent of parents buy items only if they want them.
- 23 percent of parents donate only to certain organizations.
- 9 percent never buy or donate items.

*Source: USA Today*
At her school, Piket works with the fundraiser team to tie the end goal to academics. For example, more than $12,000 raised by last fall’s gift-wrap sale was slated to fund a running track and a covered pavilion with picnic tables. The track and pavilion will enable physical education teachers to conduct classes and drills outside. The pavilion will also allow students to enjoy lunch away from the cafeteria.

According to Piket, the track and pavilion will be linked to a sprawling state-of-the-art nature trail, an ongoing school fundraising project that will eventually cost more than $30,000. The nature trail is used year-round for class activities, such as science classes, stream-water testing, landscaping, and observation of vegetation growth and animal tracks.

Piket realizes that many schools are forced to direct fundraising dollars to essentials, such as school supplies and individual classroom needs, and feels fortunate that her school was able to fund the trail, which has enriched both instruction and morale at Frey Elementary.

Go For It!
Piket’s experience illustrates the three things principals can do to support a school fundraising effort:

■ Focus on a goal that facilitates academics and a culture of learning;
■ Keep the process simple; and
■ Motivate the fundraising team.

Good luck!

References

Vickie Mabry is associate director of the Association of Fund-Raising Distributors & Suppliers. Her e-mail address is vmabry@assnhq.com.