

Website lets donors help teachers

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AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Updated: 9:57 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 4, 2011

Published: 9:49 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 4, 2011

For ninth-grade biology teacher Seth Manetta-Dillon, it's easier to show his students the inner workings of a plant cell than to draw it on a chalkboard.

But that was the hard part — without microscopes, chalk drawings would have to do.

So in July, Manetta-Dillon, who teaches at the KIPP Austin charter school, turned to DonorsChoose.org for support. The website allows teachers to solicit donations for their classrooms from people across the country. From art supplies to iPads, no request is too big or too small.

Donors Choose has found funding for 425 projects in Austin since 2005. The site, which was created by a New York social studies teacher in 2000, allows people to browse requests and give support in any amount. When a financing goal is reached, Donors Choose sends materials to the classroom. The site recently listed more than 70 classroom projects in need of support in the Austin area.

Manetta-Dillon received two microscopes in late October.

School districts across Central Texas have tightened their budgets amid state cuts, and for Manetta-Dillon and others, it's comforting knowing that the kindness of strangers is sometimes just a click away.

"I needed some new microscopes, but because of the budget cuts, we couldn't afford them," Manetta-Dillon said. The two microscopes cost more than \$900 and were paid for by just two donors — one a former biology teacher from Lancaster, Pa. The other donation was made anonymously.

Shirley Heitzman, executive director of Innovation and Development in the Austin school district, said the site allows teachers to find funding for programs and materials that the district can't always cover. To make ends meet this school year, district officials approved cutting 1,153 positions and slashing spending on various programs.

"We're always looking for new partnerships, especially in times of budgetary stress," Heitzman said. The Donors Choose website is a flexible tool "for teachers who want to do innovative things in the classroom," she said.

Dawson Elementary School teacher Angelique Dennis said that in the past she would occasionally cover out of pocket classroom costs that exceeded her \$250 budget. Through Donors Choose, Dennis has found funding for 17 classroom items — including musical instruments, art supplies and, most recently, an iPad.

Donors completely covered the nearly \$700 price tag, with the majority of the money coming from a \$500 donation, Dennis said.

"It's amazing that they have the best interest in their hearts for children they don't even know," Dennis said. "It's transformed my classroom."

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