



CREATIVE

FUNDING

IDEAS

By Mark C. Bodie

*for
Your
Physical
Education
Program*

Do you find it difficult to secure funding for your physical education program in these tough economic times? Budgets are small, if you are even lucky enough to have one at all. Do not get discouraged — funding is out there. Once you realize that nothing comes easy, get to work by writing letters, making phone calls, sending e mails, and rewriting letters. This article will show how physical education teachers can make a funding action plan, who to contact, where to write to, and how to get equipment for students. Sometimes the people who can help the teacher are directly in front of them. Other times, the teacher will have to do some research through websites, national organizations, grants, professional sports teams, local school districts, local civic organizations, and even the school's parent-teacher association (PTA).

Game Prep — Getting Organized

To get started, the teacher needs to get organized and create an action plan. The key is to record information in a style that best fits the teacher's comfort level. A spiral notebook is handy and appeals to the technically challenged. A spreadsheet is convenient and easily accessible. As long as the information is recorded somewhere, the process will be easier and the teacher will be more motivated to continue. There are several ways to obtain equipment or funding. It is very rare, and almost impossible, for an organization to hand a teacher a blank check. Also, alternative funding does not necessarily mean that the teacher has to write a grant proposal. This article will highlight all the avenues that the author has used successfully to receive funding or equipment.

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Before contacting an organization, the teacher needs to gather some data about his or her school. School population, ethnic diversity, poverty, crime data, and graduation rate help to paint a picture of the needs that the teacher is facing. Often, this information can be found through the school's website. If not, the student information system assistant can obtain the information for the teacher.

The author worked in a major metropolitan area. He included crime maps provided by the police department as well as gang injunction information provided by a newspaper to highlight the need for after-school programs and equipment. Teachers are more likely to get a second look for equipment or funding if there is a justifiable reason for it.

Learning the Plays — Ways to Get Funded

Websites

Virtually all information is accessible through the Internet. Although this article highlights only a few websites, there are many others where teachers can find information on grants, philanthropy, freebies, and everything in between. A website called donorschoose.org is an excellent one to begin with. It allows educators to post projects to get funded by anonymous donors. To use this website, the teacher needs to create a free account. Once an account is created, the teacher receives a

standard amount for their first project. Once the first project is funded, subsequent projects receive increased funding.

A project proposal needs to be written and can be for any amount up to the maximum. Donorschoose.org provides the project writer with prompts and ideas to get their projects funded. The writer can then promote their project to friends using social media. Projects are given a time limit to be funded. If the project is not funded, it is deleted. It is the responsibility of the project author to promote the project. Donorschoose.org is a popular website among educators. Chances are there is a current project in the teacher's school. Once the teacher verifies their information, he or she will be able to see those projects. When the project is funded, the teacher must be sure to follow the guidelines to submit a thank-you package. The thank-you package must include student notes and pictures. Students need not be included in the pictures or named. Failure to complete the thank-you package may result in account suspension.

Gofundme.com is another popular website among individuals who want specific project funding. This website allows anyone to submit a project for funding and all donations go directly to the project author, minus a 5% fee to the website. There is no time limit to raise funds and there is no penalty for not reaching the desired goal. The teacher needs to be wary of other fundraising websites that charge donors for donations and have other restrictions. It is recommended that teachers always read the fine print.

Social media

Social media is not just for teenagers. There is a wealth of information and, more importantly, opportunities for teachers to find funding that will provide support beyond classroom budgets. Twitter and Facebook are very popular avenues not only for philanthropists, but also for athletes and entertainers to promote their charity work. Twitter allows users to have more than one account. Therefore, the teacher may find it necessary, depending on district guidelines, to keep a personal account separate from a professional account. This article is not intended to be a "how-to" on social media. However, to access information faster, this article will highlight some of the more popular features.

If using Twitter, it is useful to follow athletes with corporate sponsors. Often, athletes will retweet a sponsor's tweet that promotes a certain giveaway, program, or promotion. For example, two years ago, Clay Matthews of the Green Bay Packers retweeted information about the Muscle Milk Recovery Grant application (Clay Matthews III tweet from September 18, 2012). This was a \$250,000 grant opportunity to support a high-school athletic program. This happened to be the company's first school grant. Due to its popularity, the program continued into a second year with some modifications. Hashtags are another way to pinpoint specific opportunities or conversations. A hashtag is the number sign (#) followed by a word or group of words strung together. For example, #grants will bring up a list of conversations and people with the word grant(s) in the tweet. The teacher will have to work through all the lists, but there is plenty of applicable information to be found.

