

Finding funds in your own backyard

No funding sources—public or private—will be more interested in meeting the academic needs of your children than those who live, work, and invest in your community. Your students represent the future workforce, the upcoming consumers of the local economy's goods, and the next generation of decisionmakers who will help determine the health of the business community and the overall quality of life in your area. More immediately, successful schools that demonstrate positive academic outcomes can be an important recruitment tool for employers in your vicinity.

Looking for support in your own backyard works best when you are seeking a relatively small amount of funding (\$5,000 or less). Compared to foundations or other grant makers who often prefer to invest in new initiatives, local sources of funding are typically more willing to make donations to expand, sustain, or renew continuing programs that have been proven successful. You can ask these sources to contribute directly or to support school-sponsored fundraising events and activities.

Who are these sources?

- **Local businesses:** Retailers, service companies, media, etc.
- **Clubs or civic organizations:** Kiwanis, Lions Club, Rotary Club, Junior League, etc.
- **Professional membership organizations:** Medical/dental associations, real estate councils, etc.
- **School organizations:** District foundations, teacher associations, etc.

There are many reasons local businesses and associations will help fund students' needs:

1. Helping education is good public relations—and a source of free advertising.
2. These organizations understand the importance of supporting local education.
3. Fulfilling your request will help build a more literate employee and customer base.
4. In most cases, business donations to education are tax deductible.
5. Business people understand and appreciate the use of data (such as that provided by Renaissance® products) because management information systems have improved their own workplaces.
6. Your proposed programs will demonstrate measurable results.

Start by making a list of likely supporters. Who does the district do business with: banks, utility companies, office supply retailers, food service vendors? Where do parents shop: big box retailers, grocery stores, car dealerships, etc. Where are clusters of parents employed? Which businesses spend advertising dollars in the district's athletic programs?

Approach strategies

Whether you believe the old fundraising adage *people give to people* or you embrace the philosophy that *people give to innovative programs that impress and inspire them*, there is one inarguable principle—they don't give if they're not asked.

Plan to make personal contacts with individuals who make or can influence funding decisions. Since local contributions are often based on relationships and trust, try to identify people in your school (staff, parents, and other family members) who know the individuals you will be approaching. Ask the people you identify to either request a donation themselves, make an appointment for someone from your school to visit the individual, or sign the request letter.

Craft a letter which states what you are trying to accomplish and why it is important to the academic success of the school. Determine to whom your letter should be addressed. Always send your request to an individual rather than addressing it to a "title". If you are not sure if the individual is a "Mr." or a "Ms." (Chris, Kelly, Robin, etc.), call to find

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out. If the company has a contributions committee which makes funding decisions, try to get the name of the committee chair. Send your request on school or district letterhead and keep the letter brief and to the point. State that you (or someone else) will call in a week or so to follow up, and then do so.

Seeing is believing, so invite representatives of the company or organization to visit your school. Since many business leaders have limited time, an invitation to breakfast or lunch may work well. During the visit, show them what the students are already doing and how your request will enhance their learning. If your school is already using the Renaissance product for which renewal or expansion funds are needed, be sure the visitors see the program in action. Encourage the teachers to describe how much they value the product. Engage your visitors in a discussion about what they've seen. After the visit, send a personal thank you note (handwritten is best) to each visitor. Even if your guests decline to give you funding, your follow-up may nudge a decisionmaker to reconsider.

If a school visit is not possible, ask for an appointment with the person to whom you wrote. Make the visit brief and bring a one-page description that you can leave behind summarizing: the need, why it is important, how the school will meet that need, and how much funding you are requesting. During the visit, share anecdotes that illustrate the need. Face-to-face interactions—whether they occur at the school, in someone's office, or elsewhere—present an unparalleled opportunity for you to convey your personal enthusiasm for the program to be funded.

Cast a wide net

Present your request to several businesses and organizations. You can ask each for the total amount you need, or you can package your request in smaller amounts for specific purposes (e.g., Star 360®, Accelerated Reader®, Accelerated Math®, myON®, computer upgrades, etc.), which might be more appealing to potential donors since they can designate their dollars for a specific purpose.

If you prefer not to earmark dollars for purposes, you can request an amount that defines various contribution levels: *friends, supporters, patrons, partners, or bronze, silver, gold, diamond*, or some creative terminology that relates to your project, school, or community.

Small contributions add up; having a broad base of support will give you a wider starting point the next time you are seeking funds.

