

EDUCATION

# Upper Darby School Board enacts limits on staff crowdfunding

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**UPPER DARBY »** Employees of the Upper Darby School District are now barred from using crowdfunding techniques that explicitly name the district or any of its school buildings as the beneficiaries of such campaigns.

The school board voted 6-1 at a recent meeting to enact Policy 702.1 (crowdfunding) to prohibit the district-specific practice for anyone who uses any crowdfunding platform that solicits and accepts donations from the public.

These types of funding campaigns have increased in popularity among teachers and schools in typically lower-funded areas of the county.

“The board prohibits the use of crowdfunding by district employees or organizations on behalf of the district,” is how the policy details the district’s authority in regard to these platforms.

Gina Curry cast the sole no vote on the policy. Board President Rachel Mitchell and Ken Rucci were not present at the meeting.

“Teachers are trying to figure out ways to fund their classrooms,” said Curry. “Crowdfunding has provided for children in the past. We need to find ways to help teachers manage the cost of the classroom that isn’t being done by (district-)managed funds.”

Parent Suzanne Briddes spoke up at the meeting to voice her opposition to the policy.

“We should probably look for a way to address any specific kinds of concerns through the policy rather than an across-the-board saying no. Ultimately, the students are going to pay the price for this decision,” she said.

Campaigns can be created for a wide spectrum of needs, including everyday school supplies (pencils, notebooks, folders), additional classroom resources, or, as Briddes noted, to create trauma-informed care initiatives in district schools. Trauma-informed care has been a growing topic of discussion in schools as mental well-being becomes more integrated into school safety following countless school shooting incidents.

District leaders say the policy was created to entice employees to find funding through more in-house channels, particularly the Upper Darby Arts and Education Foundation.

Kate Smith, a UDAEF board member, said at Tuesday’s meeting the foundation awarded grants to all 17 district applicants who applied during for the annual awards in the spring. Foundation administrator John Schmidt could not be reached Thursday for further information about the foundation’s grants and funding.

When asked what sort of discipline employees face if they use the district’s name in crowdfunding campaigns, district spokeswoman Aaronda Beauford said Wednesday afternoon that the district is not looking to punish teachers who

use crowdfunding, but to “hear from teachers regarding their need so we can consider to support them through the budget” and the UDAEF.

“We’re going to work with our teachers to make that adjustment,” Beauford added on Thursday. “Principals will go over the policy with their teachers and we’ll support them.”

Beauford said teachers under her, when she was principal at Stonehurst Hills Elementary School, have used the non-profit crowdfunding site DonorsChoose.org for campaigns without identifying the district in their campaign. As of Thursday, six teachers from Bywood Elementary, Highland Park Elementary, Stonehurst Hills, and Beverly Hills Middle schools had active campaigns ranging in need from \$240 to \$1,375. Beauford did not say if the district would ask these campaigns to be deactivated.

According to a spokesperson for DonorsChoose, teachers are required “to select their school from our database of public schools, and the school name appears on their project as part of our model of transparency.” Submitting a proposal to the site without school identification information is not one the organization has seen often.

“We’ve worked with the school superintendents association to offer some guidelines for safe and effective school crowdfunding, including a model policy that districts can adopt,” wrote DonorsChoose Public Relations & Events Man-



Stonehurst Hills Elementary School in the Upper Darby School District.

ager Ashley Dalmaine in a Thursday email. “DonorsChoose.org is the platform explicitly permitted by, among many others, the School District of Philadelphia in their crowdfunding policy.”

Philadelphia’s crowdfunding policy (Policy 702.2) allows school-based funding and crowdfunding activities, “under the direction of or in cooperation with school district principals” and explicitly names DonorsChoose as one such platform.

“The purpose of all school-based fundraising activities should be to generate resources to support the educational mission and priorities of each school, as articulated by the principal and the school’s leadership team,” reads a portion of that policy adopted in April 2018.

The teachers who lead these campaigns in Upper Darby are, on average, the lowest paid (at \$61,600), among all public school districts in the county, according to 2018-19 labor statistics by the Pennsylvania Department of Education and work in a district the school board and leaders have long cried to be under-funded by the state. Teaching conditions and wages were a major

talking point during the teachers union contract talks over the winter with the district.

Upper Darby Education Association President Melanie Masciantonio said Thursday she was disappointed the policy was adopted, and without any consultation with the 1,000-member union.

“Many teachers, including myself have used crowdfunding to improve our students’ access to new and innovative materials and technology our district can not provide. We have gotten things like pedometers and shoelaces for our running club students to 3D printers for our technology classes. We’ve also received multicultural reading materials and sensory equipment for students who need it,” she

said. “Our students benefit greatly from crowdfunding sites like DonorsChoose and teachers have brought in thousands and thousands of dollars worth of technology and materials that benefit our students. If we can no longer use these sites it will tie the hands of the educators trying to give the best opportunities to our children.

“Hopefully the state will come to our aid and give us a fair funding formula so schools and educators won’t have to depend on crowdfunding. UDEA members want the best for our students and this resolution created an obstacle that didn’t have to be there.”

Beauford could not confirm that the district worked with the UDEA in crafting this policy.

