

The Niles Star

By Jessica Sieff

Foundation focused on district's future

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The state's budget issues seem to have become an unfortunate shadow for its education sector. From one district to the next, budget constraints, continual cuts in state funding and restrictions on some grant and federal funding options are a constant presence even when trying to focus on the positives.

Where there is a successful program, an after school club providing students with a unique experience or a fresh new class there are questions of whether the program can be funded, will the club survive with little financial help and can a curriculum under tight funding support special classes?

Where there is the new idea of a new, innovative way of teaching in a specialized setting, there's the question of how such a thing will be financed.

Where there is a regional or championship game, there's the question of will athletic teams will have to do more with less.

In fact, it's not really a question.

Because districts everywhere are having to do more with less.

In Niles, however, combating the same old story of budget woes comes in the form of a new team of supporters with an idea.

That idea is the newly formed Niles Education Foundation, which announced its official recognition as a 501(c)(3) organization in October.

"We hope to help the Niles Community Schools (district) by enhancing, enriching and supplementing learning opportunities for students, staff and our community," said chairman Dr. Michel Listenberger.

The non-profit organization is the result of a year-long effort on behalf of area business and community leaders which hopes to channel tax-deductible donations into programs geared toward helping the students and staff of the Niles Community schools school district.

"From the beginning, we knew, this is what we wanted to create," Listenberger said.

The organization is expressly separate from the district, functioning independently to benefit teachers and students.

"It's above and beyond," Listenberger explained. "It's the extra stuff for the kids and the teachers."

The foundation intends to support a variety of school projects which it believes would otherwise not exist and its officers and board of trustees say they plan to focus on programs that will provide enrichment to the greatest number of students.

"In order to achieve our goals, we've set up committees to do a number of things," Listenberger said.

Trustees already elected to the foundation include Jane Brandstatter, Aida Torres Brawley, Jeff Curry, Amy Gourlay, Jon Martin, Darla Schneider, Bob Schuelke and Richard Weigel.

Current officers include Listenberger, vice chairman, fund development Jerry French, vice chair, projects Toddy Tyler, secretary Scott Schofield and treasurer Bill Haslett.

The foundation, which has a goal of reaching assets in the amount of \$100,000 by July 1, is off to a good start. Already, Listenberger said assets have reached \$55,000. The organization, at press time, was nearing the end of its charter donor program campaign.

So far, the non-profit organization is off to a good start. Already, eight innovation grants have been awarded as a means to help fund specific programs throughout the district.

Innovation Grants

- Canoe Building to Travel the Great Lakes
Ring Lardner Middle School and Howard Elementary School

- Student Response System
Ring Lardner Middle School

- Student Achievement Through Display
Niles High School

- Polymer Clay Products
Oak Manor Sixth Grade Center

- Brainetics
Oak Manor Sixth Grade Center

- Leap Frog Reading Program
Ellis Elementary School

- Oak Manor Market Day Bank
Oak Manor Sixth Grade Center

- PRIDE Program for Males
Southside School

Listenberger said the foundation is planning another round of innovation grants as well.

“(And) we’re looking for teachers who want to try something unique, do something extra,” he said.

The innovation grants are just the beginning to what the foundation hopes is a means to help the district provide programs that will benefit students.

“Our school budgets have been cut so dramatically” and property values have lowered, Listenberger said.

He added the organization is by no means trying to replace funds lost to the district because of budget cuts.

“It’s a fine line,” he said. “We’re trying just to add the extras ... it’s because of the budget needs and the priority. Kids are the priority.”

As part of its future plans, the Niles Education Foundation outlines several areas of giving it hopes to achieve including contributing to projects in the areas of leadership, creativity and general enrichment.

“If we are really going to make a difference, we have to touch every student and I see the foundation as a partner to achieving this,” Weigel said.

As they work to reach their intended goal of \$100,000, Listenberger said the positives of the ability of the foundation to provide for specific programs is seen in the pride of the teachers who receive them.

“I think they appreciate the community being behind them,” he said.

Essentially, he hopes that pride will be contagious and encourage other teachers in developing new programs or applying for future grants and funds.

But Listenberger is clear, the gifts given by the Niles Education Foundation are an “option. It’s not going to solve the budget crunch,” he said. “It is not to substitute or replace.”

Still, he said, “I think we can get the biggest bang for the buck. It’s something we can do about it.”

Officers and trustees are also working on a three-year plan to guide them into the future.

Listenberger said that includes plans for an annual or semi-annual event that would be fun for the community and alumni, alumni websites, corporate and planned giving.

“We’re looking at ways to change the educational experience,” he said. For more information, visit www.nileseducationfoundation.org.

To make a donation:

The Niles Education Foundation accepts cash, personal check, pledges, gifts of appreciated stock, in honor or memory of a loved one or through will or bequest.