

Guide and Gatekeeper:

The Role of School Principals in Fundraising

BY VICKIE MABRY

When the school bell rings in the morning, the school's fundraiser is not the first thing on a principal's mind. More likely, she's thinking about such high-priority concerns as the coffee spill in the upstairs corridor and the alarming speed at which library books and copier paper disappear. And most certainly, she's thinking about student safety. Maybe by mid-morning she can turn her focus to guiding curriculum and evaluating instruction while juggling No Child Left Behind requirements. It's true: school principals have a lot on their plates. But, now more than ever thanks to shrinking school budgets, school principals must also be involved in fundraising. Student needs depend on it.

In a survey conducted by the National Association of Elementary School Principals, 81

percent of principals polled nationwide said the benefits of fundraising justified the time and effort involved. Sixty-two percent, however, said they would end fundraising if possible.

Many principals, in fact, try to do that by delegating fundraising responsibility to someone else—often the school's PTA. (Forget for now that many PTAs would rather not be typecast as the school's fundraising department. That's another story for another day.) The fact remains, however, that fundraising makes a lot of things possible in the school community, and because of this, experts say that it is better for everyone if the principal is involved in the fundraising from start to finish. For the reluctant school principal, the first step to acceptance is looking beyond the principal's traditional policing role to an expanded role as coach and collaborator

with the school's PTA (like it or not, PTAs are responsible for fundraising in approximately 65 percent of U.S. schools).

Watchdog, sounding board, historian

"The principal serves as watchdog and sounding board for the entire school community," according to Cynthia Francis Gensheimer, author of *Raising Funds for Your Child's School*. Gensheimer speaks from firsthand experience. With three children of her own, she has conducted a number of school and PTA fundraisers, and she recommends that school principals participate from the start—by helping set goals.

"They understand the school's overall fiscal picture and can best identify shortfalls," she says. "The principal's endorsement is also crucial in committing school personnel—from

teachers to custodians—to any school project."

In Kingston, Washington, parent and PTA leader Joanne Salwei follows Gensheimer's advice. Salwei says the principal should participate in planning for the coming year and work with the PTA to assess school needs. Salwei reports, "Our PTA invited the principal to every meeting."

But how important is the principal in selecting the fundraising program and the fundraising service provider? According to professional fundraising companies, the principal is often the only constant from year to year and, therefore, in the best position to provide valuable experience and historical perspective to a new group of parent volunteers charged with selecting a fundraiser.

"Many times principals choose to wash their hands of fundraising, and parent organizations often think this is great because they really want the final say," says Bob Rumberger, a Vernon Hills, Illinois-based supplier of fundraising products. But he thinks they're doing each other a disservice: a principal can warn a committee if the school or other schools have had a bad experience with a particular company, program, or product.

As a former band director and a professional fundraising representative and supplier for two decades, Rumberger has sat on both sides of the fundraising table. His experience suggests

that any decision made without the principal's input may pose a risk to the school and the fundraising organization.

Rumberger recommends that principals serve as schools' fundraising gatekeepers. "Without some controls, it's easy to see how a school can end up with five or six fundraisers in the course of one year," says Rumberger. "The PTA has the fall magazine sale and the spring candy sale. The 5th-grade class wants to raise money for a field trip to DC. The principal has a pet project that needs separate funding. Before you know it, a parent is getting hit with fundraisers once a month." To prevent this from happening, suggests Rumberger, a fundraising schedule should be developed and governed by the school principal.

Dave Ramirez, former owner of a fundraising company in San Diego, California, also likes the idea of controls: "When fundrais-

ing is regulated, it's a good thing. I'd rather schools do a couple of big fundraising projects than 10 little ones. It's better for everyone."

"Principals can keep things in perspective," Gensheimer says. "It's vital that there be open lines of communication between the principal and the parent organization in every school activity."

Cheerleader and visionary

At Frey Elementary School in Acworth, Georgia, Principal Joyce Piket allows the PTSA to manage the school's fall fundraiser, including decisions on the best product(s) to sell and which vendor(s) to pursue. But she believes it is prudent for principals to guide fundraising teams.

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

Kissing a Pig for a Cause (and Other Confessions of School Principals)

Coaches, school administrators, and good-humored teachers will do just about anything to motivate students. Like many acts of reckless abandon, it starts out innocently enough. The fundraising committee suggests that students may need a little motivation to participate in the fundraiser that begins next week. The principal agrees, and asks himself, "What would motivate an 8-year-old more interested in recess than in homework and school fundraisers?"

One school administrator's answer: a little public display of affection between him and a banana slug. "It's yellow. It's slimy. It's about the size of a banana. And I kissed it... for the cause."

Principals have done it all: cow kissing, frog kissing, and, most commonly, pig kissing.

Then there's the middle school administrator who instead of getting a kiss, received a nip on the thumb from an unimpressed potbellied pig. The rejected administrator found himself in the emergency room, on the front page of the local paper, and the butt of a long-standing community joke.

Seemingly by-the-book adults—our youth's role models—are now reportedly shaving their heads and painting them pink, green, or—in the case of one school administrator—red, white, and blue.

Are these desperate measures for desperate times? Or is it just old-fashioned high jinks for a good cause? Maybe it's a little of both. Either way, a good-natured school administrator can play a major role in motivating students, teachers, and parents to do their part to support the school.