Although most people use Facebook as a way to keep in touch with friends, it is also an excellent resource to find and even promote fundraising efforts. If a teacher is using fundraising sites like donorschoose.org or gofundme.com, he or she can promote the program on Facebook. It is key for the teacher to not pressure any one person into giving, but rather provide an anonymous route for individuals to support the fundraising goal. Using Facebook helps to get the word out not just to the teacher's friends, but also to friends' friends, therefore easily reaching thousands of people in a very short period of time.

National or non-profit sports organizations

Team USA is a national organization located mainly in Colorado Springs, CO. There are a variety of Team USA sports and the teacher can access the list via teamusa.org. Team USA Handball made an all-day appearance to promote handball at the author's school. Each class saw the handball demonstration and participated in an impromptu handball game with Team USA members. The visit piqued the students' interest in the sport and students were much more motivated to participate in the sport during class. It was not difficult or time-consuming to get Team USA Handball to visit the school. As it was explained

to the author and his staff, handball remains the only sport in which eighth graders who were not involved in sports at an early age still had a chance to make an Olympic team roster. The presenters were knowledgeable and had an eye for evaluating talent.

Team USA Football also made a generous donation of flag football equipment to the author's school. The teacher will have to demonstrate a need, though being a Title I school is usually enough to demonstrate need. However, specific information such as the percentage of minorities, the number of students receiving free or reduced lunch, and even crime data where the school is situated may help in determining the need for funding.

Local districts and grants

Depending on the size of the school district, there are individuals and departments responsible for researching and promoting grants within the district. This was the case for the Los Angeles Unified School District. Although most grants are government-funded, a vast majority of private organizations also fund grants. The author's physical education department, principal, building custodian, instructional coach, and district



physical education liaison all had a part in the grant-writing process for a privately funded grant. From start to finish, the process took seven months.

The Sound Body/Sound Mind grant funds physical fitness equipment for middle and high school students in economically disadvantaged areas. With privately funded grants such as this one, the organization may have strict guidelines to ensure their donation is doing the most good. Therefore, the teacher may need to get not only school administration involved, but also district representation. With this specific grant, there needed to be enough square footage in the facility to accommodate all of the equipment. Upon inspection of the facility, the individuals representing the grant realized that the floor needed repair, the walls needed repair and painting, and they also needed assurances that the equipment was secure when not in use by the school. In the end, the Sound Body/Sound Mind grant supplied more than \$50,000 worth of fitness equipment to the school.

Federal grants

Although federal grants are readily available, those like the Carol M. White Physical Education Program Grant support larger needs and are more for district use, not single-school use. The teacher may find more school-friendly grants through Michelle Obama's letsmove.gov grant website. There is information on gardening grants, physical education equipment grants, and various foundations like the Women's Sports Foundation.

Civic associations

Civic associations are a great resource for grants and funding at the local level. Although the funding amount is usually low (in the \$100 to \$300 range), civic associations have resources

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beyond that to help fulfill larger needs. The teacher does not have to be an active member of the association, nor does he or she need to reside in the area, just as long as the school does. Civic associations also distribute newsletters to individuals living within its boundaries. This is an excellent resource to find not only funding, but also volunteers for programs like field days.

Parent-teacher associations

The school's PTA is an excellent resource for school-specific funding. The ability of the PTA to help is dependent on the budget and funds available. Also, there are strict guidelines for non-profit organizations like the PTA to follow. For example, there may be restrictions on budgets and what can be carried over from one year to the next. As a result, the PTA will work with the school's administration to support programs that are not in the school's budget.

It is suggested that the teacher attend most, if not all, meetings of the PTA. Generally speaking, there is very little turnout at these meetings. Therefore, being an active member of the school staff in these meetings demonstrates commitment to both the school and the PTA. In the case of there being more funds available at the end of the year, the physical education teacher just may be privy to what is available by attending monthly meetings. Of course, having a solid physical education program can only help. Further, events like field day for elementary teachers and attendance at varsity sporting events for high school teachers help promote the physical education program outside of the classroom setting.

Professional sports organizations

There are several different ways in which the teacher can enlist the help of the National Football League, National Basketball Association, National Hockey League (NHL), Professional Golf Association (PGA), and other sports teams in their area or region. It is completely up to the teacher to be creative in asking for help, but the author found the following methods to be most successful.

First, a simple e mail or letter to the community relations representative of a team can support the teacher's behavior-management program or prize box. For example, small items like stickers, hats, posters, key chains, player cards, bracelets, and water bottles are items that most sports teams keep on hand to support children who participate in activities that the team sponsors. Although these items do not specifically support the program, they help to defer the cost of purchasing these items.