Solidify the relationship

After you've received funding, thank the donor both personally and publicly. With their permission, acknowledge their contribution through press releases, on social media, with announcements at school meetings, and on the school bulletin board(s) and marquee. Display their name and/or logo prominently on your website. Other ideas for recognition include student or parent testimonials, or simple thank you notes from individual teachers sent to the funder.

Send updates on the progress of your program. The easy-to-understand reports generated by Renaissance solutions are excellent tools to show funders the positive impact that the program they have supported has had on student achievement and growth. Again, a visit to the school to see the program in action will demonstrate the difference it is making.

If you do not receive funds in response to your request, be sure to send the company or organization a brief note thanking them for considering the request. If you are sure that what you have asked for is a fit with their funding priorities, state that you will keep them informed of your work and hope they will accept the opportunity to help in the future.

Fundraising activities and events

"Do-it-yourself" fundraisers are another way to find funds in your own backyard. Implementing fundraisers takes organization and a commitment of volunteer time and effort. One of the biggest advantages of fundraising activities and events is the opportunity to involve people and increase community awareness of the school's needs—especially if you can get publicity about the activity or event. Some classic fundraisers include:

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- **Food and craft sales**—bake sales, concession stand sales, handmade craft sales, book sales, clothing sales, etc.
- **Holiday fairs**—set up a table at the school with inexpensive items for sale that children can purchase for their families, and schedule times for each class to shop.
- **Garage or rummage sales**—collect items through a donation drive and hold the sale on a weekend in the school gym, cafeteria, or other accessible location.
- **Product sales**—secure a catalogue from one of the many companies that offer fundraising items that students can sell.
- **Raffles and games of chance**—raffle tickets, “Las Vegas night,” and bingo can be successful fundraisers, but be sure to check both local and state gambling regulations before proceeding.
- **Eating events**—pancake breakfasts, spaghetti suppers, themed meals from different parts of the world, etc.
- **Exhibition games**—invite area celebrities (police officials, radio personalities, etc.), college or high school athletes, school staff, or others to participate in fun or regulation-style competitions.
- **A-thons**—read-a-thons, walk-a-thons, sing-a-thons, dance-a-thons, etc.
- **Auctions**—secure donations of goods and services. If a professional auctioneer is not available, use a local celebrity.
- **Services**—car washes, babysitting, house cleaning, lawn mowing, errand running, etc.
- **Cookbooks**—recipes contributed by parents, staff, or others.
- **Loyalty programs**—encourage staff, parents, and family members to sign up for loyalty programs at retailers where they shop most often and designate your school as the recipient of funds.

Having a written, well-organized plan is essential. It will help keep the planning committee and other volunteers on track and serve as a blueprint for future fundraising activities. The *Event Planning Guide* (see page 6) provides an easy-to-follow plan that will help you completely organize your fundraiser from start to finish.

Communicate specific information

Communicate all information with those you intend to ask for money or have participate in the event. The more specific you are, the better your results will be. Include:

- **Purpose:** How will the money be used? Who will benefit?
- **Date:** When is the money needed? It’s best to create a sense of urgency—fundraisers with a lengthy time frame tend to fizzle out.
- **Amount:** How much money do you need to raise? Setting a dollar goal allows you to monitor progress. Quick, visual updates (thermometers, charts, graphs, etc.) will encourage others to help reach the goal.

Identify matching funds

Try to find sponsors to match dollars raised through your fundraiser. Contact local businesses that might be interested in providing a match. It will generate positive public relations for them, and they may be more apt to donate if they know that their contributions will leverage more money. In addition, ask parents whose employers have matching-funds programs to apply on behalf of your school.

Organize awareness campaigns

Get the word out that you're holding a fundraiser. While traditional methods for communicating fundraising efforts such as sending letters home with students will be helpful, the popularity of social media and electronic communication may be more effective. Also, remember to send out regular reminders:

- **Facebook:** Update your status to remind your friends of the fundraiser. Encourage others to share your fundraising link. You can make your status update "public," reaching people not in your immediate network.
- **Twitter:** Send tweets to let followers know of your fundraiser.
- **Text messages:** Text parents for whom you have access/permission to use their mobile phone numbers to notify and remind them of your fundraiser.
- **Newsletters or websites:** Encourage everyone involved to post information about the fundraiser in their newsletters or on their websites.
- **Class writing project:** Ask teachers to have their students write persuasive letters to family and friends, letting them know about the fundraiser, as part of a writing assignment.

