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Schools' Deep-Pocketed Partners

By ALISON COWAN

Greenwich, Conn.

IN those final weeks before summer vacation, when temperatures can soar into the 90s, parents at 5 of Greenwich's 11 elementary schools without adequate air-conditioning could no longer watch their children wilt, along with the crayons, in the heat. So they approached the school board and air-conditioning was installed — but not at the expense of property taxpayers; the parents raised the money.

Students in two other elementary schools in town, without the same deep-pocketed parents, had to wait, however. They were finally granted air-conditioning after town officials squeezed the upgrades into capital budgets financed by taxpayers.

In the last decade, a growing number of parents, alumni and corporations have been donating private money to public schools for a wide range of school equipment, educational supplies, artists-in-residence and accouterments that go beyond the traditional PTA gifts and what may otherwise be outside the local school board's spending plan.

Some schools have used the donated money to provide basics, at a time when many districts are facing ballooning instructional costs coupled with taxpayer fatigue. Especially in areas like Long Island and Westchester, where voters rejected some school budgets and forced deep budget cuts, some schools have come to rely on parental contributions to nonprofit educational foundations created to finance extracurricular activities like the football team and the drama club.

Other districts, including several in [New Jersey](#), have used educational foundations to help add frills: greenhouses and weather stations, climbing walls and film libraries, and in one case, a quilting machine.

In Greenwich, school administrators had to set caps on how much donors could collectively give to a single school, all in the name of fairness. Now even that policy is being revisited after it became apparent how adept parents were at persuading school officials to waive the caps if the donations to an individual school were significant enough. District officials also noticed over time that donors did not always supply operating funds needed to make use of the gifts and maintain them in years to come.

“There was a sense that the existing procedure may not be sufficiently achieving the goal of equity across schools, and air-conditioning in the schools was one example,” said Susan O. Wallerstein, Greenwich's assistant superintendent for business services.

In Greenwich, the debate over what schools “need to have” versus what would be “nice to have,” as Dr. Wallerstein put it, focused on air-conditioners and more recently, on music lessons, field trips, butterfly

gardens and nifty classroom tools like smart boards.

While it may be tempting to let private donors give to a favorite school, parents and policymakers are wrestling with the implications of accepting some of those gifts. In response to this concern, officials in many communities have created nonprofit foundations that serve all schools within a district, which Greenwich has now done with its Greenwich Alliance for Education.

“My goal is to provide these opportunities and services so that all kids in town have opportunities for success, not just the privileged ones,” said Nancy Kail, the alliance’s chairwoman. As a recent example, the alliance has provided music lessons for pupils who otherwise might not be able to develop the skills needed to participate later in the high school band.

Consultants estimate that more than 5,000 such foundations exist nationwide, roughly equal to one out of every three school districts. The foundations seem to thrive best in well-off towns, whose residents are eager and able to support the schools, and in distressed cities that can attract traditional grants aimed at easing poverty. That leaves many districts muddling along without a strong financial partner.

Take the local educational foundation in Middletown, N.J. It nearly folded in 2003 because it had too few volunteers to serve on its 10-member board. “We’ve struggled,” said Nancy Ryan, a mother of two who joined the board in late 2003 and up until recently served as its president.

For all its trials, the group has managed to deliver a \$2,400 quilting machine for the high school, a \$7,900 weather station for an elementary school, \$14,000 in mountain bikes, \$200 for a rocket-boosting club, and \$850 for a ballroom-dancing program.

The foundation has also helped some of the district’s more overburdened schools apply for grants so all the resources don’t go to a handful of successful schools that are adept at seeking funds.

Philanthropic efforts in Colts Neck, N.J., also suffered a serious blow in December when the police charged Mark A. Vernaglia, the treasurer of the Colts Neck Education Foundation, with looting more than \$147,000 of that foundation’s money in addition to other crimes. Mr. Vernaglia has pleaded not guilty to the charges.

In sharp contrast, the educational foundation in Wall Township, N.J., has had little trouble packing its board with eager volunteers. Known as the Wall Foundation for Educational Excellence, it gave its schools a \$110,000 greenhouse in 1992 and \$155,000 in television equipment in 2000. The \$60,000 in equipment for a ropes course arrived in 2004. The foundation is building an \$84,000 outdoor amphitheater for the high school, complete with a koi pond.

“Everything we do is a luxury,” said Tom Clayton, chairman of the foundation, noting that his group refuses to buy items that taxpayers ought to provide. He said the organization tries to keep things fair by sprinkling gifts at the district’s one middle and one high school rather than the four elementary schools. “We try to put it in areas where everyone eventually will get the benefit of it,” he said.

EIGHTEEN school districts that cover northern Westchester and Putnam Counties tried a more regional approach in the late 1990s by banding together behind a nonprofit organization called the Learning

Foundation. But the experiment in collaboration petered out about six years ago, tax records show, as some of the well-heeled participants expressed interest in creating foundations that catered exclusively to their schools. Today, most of the 18 districts have foundations dedicated to their own needs, leaving a few struggling to duplicate what the others have.

