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Non-Profits

Adjusting to difficult times

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By HARVY LIPMAN
RECORD COLUMNIST



Raising money and turning out volunteers are problems for nearly any non-profit in tough economic times, and local education foundations are no exception.

Set up by local residents, usually in conjunction with local school officials, education foundations are charities that raise money to spend on special projects, everything from field trips to cameras for photography classes.

A handful of the 300 foundations across New Jersey have six-figure budgets and professional staff. But most are run by volunteers with minimal experience.

SPOTLIGHT

The American Conference on Diversity will give its Community Service Award to Bergen Community College's Center for the Study of Intercultural Understanding. The presentation will take place on Oct. 16 at the Bergen-Passaic County Chapter of the American Conference on Diversity's annual Humanitarian Awards Dinner. The CSIU is devoted to promoting a greater understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures through improving communication and critical thinking skills. Pictured above are English professor and CSIU director Charles Bordogna, left, and fellow CSIU professor Keith Chu.

Now a local group has instigated an effort to bring the education foundations in North Jersey together so they can lean on one another for assistance.

"We were finding ourselves struggling as a board and wondering how everybody else operates, so we reached out to a number of other foundations," said Joanne Ruberto, secretary of the Montvale

Education Foundation. She surveyed two dozen other area foundations and learned that "they were struggling with the same questions."

The Montvale group last Thursday held what it called a "Best Practices Summit," bringing together representatives from educational foundations around North Jersey and officials of the New Jersey Education Foundation Partnership. The partnership, based in Princeton Junction, was formed last year to provide technical advice for education foundations.

A big common issue is fund-raising in a stagnant economy.

"It forces us to look beyond our traditional means of fund-raising, which is to call on the parents of the children we serve," Ruberto said. "We have to make a concerted effort to seek out corporations, local businesses and other groups to seek their help."

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Developing a good working relationship with school officials was another key topic of discussion. Mike Feiler, president of the Fort Lee Education Foundation, noted that his group was having great difficulty giving its money away, because it couldn't get teachers to submit grant applications.

"We put them in all their mailboxes, but they don't respond," Feiler said. "We have thousands of dollars to give out."

The meeting quickly demonstrated the value of bringing the groups together. Representatives of several foundations suggested solutions to Fort Lee's problem, ranging from simplifying the grant form to e-mailing the teachers.

Diane Senerth, partnership vice president, noted that these are the sorts of problems often faced by education foundations.

"These are grass-roots organizations, and they need a support system to help them do things in a professional way," Senerth said.

That's why the partnership was formed, she added. For several years it operated as the Central New Jersey Education Foundation Partnership, serving groups just in Mercer County. "We kept getting calls from people in foundations around the state, saying can we come to your meetings?"

In the past 12 months, added Marcia Smith-Fleres, the partnership's executive director, its membership has doubled, to 30 organizations. "We offer all sorts of training and workshops," she said.

"We want them to know you don't have to reinvent the wheel every time you want to try something," Senerth added.

E-mail: lipman@northjersey.com

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