How to get free merchandise

Donations of merchandise are a great way to minimize your fundraising expenses, because every item you can obtain at no cost represents real dollars in your group's bank account at the end of the event. Donations fall into two distinct categories: (1) items that can be sold and (2) items that can be awarded as prizes.

Items that can be sold include cookies for a bake sale, outgrown children's clothing for a rummage sale, or similar donations. Obtaining such items is generally easy because these are things people don't mind donating to a worthy cause. Here are a few general calls to action that have worked for other schools:

- Challenge your parent group or the school staff to contribute the most items—with the winner getting a free lunch paid for by everyone else.
- Send a request letter home with students.
- Post fliers and signs around your community.
- Ask for donations on the school or district website, Facebook page, etc.
- Place an advertisement in your local newspaper.

Higher-value donations may be set aside as prizes (gift cards, bikes, etc.). Suggested sources for obtaining items as prize donations include:

- Local businesses (restaurants, hotels, bowling alleys, movie theaters, etc.) can donate gift cards, free meals, free tickets, etc.
- Civic groups (Chamber of Commerce, Lions Club, Rotary, Kiwanis, etc.) may provide prize donations related to their organizations or items of more general interest.
- Sports teams (local and national) can be excellent sources of prize donations because of their popularity with both children and adults, and their goods ranging from logo hats and clothing to autographed items and free tickets.
- Local artists or craftspeople can be asked to donate items they have created.

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- Parents' employers may welcome the opportunity to help, especially if they can donate items that represent their companies.

Professional fundraising companies

Sometimes the best way to handle a fundraiser is not to do it yourself—and that's when you want to talk to a professional fundraising company. These companies specialize in products or services you can purchase for your own fundraising effort. They provide complete materials and the advice you'll need to get going. Whether you'd like to sell cookbooks, candles, or candy or sponsor a 5K, there are a number of professional fundraising companies out there to choose from. Make sure to shop around for the best contract and items or activities that are appropriate for your school.

Online fundraising

The Internet has changed how we do almost everything, so it's not surprising that it has become a popular and effective way to raise funds.

Benefits of online fundraising

- **Efficiency:** Online fundraisers are easy to access via the Internet, especially on mobile devices. Potential donors who don't have time to participate in a fundraising event can support your education initiatives with a simple click. Additionally, the need for volunteers is minimized.
- **Reach:** Online fundraising reaches large audiences with ease and speed, instantly communicating your program's details. Advertising your online fundraising through email, social media, your school or district website, blogs, and text messages can expand your scope of potential donors.
- **Cost effectiveness:** Creating an online fundraiser minimizes costs including paper, personnel time, travel, and supplies.

Choose a fundraising site

There are several online websites to help you with fundraising. Research the options to choose a site that best meets your school's needs. Many of these sites offer widgets you can add to the school website, social networking site(s), and blogs.

- Investigate any fees involved. Some sites charge a monthly fee for use—or take a percentage of each donation—while others are completely free.
- Evaluate payment options. Most sites allow your donors to pay via PayPal™ or credit card.
- Understand how and when you will receive donations from the fundraising site.
- Consider the capabilities. Most allow you to personalize the site by adding text, photos, links, etc.

Popular fundraising sites (note: Renaissance is not affiliated with any of these sites)

- www.donorschoose.org
- www.adoptaclassroom.org
- www.firstgiving.com
- www.fundrazr.com
- www.gogetfunding.com

Thank donors

Whether a corporation, small business, or individual has contributed to your fundraising effort, take the time to thank them. In addition to individual acknowledgements, you can—with permission—use the same methods of communication used to notify people of the fundraiser (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, websites, newsletters, etc.) to communicate your gratitude. Let donors know how much you appreciate their efforts, the total amount raised, and how the money will be used.

Event planning guide

| Steps to complete | Notes | Completed (✓) |
|---------------------------|-------|---------------|
| 1) Purpose of fundraiser | | |
| 2) Financial goal | | |
| 3) Type of event | | |
| 4) Committee members | | |
| 5) Event date and time | | |
| 6) Event location | | |
| 7) Admission price | | |
| 8) Facility information | | |
| 9) Special permits | | |
| 10) Event materials | | |
| 11) Donations | | |
| 12) Advertising/publicity | | |
| 13) Volunteer schedule | | |
| 14) Clean-up | | |
| 15) Send thank-you notes | | |
| 16) Net proceeds | | |