

The Harvard Schools Trust: The glue between school and community

BY CARLENE PHILLIPS · DECEMBER 8, 2016

A projector system, Wobble chairs, an adventure game kit, outdoor equipment, mosaic mysteries math games. Is this a child's holiday wish list? In a way, but more accurately it is a partial list of items actually granted in 2016 to teachers at Hildreth Elementary and Bromfield by the Harvard Schools Trust. By mid-November the nonprofit organization had funded, or partially funded, 23 requests from educators, almost exactly divided between the two schools. Treasurer Rolf VandeVaart said the trust has granted an average of \$40,000 annually to the schools over the past three years. "We are so fortunate to live in this community that is so supportive of its schools," remarked Terry Symula, president of the trust.

The mission of the trust is "to provide Harvard's schools with supplemental curriculum support, equipment, extracurricular experiences, and staff development, and to broaden community awareness, involvement, and confidence in our students and our schools." Symula explained that the trust is a way to provide a teacher with something outside of the budget cycle. With grants awarded every month, a teacher can come up with a new idea and potentially have it funded almost immediately, instead of having to wait for the next year's school budget. A grant from the trust also allows a teacher to pilot something before making a budget request.

Symula noted that while many towns, among them Acton, Ayer, Littleton, and Bolton, have a similar funding program, most of them rely almost solely on donations. The Harvard Schools Trust may be unusual in its emphasis on fundraising not only through memberships but also through community events. For the past several years the trust has been a co-sponsor of the annual flea market on Columbus Day weekend. The spring Gala, held first in various people's homes and more recently at a single venue, has been a major source of revenue. Because one dinner location limits the number of attendees, the Gala has become less of a large community event. This year, said Symula, the board wants to "mix it up" and plans to have an early May hootenanny to bring out the whole town for a rollicking, fun event.

More than fundraisers

It is not only through fundraisers that the Schools Trust connects the schools with the community. The two recent Civil War encampments on the Common, spearheaded by Bromfield social studies teacher Kristin McManus and sponsored by the trust, were attended by students and community members

alike. The trust has invited the public to lectures, exhibits, and films in an effort to connect the schools and the community. The Schools Trust is "the glue" between the two, said Symula.

The mission statement goes on to say, "Through the grants program, the trust distributes funds to specific projects and opportunities submitted to the board of directors by teachers, administrators, parents, or students." Said Symula, "They come to us, and what we support runs the gamut." While most grants are for a single item or program, some are for recurring events. The Bromfield Model UN, the Speech and Debate Club, and other clubs request funds to help pay conference fees. The fifth-grade Nature's Classroom uses trust funds for scholarships. Symula remarked that in the past several years, many new clubs have been formed—the Green Team, the Bromfield chapter of Business Professionals of America, and the First Lego League and Robotics Program among them—and the trust provides money for some of their ongoing needs. Bromfield psychology teacher Kathleen Doherty said, "The co-curricular groups involve the students in very authentic learning activities" and many of the students have "transformational experiences" through these programs.

Independent, but in harmony with schools

Although the trust is not affiliated with any municipal or educational group, it acts in harmony with the schools' educational goals. It is governed by a volunteer board of directors consisting of parents and community leaders. A look at the trust's website (a very informative and detailed site, done for the past 15 years by board member Sue Robbins, a co-owner of The Harvard Press) shows that many board members have been so for many years. Symula said the board likes to have a balance of members with kids in the schools and those whose children have graduated, but it's getting harder and harder to find parents of school-age children who don't work and who have the time to commit to the trust. "We are a board of doers," said Symula. On the other hand, members who no longer have kids in school can perhaps be more objective about the grants. And, said Symula, longtime members provide mentorship; newer members feel they are following in the footsteps of good community leaders with a real commitment to the work of the trust—to build community and to benefit the schools.

The trust meets monthly, and at those meetings it makes decisions on grant requests it has received. There are two categories of grants: one under \$300 and one over \$300. It isn't often

the board says no, said Symula, adding that the trust doesn't want teachers to have to spend their own money. Sometimes parts of an application need to be rewritten, and sometimes only a portion of a request gets funded. Symula said that in the early years of the trust, all requests were for supplementing curriculum, for enrichment. Robbins commented that more and more, "We are getting requests for nuts and bolts." Some of these belong in the school budget and could justifiably be turned down by the trust, but the board seems committed to the spirit of early members who asked, "If we don't fund it, who will?"

Origins

According to the "In the News" tab on the website, the trust grew out of a task force in 1989. Worth Robbins, a member of that original group (and also a co-owner of the Harvard Press), said there was a financial need at that time because the effects of Proposition 2 1/2 were being felt. For several years the impact had been offset by the town's windfall in state aid because Fort Devens residents were counted as part of Harvard, but those monies had run out. The trust was seen as a way of funding some things for the schools in the event of override failures.

In thinking about memorable grant programs, Symula cited "Nothing to Hide," a speaker series and photo exhibit exploring mental illness that was initiated by Doherty and three other professionals at Bromfield. Symula saw the program as a great service to the whole community, not just students, and as such was an ideal fit with the trust's mission. And, she added, how else could something like that get funded? She said she looks forward to more programs like this that support the schools' efforts to balance wellness and academics.

Sue Robbins' favorite request—although she loved that the trust once bought baby chicks for an elementary classroom—was one from math teacher Julie Horton, who wanted to buy scripts of the stage play "Proof" for her class. The play is about a noted elderly mathematician, and there is a good deal of math involved in it. In her thank-you note to the trust, Horton wrote that there were kids who contributed to the discussion of the play who had never talked in class before.

Based on the number and variety of grants given and the thank-you messages received, it seems teachers in both schools would agree with Doherty's statement, "I am so grateful to the Harvard Schools Trust for their ongoing support of so many programs in the schools. I love the trust!"

THANKS FROM TRUST BENEFICIARIES

"The Harvard Schools Trust has been supporting educational initiatives at both schools for decades. Some of it has been very innovative, such as the funding of the first wave of Smartboards that have proven to be an incredibly useful instructional technology tool. Other funds have gone to enrich curricula, such as actors from the Plimoth Plantation or Shakespearean plays. The trust has consistently been a vital and generous group that has contributed significant funds to enhancing learning within our schools."

—Gretchen Henry, former Hildreth Elementary School teacher and associate principal

"The two traveling photo exhibits that I have been involved in requesting grants for ('In Our Family: Portraits of All Kinds of Families,' and 'Nothing to Hide: Mental Illness in the Family') have been extremely well received by the students, staff, and community. We were able to utilize those photo exhibits as part of class activities (in English,

art, Roundtable [advisory discussion groups, grades eight to 12], and psychology, just to name a few) in a way that meaningfully enhanced the curriculum.' In the case of 'Nothing to Hide,' I felt that the exhibit helped us to explore the topic of mental illness in a way that went beyond the more traditional classroom/textbook coverage."

—Kathleen Doherty, Bromfield psychology teacher

"My seventh-grade students and I have benefited enormously from the Harvard Schools Trust. Two years in a row, students have been able to produce their own creative writing (fiction, nonfiction, and poetry) and gather it into a single volume that looks and feels like a real, published book. For many students, seeing their work in a bound volume like this was a moment of elation, and I'm so grateful to the trust for being able to make this dream become a creative reality."

—Luke Reynolds, Bromfield language arts teacher