

Crowdfunded classrooms: Teachers increasingly solicit online

September 4 2016, by Megan Trimble



Kindergarten school teacher, Shannon Raftery poses for a photograph in her classroom as she prepares it for the upcoming school year in Philadelphia, Wednesday, Aug. 31, 2016. Raftery raised funds through crowdfunding to supplement the money she took out of each paycheck to pay for classroom supplies. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke)

Paper? Pencils? Laptops? Robots? Teachers are increasingly relying on crowdfunding efforts to stock their classrooms with both the mundane

and sometimes big-ticket items.

Contributions to education campaigns have climbed on GoFundMe and DonorsChoose, collectively, from just more than \$31.2 million in 2010 to nearly \$140 million in 2015, the do-it-yourself fundraising sites report. Both sites are on pace to eclipse that in 2016.

GoFundMe has collected \$58 million in just the last 12 months, and DonorsChoose saw more than 50,000 campaigns live on the site for the first time this back-to-school season.

In her first year as an elementary school teacher in Kingman, Arizona, Shannon Raftery raised \$340 through crowdfunding to supplement the money she took out of each paycheck to pay for classroom supplies. Now in Philadelphia, she's looking to raise \$500 for her new kindergarten classroom at Roosevelt Elementary School.

She has a supportive principal, she said, but there is just not enough money in the notoriously cash-strapped Philadelphia district to equip her classroom the way she'd like.

In her case, reality is a \$200 budget allocated to cover 25 students in a school where at least 40 percent of students live in poverty. She has spent that even before the start of classes after Labor Day.

"I'd rather spend my own money than have my kids go without something," she said. "Every dollar helps."

But even as Raftery plans to continue pulling \$100 to \$150 from each paycheck to meet her classroom needs, she said, she knows it won't be enough. She has bought cleaning supplies, bulletin board paper, and peach and sky blue paint to cover her stark white walls. She hopes to add to seating with beach chairs and bean bags.

"I don't want a cold environment to ruin a kid's first impression of school," Raftery said.

Donors can scroll through all education campaigns listed on the sites, resulting in millions of dollars' worth of supplies and equipment infused into both high-poverty schools and more affluent districts.

"There still is that group of teachers that has amazing ideas even in the most well-funded districts, like the sixth-grade teacher wanting and currently campaigning for an underwater robot to restore fisheries," said Chris Pearsall, DonorsChoose spokesman.

Teachers create campaigns by writing a story about their needs, often accompanied by classroom pictures.

Teachers have turned to crowdfunding even in states with high per-pupil spending. But while the numbers are enough to cause pause, they aren't necessarily surprising, said Michael Leachman, director of state fiscal research at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

Post-recession local, state and federal revenue has been unable to keep up with states' needs after deep cuts. Now, other economic factors, like low property taxes and inflation, are preventing them from a full recovery, even as most states have seen gradual improvement in education funding, Leachman said.

"It's obviously disturbing that teachers are having to raise the money that they need to provide good education to kids," he said.

With crowdfunding, teachers can access funding and supplies within weeks of starting a campaign.

Allan Rogers teaches third grade at Jackson Elementary School in

Jackson, Louisiana, a rural community damaged by recent flooding. He works with students who are already using crowdfunded supplies mere weeks into the school year.

"There have been people who have lost everything due to the flooding, and prior to the flooding they already didn't have much," Rogers said of students and staff at the school, where there is no technology budget and about 96 percent of students are get free or discounted lunches.

Teachers at the school have campaigned for basic supplies, like white board markers, but are also trying to buy a functioning computer for each classroom, said Megan Phillips, the school's principal. They've relied exclusively on crowdfunding to purchase computers, iPad and iPods for students to use, she said.

"We're always trying to give students what they deserve," Rogers said. "Not only what they need, but what they deserve."

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