

## Ridgewood Education Foundation plans new direction

The Ridgewood Education Foundation (REF) is thinking bigger.

With a new campaign officially announced at a REF fundraiser last week, the private organization formerly known for its micro-grants for individual classrooms will now focus its energies on "truly innovative" grants and projects that affect more Ridgewood students district-wide.

A first \$100,000 grant has already been given to the Board of Education (BOE) to aid the district with implementing Ridgewood High School's (RHS) 1:1 technology initiative.

The REF will also make a \$100,000 commitment to "21st century learning."

"[Twenty-first century learning] is not limited to technology or STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics)," the organization noted in a press release. "It is about collaboration, creativity, project-based learning, critical thinking skills, civic literacy."

"It's no longer memorizing your times tables. Education's constantly evolving," REF President Jennie Smith Wilson said. "We're trying to help it evolve in the best way possible."

This kind of learning is something that many district officials and teachers are already working on, Wilson said, so rather than steering education in a new direction, the REF wants to aid the district with its aims.

This new campaign is also another way for the education organization, which was created in 1989 by community leaders looking to raise private funds for Ridgewood schools, to differentiate itself from the individual schools' Home and School Associations, which are strong enough to raise money on their own for many school-based needs.

Second Vice President Mary Romano Micale, a leader in the new campaign's development, noted that the REF is in a position to help boost larger projects that the budget alone cannot support.

"We have the opportunity to take risks sometimes with our money that you can't when you're funded solely by taxpayer dollars," Micale explained. "Some people think that a 1:1 [initiative] is risky, for example."

The money the REF is now committing in a single year to the new campaign is considerable - especially considering that, in its nearly 25 years, it has given out a total of \$600,000, funding more than 300 educational programs in classrooms and schools across the district.

To better implement its new mission, the REF wants to raise as much money as possible for future district projects, and as before, it is accepting donations through its website, which now has a newly updated look to



complement the REF's new campaign and logo, which features a set of climbing steps.

According to Wilson, The Valley Hospital this week made a leadership grant to the campaign of \$25,000 a year for three years to fund programs in the schools that are focused on innovative health, wellness and the science initiatives.

Last week, Superintendent Daniel Fishbein expressed his gratitude to the REF.

"I am very excited about starting a 1:1 initiative in the district. The foundation has been very generous and a partner with the district since its inception.

"I am very grateful for their generosity in their continued support of important district initiatives," he said.

The technology at the center of the initiative, which has previously been discussed for the next school year, is subject to change, but Fishbein said "it appears that we will go with Chromebooks."

"I am not really concerned about the device that will be used, but excited about the teaching and learning that will take place," he said.

According to Wilson, the foundation was partly inspired to take a new focus after its \$100,000 leadership donation last year toward renovation of the RHS library. The renovation of the library, which is referred to as the Learning Commons project, is expected to be finished by next school year.

Despite the shift in emphasis toward district-wide projects, the organization will still give out smaller grants through an application process, the foundation members said; they are just looking to give grants out to educators with new ideas that will affect more than one classroom.

"We got into the idea of district-elevating," Wilson said. "Those [micro-]grants were all wonderful, but they were great for Mrs. Jones' classroom.

"We can help to facilitate that kind of [innovative] thought, but step back and say, 'Great idea, how can we do this everywhere?'"

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