

## Big Needs, Small Budgets

### Debbie Silver

Keep a “Needs List” on the board or write it in your class newsletter. When asked ahead of time for coffee cans, clean jars, magazines, pet containers, egg cartons, plastic milk jugs, 2-liter bottles, or other available materials both students and parents will contribute items if given enough notice. Remember to thank them.

- When you go into a store to make a purchase for your classroom, ask to speak to either the manager or assistant manager. Tell her/him that you are a local educator on a limited budget. Ask her/him if s/he can give you a discount on items you are purchasing for your students. Sometimes store managers have a certain amount of discretionary funds they can use to make charitable donations, so you may end up getting your purchases for free.
- As soon as you move into your classroom start making a “dream list” of items you need and want (a piece of equipment, supplies, supplementary materials). Prioritize your list and periodically submit it to the local PTA/PTO, local service organizations, or other groups that help in the community. Often times these groups have extra money in their budgets and will give it to an educator who makes a reasonable request. Sometimes you can get three or four groups to go together and help purchase the larger items you need.

Show up at community events and get to know leaders in the service organizations. Being visible in the community helps you build support. Groups are more likely to support your requests if they know you and you support them.

- When a group, individual, or business donates items to your classroom take a picture of the students actually using it and attach it to a thank you note from the children. Mention it in your newsletter, highlight it, and mail that along, too. Making a practice of following up with acts of appreciation is great for building support with the community as well as insuring that you will be positively received the next time you make a request.
- Don't limit yourself to money donations or even new items. A local MacDonald's™ gave me a wonderful set of slightly used plastic trays for my cooperative learning activities (~~more on that in chapter 7~~). The community hospital donated extra urinal cups (yes, they were clean) for a measuring activity. A pharmacy gave me a whole box of eyedroppers to use in making Cartesian Divers. It's best to ask first at places where you regularly shop. If you are a good customer the management is usually more receptive to your request. However, you can always approach an

unknown manager with this line, "Hello Ms/Mr. (read it off her/his name tag), my name is (read it off your school badge if you have forgotten), do you like children?" What's s/he going to say? That gives you an opening. "Well, I'm glad to hear it because I'm here today on behalf of some really deserving children . . ." You know the drill. Just be very specific about what you want, and you are far more likely to get it. "I need 24 carpet samples" is much more effective than "We'll take anything that you've got!"

If you cannot afford to join the national organization(s) for your grade level or subject area, at least join the local and state levels. Ask your principal or librarian to subscribe to the journals that pertain to your area. Some of the best grant opportunities, teaching resources, and professional development offerings are advertised in their newsletters and periodicals.

Go to yard sales, garage sales, and second-hand stores for wonderful buys on larger items like aquariums, ice chests, mats, playground toys, pet habitats, instructional toys, books, and furniture.

Attend workshops on grant writing. Check out grant sites on the internet for tips and available sources. Find out if local or state organizations offer teachers a chance to compete for funds. Remember that your chances of winning a local grant are much better than getting a national one, and they are usually easier to write