

# DEF an 'irreplaceable' support for schools

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The Duxbury Education Foundation has become a valuable partner for the Duxbury Public Schools, providing through grants opportunities the district wouldn't normally be able to afford.

Since their inception in 1989, motivated by the cut backs in education spending after the passing of Proposition 2 1/2, the group has given around \$830,000 in grants to the schools.

The foundation is run by a board of directors, who say organizations like the DEF are even more essential as the state faces a financial crisis.

"These are the years when it's possible all the schools will do is tread water," said board member Gay Shanahan. "If we can provide something that helps them move forward, that's a positive."

The mission of the DEF is to look for grant opportunities that provide some kind of unique opportunity for students. Recent grants include a number of tablet laptops for the science and journalism classes at the high school. The word, used over and over again by DEF members and others is "innovation."

"I think innovation is the key word here," said School Committee Chairwoman Anne Ward. "DEF is an incredible resource to teachers and administrators looking for something that's outside of the school budget."

The foundation gives out grants in three categories: research

and development, professional development and general enrichment. Grants over \$1,000 are reviewed twice a year in the spring and fall. Grant deadlines are March 8 and Oct 25. Grants of \$1,000 or less may be submitted at any time and will be acted on within three weeks, according to the DEF Web site. DEF board member Wayne Clough said the DEF typically gets between 20-30 requests each grant round. “It’s evolved,” Clough said of the foundation. “And the way we’ve raised money has evolved.”

The DEF has several major fundraisers throughout the year. The largest single fundraiser is the DEF “Divots for Duxbury” golf tournament at the Duxbury Yacht Club golf course.

The group also sends out an annual appeal in November, and hosts a spelling bee in February. The group has expanded their fundraising efforts in recent years, with the “Dinners for Duxbury” dinner party fundraisers and a 5k run on Memorial Day weekend.

The most recent fundraiser is “flocking,” where, for a donation to the DEF, a Duxbury resident can have a slew of pink flamingos placed on a neighbor’s yard in the middle of the night.

Board member Peggy Davis joined the DEF after spending some time in Chicago, where her neighborhood had a similar education foundation.

“It was amazing to me that there was never even an argument,” she said of that community’s support for the schools.

Davis said she believe the Duxbury schools are good schools, but organizations like the DEF make better connections between the district and parents.

“You have to be proactive and help,” she said. “If I’m engaged with the schools, I have a better opinion of what’s going on.”

Although not directly connected, the DEF works closely with the schools. Assistant Superintendent Edwin Walsh is the liaison between the foundation and the school district.

“They’re tremendous,” Walsh said. “It helps us address sort of outside the box type initiatives. It gives the teachers the opportunity to be innovative.”

One of the challenges Walsh has to deal with is to make sure the grants funded by the DEF don’t either fall by the wayside when the initial grant runs out, or put too much of a burden on the district’s budget if the programs have to be absorbed.

“Essentially they give us the seed money to get the ball rolling,” he said.

Ward said the support from the DEF allows the schools to move forward in a time of tight budgets.

“Like everybody else, we’re pinching pennies to make things happen,” she said. “Education is not about the status quo, it’s about being dynamic and trying new things.”

“They’re irreplaceable from my perspective,” said Walsh. “They’re such a complementary partner in the education of the kids here. They’re part of the team.”