

## PRIVATE FOUNDATIONS GROW AS SCHOOL BUDGETS TIGHTEN

### Foundations

**Even the smallest grants have huge impact on expansions in student learning**

**JUSTIN MURPHY @CITIZENMURPHY**

Nearly everything in Jamie Melos' special education classroom at Merton Williams Middle School can be traced back to the Hilton Central School District's annual budget: smart boards from the technology fund; furniture from general operating expenses; salary and benefits for Melos and her colleagues.

Then there's Stewie.

Some school districts might have \$130 budgeted specifically for a Russian tortoise, or \$15 for nesting material made of coconut fiber, but Hilton isn't one of them. Instead, Melos applied last year for a small grant from the Hilton Education Foundation, established in 2006 to fund student scholarships and teachers' pet projects. In this case, that meant an actual pet.

Monroe County school districts are increasingly looking to independent education foundations as a way to fund small

See **FOUNDATIONS**, Page **13A**



AMOUNTS LOCAL FOUNDATIONS HAVE GIVEN FOR EXTRA SCHOOL PROGRAMS



**Brendon Riley smiles as he watches Stewie the tortoise, which was wandering the desk after being weighed in class at Merton Williams Middle School in Hilton.**

TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/@TYEE23/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



\$16,000

Scholarships for graduating seniors

\$1500

Set of African Drums

\$300

Literary competition prize money

\$968

Weather station

\$880

‘Shaken baby’ doll for child development classes

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Continued from Page 1A

ventures and tap community interest.

The sums are generally trifling in the context of the districts’ overall budgets; the 13 organizations combined paid out about \$100,000 in 2015-16, meaning the questions of funding equity raised elsewhere in the country are not as pointed here. The increasing prevalence of the foundations, though, comes partly in response to tightening school budgets, in which nonessential expenditures such as pet tortoises are under pressure.

Twenty years ago, only two Monroe County school districts — Brighton and West Irondequoit — had independent education foundations with the sole purpose of supplementing their public budgets. Now, 13 of them do, and two more are in the process of starting them.

For teachers, it’s a way to pay for small innovations. For students, it might mean \$1,000 toward college tuition. For parents and others in the community, it’s another avenue to contribute to public education.

Melos’ students researched which sort of animal they’d like to adopt, then built a habitat in technology class. They take turns feeding, weighing and bathing Stewie and cleaning out his cage. They even bought him a stuffed pink tortoise friend named Rosie, reasoning that because tortoises like to eat bright-colored flowers, Stewie might like her.

It worked. When they set Rosie in front of the cage, Stewie motors over to her and puts his face against the glass.

“We try to think what he’s thinking,” 13-year-old Brendon Ryan said. “He’s pretty silly.”

In the same year, the Hilton foundation gave \$968 for a weather station at Northwood Elementary School and \$300 as prize money for the Silver Nickel literary contest at Hilton High School, among other grants. It also gave out more than \$16,000 in scholarships to graduating seniors.

“The (budget) system isn’t really designed for people to come to a school district and make a contribution,” said Jody Siegle, chair of the Brighton Education Fund. “A foundation really is about tapping into the support people across the broader community.”

### **Fast-growing sector**

Ever since the first school opened its doors, there have been students, parents and other community members baking cookies, washing vehicles and selling raffle tickets to raise money outside the formal budget process, with parentteacher organizations often taking the lead.

Education foundations go a step further. Though they vary in size and type, they are generally nonprofit organizations that appoint a board of trustees and operate independently (at least in structure) from the school district they support.

The first in the Rochester area was the West Irondequoit Foundation, established in 1987, followed by the Brighton Education Fund in 1992. Six more districts joined them between 2000 and 2006, including Hilton and the Rochester City School District.

Since 2012, five more have been established. Brockport and Penfield are in the formative stages.

“We recognize there’s a need and a great opportunity to help kids in Penfield,” said Jason Torres, one of the organizers of the nascent Penfield Education Foundation. “We want to provide our kids with opportunities. ... If they’re not funded within the budget — which is understandable — there’s got to be an alternate source, and that’s what we hope the foundation can provide.”

There is no apparent local trend toward more spending, but rather toward the creation of foundations in more districts.

Robin Callahan, executive director of the National School Foundation Association, said her association has about 1,000 dues-paying member organizations and has been gaining steadily.

“School foundations are one of the fastest-growing (elements) in the philanthropic sector,” she said. “We’ve really seen a need for more public-private partnerships.”

Generally speaking, the foundations focus on two areas: teacher grants and college scholarships for graduating seniors. The former have covered a wide variety of uses.

The Fairport Area Community Education Trust paid for an egg incubator, materials for play-based learning and the construction of a Tibetan Buddhist sand mandala. The Honeoye Falls-Lima Education Fund bought stream waders, magnifying glasses and binoculars for outdoor learning. The Greece Education Foundation spent \$300 to offset the cost of a trip to Niagara Falls for English language- learner students; \$1,500 for a set of African drums; and \$880 for a “shaken baby syndrome simulated infant” for use in child development classes.

