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ABSTRACT

Boles Independent School District (Texas) serves 360 students and is the poorest district in Texas. Yet, due to the aggressiveness of its superintendent and staff, Boles has pieced together a technology program that equals or surpasses those of larger neighboring districts with more resources. This success is derived from creativity, resourcefulness, persistence, thrift, and scavenging. The entire staff refused to accept an image of poverty and low morale and shifted to a resource-rich perspective. This paper outlines five major resource areas tapped by the district and offers suggestions for similar efforts. These resource areas include: (1) grants for technology funding from state agencies and private foundations; (2) cash awards and other recognitions; (3) partnerships with businesses (providing funds or goods and services at reduced rates) and links to universities (providing staff training, technical assistance, and coordination of consortium building); (4) public support spurred by publicity; and (5) discarded materials and other types of assistance requested from corporations and individuals. (SV)

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IMPLEMENTING TECHNOLOGY WITHOUT BREAKING THE BANK

Texas is a very diverse state. The student population of 3.5 million is growing at a rate of 77,000 students per year. Close to 600 of the 1,058 school districts have less than 1,000 students. The largest district, Houston Independent School District, with its 200,000 students is in sharp contrast to Allamoore I. S. D. where there are only three students. There are bus routes where students travel 75 miles daily to reach their schools and 300 miles for some in-district athletic competitions.

The wealth of the school districts is as diverse as its geographic make-up. Texas spent in excess of $17.5 billion on education in the 1993-1994 school year, distributing the funds according to the perceived need of the districts. The richest school district in Texas boasts a nuclear power plant within its boundaries, bringing its assessed property tax value to $7.5 billion for its 1,200 students. Boles Independent School District, on the other hand, is the poorest district with an assessed property tax value of $5 million and supports 360 students. Yet Boles has a state-wide reputation, not for its lack of funds but for its technology program.

Boles I.S.D., situated 35 miles east of Dallas, has become an award winning district due to the aggressiveness of the superintendent and staff. They have pieced together a technology program that equals, and even surpasses, that of larger neighboring districts with more resources. The student population is small, consisting of 35 students from the Boles Childrens Home, 60 students who live in the district, and 265 students who transfer in from surrounding districts because parents are seeking a quality district with small class sizes and sound discipline.

Due to various economic realities, rural districts are hard pressed to

offer students quality technology which larger, more affluent districts can provide. Despite the lack of funds derived from tax dollars, Boles has developed a technology plan that encompasses the latest in instructional and administrative technology for its students and staff. Their success is derived from their creativity, resourcefulness, and an unwillingness to give up. Through thrift, scavenging and ingenuity, the district has created a technologically advanced academic setting in which to nurture and enhance childrens' learning. The entire staff refused to accept an image of poverty and low morale and shifted to a resource-rich perspective. The result is a district recognized state-wide for its new programs and for its renewed pride.

The five major resource areas tapped by the district were:

1. Grants
2. Awards
3. Business and University partnerships
4. Publicity
5. Begging and borrowing but stopping just short of stealing.

Efforts were based upon 1) the theory that resources are available if one is willing to do the research necessary to find them, 2) the knowledge that money is not the only resource needed to reach a goal, and 3) the awareness of the power generated by partnerships.

GRANTS

Just as thousands of college scholarships are passed over by students who never bother to apply, grants are often overlooked as a funding resource. Boles I. S. D., taking the time and the risks involved in writing a grant proposal, received money from several agencies. The Ford Foundation provided funds to purchase high-quality, low-cost software for computer labs. A Texas Education Agency Direct Connectivity Grant enabled the district to link every computer on campus to the Internet via the Texas Education Network. Additional grants are being sought to support other long-range technology plans.

Grants are an obvious avenue for technology funding. What is often not so clear is the amount of time involved in applying for grants and documentation requirements after the grant has been received. Yet the payoff can make the effort worthwhile. One skill for good grant writing is knowing when not to apply. What looks good at first glance could cost the district more in management resources than the grant is worth. There is

also safety in numbers. Local or regional consortiums can apply for grants as a group. If a group does not exist, any district can initiate one. Sharing ideas as well as workloads benefits everyone.

For individual district grants, local committees made up of administrators, teachers, and parents can forge the groundwork for a desired program. Because local governments deal with grants and the grant writing process on a continual basis, the Council of Governments or other government agencies can provide reference materials. If the grant in question is too important to pass up, hiring an outside consultant should be considered. Individual consultants are often reasonable about fees and can even write payment for consulting hours into the grant itself. If the grant has appeal, the consultant may make payment contingent on receiving the grant.

AWARDS

Awards are another resource for funds and often carry little or no stipulation as to how the money is to be spent. Boles received the Texas "Success in Schools" award making it possible to purchase software that gave teachers the capability of managing student records and grades on computers networked campus-wide.

