

PITTSBURGH BUSINESS TIMES' 2013 GUIDE TO
Western Pennsylvania
SCHOOLS

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WORKING HARD TO GET BY

School districts finding it tougher to make ends meet



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SCHOOL RANKINGS

Schools ranked by 11th, 8th, 7th, 6th, 5th, 4th and 3rd grades

DISTRICT RANKINGS

The top-ranked districts both in the region and Pennsylvania

Group delivers for students in need

BY JUSTINE COYNE

To Justin Brown, executive director of The Education Partnership, the need for the program is obvious: If there are families in the area who can't afford to buy their children lunch, they almost certainly can't afford to buy school supplies. So, any help from the community is appreciated.

Just ask Victor, an elementary school student who sent this thank you note to the organization:

"Thank you for all the stuff," he wrote. "I need the pencils for my tests. I need the calculator for math. I need the other utensils to help me improve."

"The simple fact is that you can't teach these children if they don't have the proper tools to learn," said Amanda McQuillan, community engagement coordinator at The Education Partnership.

The organization works to bridge the gap between what supplies students have and what they need. Relying on local businesses to donate new or unwanted office supplies, the nonprofit has since 2009 served a total of 14,000 students and distributed more than \$1 million in supplies.

Each year, teachers from qualifying schools are invited to shop for free on three occasions at the partnership's 30,000-square-foot West End Resource Center.

The cost to the nonprofit is \$50 per teacher, but with that money they are able to supply each with supplies worth \$1,200, the amount, according to national data and local surveys, the average teacher is spending out-of-pocket to fill this gap.

"Teachers tell us that having a drawer full of new supplies is a game-changer everyday," Brown said. "Pulling out a new notebook, report folder or even a new T-shirt from our Resource Center can pull a student out of whatever state of mind is present into a state of learning



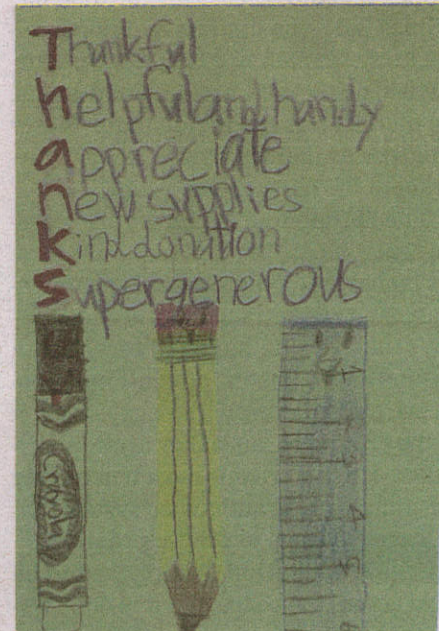
PHOTOS COURTESY OF JAE RUBERTO FOR THE EDUCATION PARTNERSHIP
An Urban Pathways K-5 College Charter School student high-fives a volunteer after getting a box of school supplies and hygiene items from The Education Partnership.

readiness."

To be eligible, a school must have at least 70 percent of its student body qualify for a free or reduced lunch by the National School Lunch Program. There are 96 eligible schools in the six counties the organization serves — Allegheny,

Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Washington and Westmoreland — and nearly one out of every seven students in Allegheny County would qualify.

"We know there is an immediate need in the community," McQuillan said. "But there is also an easy and immediate fix.



Our biggest challenge is to get people to understand what these supplies are to these kids."

With its new "Homeroom Heroes" initiative, The Education Partnership is calling on local businesses to step up by donating, hosting product drives, volunteering or upcycling.

"Our favorite definition of upcycle is to give something a higher and better use," she said. "I can't think of a better use than to give these unwanted or unneeded supplies to kids."

Brown said with so many companies rebranding or adding partners, it often leads to a surplus of seemingly useless and out-of-date marketing items.

"To your company that item no longer has a use, but to a kid it has value," Brown said. "A kid doesn't care what bank's name is on their pen, they are just thankful to have it."

Rachel Gawlas, director of business development at Metz Lewis Brodman Must & O'Keefe LLC, said The Education Partnership is a simple, yet powerful idea that stuck with her as the firm moved to the Oliver Building in December. In the

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move, it was able to donate more than 100 three-ring binders, in addition to boxes of assorted office supply items like staplers, pens, highlighters, organizers and trays.

"After nearly 15 years, our attorneys and staff had collected a significant amount of office supplies," she said. "Helping deserving teachers and schools with our surplus seemed like a great fit — a true win-win."

The organization tries not to take anything it can't use; however, with its "Creative Corner," a section that houses all of the miscellaneous items, they see that teachers can find a use for almost anything. One fixture, filled with American Airlines pillow covers, may only serve as a reminder of a more luxurious time in air travel to some, but to a teacher the possibilities are endless.

"Teachers have used these for everything from book covers to bags," McQuillan said. "It's amazing to see what they come up with and what needs can be met by items that could have otherwise been in a landfill."

For the last three years, the organization has done a holiday



COURTESY OF JAE RUBERTO FOR THE EDUCATION PARTNERSHIP

The Education Partnership's West End Resource Center features a "store" where teachers from qualifying schools can shop for free three times during the year.

distribution to give each student in the program age-appropriate boxes filled with school supplies and hygiene products. During the 2012 distribution, they distributed \$230,000 worth of products.

"When they came into the school at Christmastime, those notepads and pencils, and Post-Its and glue sticks they gave to each student; for some of our kids, that was their Christmas," said Michael Panza,

superintendent at the Sto-Rox School District.

Panza said Sto-Rox Elementary has been selected for the program since 2010, but he hopes the middle school and high school will be accepted as well.

Having an outside organization come into these schools and tell children they matter and deserve to have the tools they need to be successful can really instill change, Brown said.

"We are unique because we are not a government program," he said. "I think for the students they see us not as a handout, but a hand up."

Andrea Zimmer, program manager, said while the focus is on growing the program annually to serve more students and teachers, it is important for them to make sure they service these additional schools at the same level they have established.

She said the organization has grown by 25 percent, or 1,200 students, since the 2011-2012 school year and plans the same amount of growth for next year.

McQuillan said the goal is to serve every eligible student. The only thing stopping them is the number of supplies they bring in the door.

"We are ready to grow. We have the space for it," she said. "Now it's just about getting the supplies to fill that space."

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