They vary widely in size, vigor and mission. The West Irondequoit Foundation had a year-end fund balance of nearly \$400,000 in 2015; the East Irondequoit Educational Foundation, on the other hand, has just \$3,200.

The Rush-Henrietta Education Foundation still has a website but lost its federal tax exemption status in 2012 after failing for three years in a row to file required financial reports with the Internal Revenue Service. The district said it was unaware of the lapse in status and is in the process of reviving the foundation.

The Brighton Education Fund focuses on creative teacher ideas and over 25 years has seen some of its projects blossom from a single classroom to the entire district, said Siegle, its chairwoman and the former executive director of the Monroe County School Boards Association.

“Teachers can have innovative, creative ideas and it’s wonderful to be able to support that,” she said. “It’s amazing to see how the (projects) have spread through the district.”

The KEEP Foundation in Pittsford paid for high-altitude balloons that Mendon High School students have shot up more than 23 miles into the atmosphere. Students have to design and account for electrical and structural elements and weather patterning, and use 3D printers to create bobbleheads that “pilot” the balloons.

The balloons also carry simple science experiments on behalf of elementary- school children. This year, they hope to get the balloons into the jet stream and follow them around the globe with GPS tracking, teacher Scott Banister said.

“When I tell them the challenge is open-ended, and that it will take all of them to make it successful — it brings a level of enthusiasm that’s phenomenal to see,” he said.

### **Property Tax Cap**

Statewide and locally, school and foundation leaders cited the pressure of the New York state property tax cap as a reason to look for funding elsewhere. With the property tax cap hovering at 1 percent and the state funding formula frozen, districts and school boards have increasingly narrowed their budgetary horizons.

“If the state would step up to the plate and provide the funding necessary for students to succeed, it wouldn’t be a question of raising money from private foundations to make up the gap,” said Billy Easton, executive director of the Alliance for Quality Education of New York.

It isn’t quite true that foundations in the Rochester area “make up the gap”; indeed, no local foundation comes close to distributing even half of 1 percent of its district’s annual budget. Some foundations in affluent communities elsewhere, however, have garnered headlines with eye-popping fundraising totals.

A foundation in one wealthy California community raised 20 percent of the district’s operating budget in 2015-16, in part by auctioning off items such as a limousine for six to a Taylor Swift concert and a weeklong vacation at a private estate. In New York City, some prestigious schools ask parents to provide hundreds of dollars’ worth of school supplies and even toilet paper.

Those cases raise the question of whether school foundations perpetuate funding inequities. After all, schools in wealthy communities will be able to raise more in donations than those in poorer communities.

“It can expand the inequality, because people who have more money to give to their kids’ schools are in school districts with more money to begin with,” Easton said. “We’re never opposed to people giving money to public schools, but it does create problems.”

In Monroe County, the sums are small enough that there is no strong correlation between wealthy districts and powerful foundations. For instance, the East Rochester Alumni Foundation outspent the Pittsford KEEP Foundation in 201415 despite the significant wealth disparity between the two

districts.

The Rochester Education Foundation, benefiting the city school district, is the largest in the area, and the only one with paid staff. It took in \$274,000 in contributions in 2015, much of it coming from larger foundations or donors outside city limits.

That money does not go directly to schools — the foundation distributes musical instruments and books and runs a college access program — but nonetheless would make up less than a third of 1 percent of the district’s \$864 million budget.

Even when a brigade of West Irondequoit residents raised money to spare some programs from elimination after the budget failed in 2014-15, they did it through a new organization, not the foundation.

“Out of our budget of \$70 million, \$30,000 or \$40,000 (in grants) ... doesn’t make much of a difference,” said James Brennan, the district’s assistant superintendent for finance. “The biggest financial benefit is that it allows us to evaluate an idea without putting any taxpayer money behind it.”

The only four Monroe County school districts lacking a foundation are Churchville-Chili, Spencerport, Webster and Wheatland-Chili. Siegle, the doyenne of local education foundations, often provides advice to new organizations and said she wouldn’t be surprised to see even more spring up. “People look around and see it’s been done in other communities around them,” she said. “We think of ourselves as an academic booster club. ... I can honestly say that every child in Brighton benefits as a result of grants from the fund.”

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**Jamie Melos watches as students Logan Kibby and Sarab Alsafadi weigh paper clips as part of their classroom math exercise. Brendon Ryan protects the class tortoise, Stewie, making sure he doesn't wander off the desk.**

PHOTOS BY TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/@TYEE23/STAFF



**Above: Stewie wanders around a table under the watchful eye of a student after Jamie Melos' class weighed him.**



**At left: Brendon Ryan charts the date and weight of the class tortoise at Merton Williams Middle School in Hilton.**



**Below: Jamie Melos helps students Logan Kibby, Caleb Casey and Brendon Ryan weigh the class tortoise as part of their math class at Merton Williams Middle School in Hilton.**

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**JODY SIEGLE**

**BRIGHTON EDUCATION FUND**

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Sunday, 01/08/2017 Pag.A01

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