Districts can be aggressive in seeking awards. Becoming knowledgeable of what is available locally, state-wide, and even nationally is a first step. Networks involving colleagues and organizations can be excellent sources of information. After identifying a suitable award, it may be necessary to secure a sponsor to make the nomination. Providing the sponsor with accurate and timely information on the district's accomplishments enhances the chance of receiving the award. Awards not accompanied with funds are also desirable. Once received, momentum builds (critical mass reached) and other recognitions, some with cash awards, often follow.

PARTNERSHIPS

Business Partnerships

Businesses spent over $30 billion retraining employees last year. Seeking to influence the future job force, businesses are increasing their involvement and cooperation with school districts. These partnerships

are also vehicles for capitalizing on the willingness of local, and not so local, corporations to provide, at reduced rates, goods or services in exchange for free publicity or tax write-offs. At Boles, telephones, telephone lines, shelves, and fiber optic cables were donated by nearby East Texas State University and local businesses. The phone company agreed to install the telephone lines at reduced rates.

Business partnerships can be extensive for anyone willing to pursue them. Computer manufacturers are sometimes willing to provide small items at low, or no, cost. For example, wrist pads for computer labs may be donated in exchange for displaying the company's name or logo in front of students who have the potential of being future customers. Businesses with limited funds can sponsor a teacher's travel to a conference or award a scholarship for summer school. For Boles, systematically tapping local business resources has proved to be highly successful. A yearly campaign when personalized letters are sent to all local businesses serves as a reminder that the district still needs help. Once business liasons are established, they tend to develop a life of their own, enabling a district to reap the benefits for many years with a minimum amount of upkeep.

University Links

Universities are an untapped resource. Most universities are anxious to build partnerships with local school districts, partly due to new state requirements. Boles found that the services available from nearby East Texas State University were broad, from training food service employees to teaching such complex topics as Total Quality Management. Specific partnership projects were designed, involving a consortium of rural districts. The Teacher Inservice Training Program provided staff development for 500 employees from seven schools. Under the University's direction, a technology project included bringing nineteen rural schools together through fiber optic networks. With capabilities to teach and share teachers from any of these sites, advanced placement and university courses were made ava..able. Through a grant, the University allotted eight districts $5,000 each to pursue projects at their individual sites. The projects included teacher training in specific areas, leadership academies, and training on the use of The Texas Education Network online computer system (TENET). A horticulture project instituted at Boles and several other districts tapped the expertise of the University's Science Department.

For Boles, the key to building a relationship with East Texas State University was communication. Frequent meetings were scheduled with department chairmen and deans. Knowing that new ideas take time to evolve, the district was patient. Boles' superintendent seized every opportunity to correspond by informing key departments and the University president of news events, pictures of outstanding events and letters of appreciation.

PUBLICITY

Publicity is a key element in implementing technology inexpensively. Good publicity, that is. Advertising accomplishments can cause others to "jump on the band wagon" as donors want to know their resources are going to be well placed. The Houston Chronicle (1993) with a readership of 600,000 stated that Boles' "Super Lab" is one where software has been chosen specifically for student needs and noted that all Boles' buildings are networked via fiber optics. This piece of news brought further publicity and donations from the public. Subsequently the district has been recognized by Texas State Auditors Office (1993), the Texas Association of School Boards Lone Star publication (1994), and local newspapers. Forbes Magazine is even considering an article on Boles' success.

BEGGING, BORROWING, BUT NOT STEALING

Never being afraid to ask, Boles found corporations, companies, and individuals willing to help - often on their own time and at their own expense. The phrase "One man's trash is another man's treasure" can be be applied to school districts. Boles asked for help from a local defense contractor and received a lighting system, including a beacon, for their 200 foot microwave tower. Responding to an advertizement placed by a local door manufacturing company, Boles indicated their interest in but inability to pay for the company's discarded phone system. The company donated the system. As a result, Boles has 80 telephone extensions with a phone on every teacher's desk and an intercom system with capabilities for conference calls. A needy district was located to which Boles could donate their discarded phones. Spotting spools with short end pieces of 1,000-2,000 feet of fiber optic cable, Boles was able to persuade the owner, a local telephone cooperative, to donate the cable to connect all the campus buildings.

It is not uncommon to see the Boles superintendent in his truck, bringing in throw-away materials from a company's back lot or items from a local sale. For a small sum, Boles acquired 30 teacher desks from an estate sale. The structurally sound wooden desks provided lessons in staining techniques, scratch removal, and refinishing for the high school students. This scavenging mentality was contageous. Students searched for ways to salvage any and all materials. Businesses began looking at their trash piles in a new light and frequently call Boles before hauling items away or burning them.

Whether by request, by grants and awards, or by partnerships, Boles I.S.D. has been able to piece together a sound technology program for its students. It has required dropping an attitude of defeat and self pity and adopting one that views the world as a vast pool of resources. It means having the courage to do what needs to be done.

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