

Big Dollars for the Small Shop: Fundraising for New, Small, and Freestanding Charter Schools

By Jill Wells, Director of Educational Support Services, EdTec Inc.

Charter management organizations (CMOs) have gained wide recognition and attention as drivers of education reform, and they have attracted some of the largest and most concentrated investments in public education. In fact, many of the notable philanthropic supporters of charter schools exclusively support CMOs. However, according to the California Charter School Association’s recent report, *Portrait of the Movement*, **61.2%** of all California charter schools are “freestanding” and operate independently. While much of the philanthropic focus may be on CMOs, there is ample opportunity for small and start-up freestanding schools to attract fundraising dollars. Through effective grant-seeking tactics, local resources and campaigns, and strong community engagement, a start-up charter school can generate significant fundraising support for its programs.

Seeing Is Believing

North County Trade Tech	
113	students
717	2010 API
57%	free/reduced
Focus: college & construction career prep	
\$100,000	raised in private grants, annually

Doreen Quinn, Board President of North County Trade Tech High School in Vista, CA, has consistently raised over \$100,000 in private grants annually to support Trade Tech’s growth and career prep programs since the school opened in 2008. She emphasizes partnership with potential funders as a key to the school’s success in fundraising: “It’s important to understand the funder’s priorities, establish a relationship, and be authentic.” Before setting out to solicit contributions, it’s crucial to understand the donor’s inspiration and priorities – whether it’s a corporate sponsor or local foundation – and to assess your program’s fit

with the funder’s motivations. Become a student of your funders and do your homework! Collect information on available grants, past grantee profiles, and current board members to determine your school’s alignment with a donor’s mission. Many foundations and corporations describe their mission and giving policies in detail online, but, as Quinn also noted, “Most things happen sitting one-to-one.” A site visit is perhaps the most important step in developing a relationship with a potential funder. Without the benefit of national recognition or a history of significant philanthropic investment that a CMO might have, funders need to get out to a freestanding school’s campus to see the students, meet the faculty, and witness the unique strengths of the school. A school day tour is the best showcase of your charter’s mission and values, and it provides an opportunity to present the reasons your school is a truly worthwhile investment. “Funders are interested in the vision and the potential difference this school can make in the community,” Quinn remarks; once your potential funder has the opportunity to witness your school in action, the buy-in will be there. This is where the authenticity of your program shows through; it’s not a sales job, it’s an opportunity to demonstrate how the school is fulfilling its mission and delivering on the promise of the charter.

Going Local

SOAR Charter Academy	
332	students
797	2010 API
72%	free/reduced
Focus: character & community development	
\$60,000 raised in online contests in last three years	

Even before SOAR Charter Academy in San Bernardino, CA opened its doors, Co-Founder and Teacher Tammi Fort began sending letters to introduce the school to local businesses, community associations, and families. This was the first step in what evolved into a community-focused fundraising platform that fits with the school's mission and has helped SOAR develop a respected presence and strong connections in the community. After some initial research, Fort began to realize SOAR didn't fit the requirements or priorities grantmakers in the area had established. "We found ourselves left out from these opportunities,"

she noted, so she turned to pursuing in-kind donations from local business and online contests to restart her fundraising campaign. Through voting contests on Facebook, parents and friends were also able to get involved. And, it works: SOAR has raised over \$60,000 through online contests in the last three years. Fort has kept up her online efforts, turning from her original letter-writing strategy and shifting to using SOAR's Facebook page to canvass local groups such as the Firefighters' Association, garnering even more support for the school. When a fire destroyed SOAR's playground last year, the Firefighters' Association representative saw the pictures on Facebook and was one of the first to come forward with a donation and a group of volunteers who helped rebuild the structure. When it comes to reaching out, Fort stresses, "No business is too small to ask," and, more importantly, "So many people are willing and wanting to help." Starting with the inner circle of the school's parents and neighbors, SOAR has been able to cultivate a diverse assembly of supporters. Fort acknowledges SOAR parents as the biggest asset in building SOAR's network and helping the school access resources in the community. She notes, "There is always someone who knows someone who knows someone that can help us with what we need." One of the keys to SOAR's fundraising success has been creating the opportunities for local stakeholders to get involved in the school in ways that are both natural for contributors and meaningful for the school.

The Power of One

In addition to connecting with grantmakers and businesses, charter schools must also dedicate time and resources to engaging with individual supporters. In the same way philanthropists seem to focus on large CMO networks as the key players in education reform, small nonprofits such as charter schools often make the mistake of directing fundraising efforts exclusively on foundations or corporations, instead of creating a more diversified, home-grown strategy. A long tradition of giving in the U.S., and the most recent summary from the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University, reminds us that individual donors are the source of 81% of all contributions (including bequests). Foundations follow with 14% and corporations with 5%. Traditional fundraising "asks" involve a long courtship of high net worth individuals, a strategy that is best suited for organizations with a lengthy fundraising track record and a formal capital campaign. However, the opportunity for small organizations is still there; it just needs to be adapted to a format that works for a smaller entity. SOAR's leaders have geared their individual giving campaign to fit in with everyday life. "The [fundraising activities] that are hands-on and offer parents things they'd do anyway are the most successful," Fort explains, and adds, "catalogs don't work." Activities such as scrip sales and local restaurant nights (at which a percentage of the nightly sales go to the school) give parents a convenient way to get involved with helping the school. When parents and supporters aren't able to make a financial contribution, they can participate by delivering donation letters and thank you notes in person to local businesses, friends, and neighbors. There's a

way for each stakeholder to play a part in fundraising and build the network of people who know about the school, and therefore draw in the individuals who may also become financial supporters.

Don't Stop Believing

Looking back on their experiences in fundraising for their start-ups, both Quinn and Fort concluded the most important part of fundraising is to keep doing it. There will be disappointments and missteps, but as Quinn noted, "the number one thing about this business is the ability to persevere." Fort echoes this sentiment: "Keep trying and keep asking and people will come back."

In all of their efforts, the focus is the same: building and maintaining meaningful relationships with partners who share your vision. Small schools such as SOAR and Trade Tech have turned being small and new into an asset. Their ability to demonstrate the school's vision, closeness with community members, and innovative approaches has translated into fundraising success. 

Fundraising Tips

- **Seeing is Believing!**

Invite potential donors to visit your site to see the program in action.

- **Think Small!**

No business is too small to ask! Small donations add up fast!

- **Get Your Name Out!**

Use the power of social media to drive interest, and donations, in your school.

- **Don't Go It Alone!**

Parents are a huge asset; give them opportunities to get involved in fundraising.

- **Bigger Isn't Always Better!**

Fostering a close-knit school community makes people feel personally invested in the school's success.

- **Don't Wait!**

Your school doesn't have to be open to begin fundraising; start efforts early and you'll be ahead of the game.

This article was written with additional staff contributions from Kelly Theofanis, EdTec Inc.