

News

Mobilize alum philanthropy for Virginia public schools

By Gerard Robinson Guest columnist

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As our nation emerges from the shadow of COVID-19, the general public is coming to grips with a stark reality looming over our public schools: billions in temporary federal relief funds are ending. Now, more than ever, it is imperative that public schools get creative about securing additional funds. From providing meals to serving as vaccination sites, our schools stepped up in unprecedented ways when their critical role in the community was underscored by the pandemic. These herculean efforts, nonetheless, came at a cost to school districts already tethered by tight budgets.

With federal funds drying up, many schools face budget shortfalls that threaten to undermine the quality of public education and the ability to retain and recruit teachers. This financial strain calls for innovative solutions.

The Endowment Project Foundation offers a road map for making this vision a reality through alumni-based philanthropy at no additional charge to the schools. As a 501(c)(3) organization, the foundation provides an easy and proven way for alumni, individuals or corporations to make tax-deductible donations to their favorite schools. This promising initiative supports, rather than supplants, the wonderful work of any existing public school foundations, which rarely, if ever, have the resources to engage meaningfully with vast alumni populations.

Organizing alumni-based philanthropy is a cornerstone of fundraising in American education.

In the K-12 sector, for example, fundraising campaigns at more than 1,300 private schools raised \$5.2 billion from 990,000 donors according to a 2024 report published by the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE). Alumni are the largest donor type for private schools, with gifts totaling \$737 million. In higher education, alumni donations account for one-fifth of the \$58 billion received in 2023 according to another CASE report. At a micro level, Harvard University received \$486 million in gifts from alumni and foundations in fiscal year 2023. Closer to home, the University of Virginia announced in 2024 that it raised a record \$5 billion in donations from sources which include more than 230,000 alumni, parents and friends.

Endowments are not just for elite institutions. With the right approach, public schools can build endowments that provide a steady stream of income to support their missions. This includes scholarships for deserving graduates as they head off to college and grants for teachers.

Public school alumni, amounting to 200 million Americans, represent a vast, often underutilized, network of potential donors who have a vested interest in the success of their alma maters. By creating robust alumni networks and fostering a culture of giving, public schools can secure a sustainable source of funding that can help bridge budget gaps and support essential programs.

Here is how The Endowment Project Foundation can make a difference.

Building alumni networks: The first step is to identify and engage alumni by launching outreach campaigns, organizing events that bring alumni together, using social media, newsletters and alumni events to stay connected and foster a sense of community.

Creating a culture of giving: Once alumni networks are established, the focus shifts to cultivating a culture of giving. This is achieved through targeted fundraising campaigns, highlighting the impact of donations and

recognizing alumni contributions. Sharing success stories and showing how donations directly benefit students can motivate alumni to give back.

Establishing endowments: The ultimate goal is to establish endowments that provide long-term financial stability. Even small contributions can grow significantly over time, providing a reliable source of income.

Leveraging matching gifts and grants: The fundraising efforts are enhanced by seeking matching gifts from employers and applying for grants.

Engaging the community: Alumni, parents, local businesses and community leaders can all play a role in fostering fundraising events.

In closing, alumni-based philanthropy is a promising avenue to support Virginia public school students, teachers, principals and families.

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