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Icing on the cake

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Caption: PHOTO - Exploring inner world via microscope, thanks to a school foundation.

THESE DAYS, about 90 percent of a school's budget is committed to salaries and other contractual items. That makes it difficult, if not impossible, for an administration to spend money on any innovations like new science equipment, field trips or after-school programs.

Enter education foundations, non-profit groups that increasingly fill the gap between budgets and wish lists.

North Jersey's education foundations have provided to schools such extras as microscopes, weight rooms, wireless computer networks, robotics labs and musical instruments.

In an ideal world, taxes would cover these things. But life has grown ever more expensive, school districts have a 4 percent cap on budget increases and taxpayers should not have to foot the bill for every new school project or educational idea. We are encouraged to see people organize foundations to pay for items or programs that enrich their children's time at school. This is a far better approach than charging parents a participation fee for their kids to play sports or join the French club.

Bergen County has approximately 35 foundations, and Passaic County has seven.

Education foundations raise private money from parents, businesses and residents to donate to public schools. The foundations are different from parent-teacher organizations, Staff Writer Allison Pries wrote in Sunday's Record, because education foundations are usually set up to collect money for particular activities, as opposed to a general fund.

"We felt that there were projects and programs not being offered to the kids," Ruth Pomerantz, co-president of the Cresskill Education Foundation, told The Record. "If we came in and did this, it could only enhance and expand their opportunities."

Good for the parents and educators who take it upon themselves to organize events and galas, donations and raffles, to collect money for schools.

Unfortunately, corporate donations may make a big difference to a

foundation's success. That means towns without many businesses have more difficulty raising money in general, Pries wrote. Some are now using the private-school model of fund raising, which relies heavily on alumni.

Districts with education foundations benefit. The wider community, including the business community, gets involved, and students are given opportunities they otherwise would not have — beneficial in itself, of course, but also good because it serves to draw a community closer together. But that good also points out the converse, which is that districts without foundations do not benefit. That is not to say they suffer, only that those children do not get the same opportunities as kids in the foundation districts.

These days, people feel fortunate just to have jobs and money to make the rent or mortgage. But should parents in districts without educational foundations find the time, they could greatly help their schools by finding volunteers and forming one. The more opportunities children have to discover new interests, the better their futures will be.

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