"We don't have the business or corporate group that Westchester tends to have," said Marilyn C. Terranova, the schools superintendent for Carmel, N.Y., in Putnam. Her town has a small foundation, which concentrates almost entirely on awarding scholarships to graduating seniors.

Nan Banks, a founder of the Learning Foundation, said asking donors to help out regionally was a difficult pitch because "there are very few individuals who will give to anything beyond their own school districts."

In California, where parents first started educational foundations in response to a statewide law capping property taxes, the combined district of Santa Monica and Malibu requires that 15 percent of the gifts from parents to individual schools must go in an "equity fund" that is administered by an independent foundation. That money then provides block grants that have the potential to "improve the achievement of all students," according to the district's Web site.

The \$330,000 that the equity fund took in this year, according to Linda Gross, the chairwoman of the foundation, goes a long way toward smoothing out differences in a district where one parent-teacher association raises \$25,000 a year and another raises \$750,000.

Howie Schaffer, public outreach director for the Public Education Network, a Washington-based advocacy group for public education, applauds districts that promote fairness without deterring private philanthropy. "The criticism about equity is well founded and things like equity funds and gift caps help to address those issues," he said.

But he said neither approach does as much as local foundations do to sustain community giving by becoming "permanent partners and bridge builders with these districts."

Few places are better than Greenwich to observe firsthand the sharp differences that can arise if donors are allowed to give with abandon to one elementary school.

For all its pre-eminence as [Connecticut](#)'s richest municipality, Greenwich educates many less advantaged children, too. Seven percent of its nearly 9,000 students receive free or reduced-price lunch, and 17 percent come from homes where English is not the first language. Those percentages tend to be higher in the elementary and middle schools on the western fringe of town near Port Chester, N.Y., and lower on the eastern fringe near Stamford.

At the Hamilton Avenue School, an elementary school on the western side of Greenwich, the student body is nearly 60 percent minority, the highest percentage in the district, and Damaris Rau, the principal, has an unusual perspective. For six years, she was the assistant principal of the Parkway School, a school that has hardly any children eligible for free or reduced price lunch. "I know what happens at the affluent side of town," she said.

While children from other parts of town have all sorts of enrichment opportunities like music lessons and often “go to Europe for the summer,” her pupils tend to have fewer assemblies and arts programs because their parents are hard pressed to contribute time and money. “That’s the part that is unequal,” she said.

It was just those kinds of disparities that led the Greenwich school board to impose gift caps 10 years ago on what schools can accept in total each year from parents and other sources. These days, the caps have been hovering at about \$64,600 per elementary school and \$104,500 per middle school.

Despite those controls, a board of education analysis dated September 2005 showed “continuing inequities among schools,” with the largest variation evident at the elementary school level. Hamilton Avenue received as little as \$17,022 in gifts in the 2004-5 school year, \$7,811 of which was contributed by its parent-teacher association. Eight other elementary schools received well in excess of \$50,000 apiece from their parent-teacher associations.

A more in-depth analysis presented this February by school officials and leaders of the PTA Council, which coordinates the various parent-teacher associations in town, further argued that “most if not all involved in the issue support the idea of taking advantage of outside funding opportunities but agree there need to be new and better ways to manage the process.”

As much as air-conditioning was the last big battle, the report suggests that smart boards were emerging as the next one. “Smart boards is the new air-conditioning,” Dr. Wallerstein said. Her records show that the Old Greenwich School on the eastern side of town has managed to procure, mostly with parental help, four of the high-tech devices, while the two schools on the western side of town, Hamilton Avenue and New Lebanon, each have one, supplied by taxpayers.

The district is now revisiting its gift-cap policy, and PTA leaders like Janice Richards, last year’s president of the PTA Council, said her members were committed to “addressing these issues.”

MS. KAIL, a former investment banker who is the chairwoman of the Greenwich Alliance for Education, moved to town in 1995 when she quit Wertheim Schroder. She had other thoughts about how to address the problem. From her dining room table, where her eight-person steering group still occasionally meets, she recently helped start the Greenwich Alliance as a way to help all the schools, not just the ones her three children attend. “It was nagging at me that access to opportunities and services were very unequal across town,” she said.

To nab the kind of deep-pocketed backers she coveted, she plied her Democratic connections to help arrange a breakfast meeting featuring a well-known Greenwich resident, Connecticut’s attorney general, [Richard Blumenthal](#).

That one event netted her three big donors who each agreed to provide the foundation \$25,000 or more in each of the next three years. She then persuaded the district not to hold her organization’s gifts against the schools’ gift caps to avoid competing with the local parent-teacher associations.

Ms. Kail has already committed \$200,000 to an early childhood literacy program that uses a colorful refurbished recreational vehicle, or “storymobile,” to take books and readers to the places where children live

and learn. Next was a \$55,000 program called "Tuning In to Music," which has 37 underprivileged children taking weekly one-on-one music lessons.

As the mother of a trombone player who recently toured China with the Greenwich High School band, Ms. Kail said, "many more kids should have that opportunity." But she also knows all too well that to participate at the high school level, "you have to start playing in fourth or fifth grade."

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