Second, the sports team may donate equipment to help the teacher's physical education program. The author's school received all sorts of hockey equipment, as well as visits from former players and mascots from the NHL team in his region. Normally, this is a one-time donation, but visits by mascots and players every few years or so to promote the team can be arranged. When contacting the PGA, the teacher should find the specific district in which his or her school is located. When the author was located in the Mid-Atlantic region, after an e mail and a few phone calls, the author was able to drive down to the

headquarters building and pick up enough used golf clubs to start a golf program at his school. In the Southern California region, the author was able to direct coworkers to contact and connect with personnel who donated new clubs and equipment to begin an inner-city golf program.

Lastly, to receive an autographed item from a sport team, the teacher will need a copy of the school's tax-exempt identification number. Also, the online application will ask for an event date. Although this process can be very time-consuming, it has the potential to be very rewarding as far as funding goes. The teacher may consider having a silent auction at a PTA meeting or during a varsity sporting event. It is up to the teacher to decide which type of event will receive the most attendance, but an auction at school is usually the best option. The teacher can also auction the autographed item online. However, the teacher may not receive the true value of that item, as many autographed items are already for sale online. The teacher should use all forms of social media to promote the event and should save the correspondence that was shipped with the item to prove its authenticity.

It is advisable to request items from all the teams in your region — not just professional, but also collegiate. Collegiate teams, especially those from which the teacher is an alumnus, are great places to start requests for “auctionable” items. As for accountability, some organizations may ask for a report stating how much was received for the item. Many applications will say, “If you wish to be considered for future donations, please be sure to report how much the item auctioned for.” As there are literally thousands of requests for autographed items, it would be in the teacher's best interest to remain on good terms with the team.

It is *not* advisable to write to professional sport athletes directly to ask for autographed items specifically for the purpose of selling them. For collectors of autographs, there are specific places for which autographs fetch the most money. By contacting athletes directly, they may autograph items on places where collectors prefer they do not. By writing the organization directly, the teacher ensures that the item is authentic and properly signed.

Calling the Play — Writing a Contact Letter

Access to information on the Internet makes it easier to find organizations. At the bottom of almost every web page is a contact button. This should be the first stop for the teacher. Often there will be an e mail address, mailing address, phone number, and/or a fax number that can put the teacher in touch with the organization.

When searching for specific people to write to, the philanthropy, community relations, marketing, and/or media relations areas of an organization can best help the teacher. These people can be found through a search engine by including key words along with the organization to find a list of biographies or a staff directory. An example would be to type “community relations director, Los Angeles Lakers.” When addressing a letter, it is best to refrain from using “To whom it may concern”

whenever possible. The letter will appear more genuine if addressed to someone specifically. If the teacher is unable to find a contact person, a phone call to the organization is appropriate. It is important to be specific and brief. Remember: individuals working in community relations are normally responsible for donation requests.

Once the teacher has written the contact letter, it is imperative that the letter contain *no* grammatical or spelling errors. The teacher should have one or two coworkers proofread the letter. Letters with such errors usually end up in the round file. Teachers should not use form letters. Lastly, the teacher should sign the letter in blue ink. The blue ink makes the letter stand out and not seem like a processed duplicate letter. These organizations receive hundreds, if not thousands, of letters each year. Doing the little things right can make the request stand out.

Winning the Game — Student Impact

All of this work — because, to be honest, it is hard work — ultimately benefits the students. Before taking on the task of seeking assistance, the author's physical education closet consisted of a handful of soccer balls, footballs, and basketballs. Most equipment was purchased personally. Nothing matched as it came from catalogs, yard sales, and swap meets. In just a few short years, and thanks to successful funding efforts that resulted in new equipment purchases, students were learning lacrosse, handball, baseball, softball, Ultimate Frisbee, flag football, badminton, and golf. The exposure to all of these sports had a positive impact on student participation. The author noticed a decrease in time spent on behavior management and an increase in staff morale. Students were excited about learning a new sport and the teacher felt motivated to find them more equipment.

As new equipment came in, a sense of ownership compelled most students to take better care of it. Tagging, equipment abuse, and theft all decreased. The author learned that getting the cheapest equipment does not always work out for the best.

Film Time — Reflecting and Reenergizing

Althea Gibson once said, “No matter what accomplishments you make, somebody helped you.” In learning who and where to write for funding, the author received valuable input from staff members. After writing a letter, someone opened it up, read it, and passed it along. The point is that the letter got to its destination, and ultimately, someone made the decision to help. The author also made it a point to send thank-you notes to each and every organization that helped with donations of any kind.

It is hoped that this article will motivate other teachers to ask for help and that enough information was provided here to get started. Please do not hesitate to share with colleagues the “cool things” found along the way. Good luck! **S**

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