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WHAT IS THE AVON EDUCATION FOUNDATION?

What does it mean to Avon?

FAQs

- Founded March 4, 2003 as 501(c)3 not-for-profit organization
- Provides funding for innovative educational programs for students in the Avon Public Schools and the entire community of Avon.
- Through October 2008, funded 40 projects totaling approximately \$102,300 -- each public school and the Avon Free Public Library have received awards.
- Member of the Connecticut Consortium of Education Foundations (CTCEF) and the Avon Chamber of Commerce

In 2002, Avon resident Sue Bertolini went to Dr. Richard Kisiel, Superintendent of Avon's public schools, when a reduced budget was passed by taxpayers. She wanted to donate the difference in her tax bill to the local education foundation. Thus, the Avon Education Foundation (AEF) was conceived. Today, the foundation is 5 ½ years old and has topped \$100,000 in grants given to initiatives varying from an early reading intervention program to author visits at the library to a student fitness tracking system to a Musical Instrument Digital Interface (MIDI) lab to Avon TV to the Chidsey Brook Nature Trail.

Joanne Beers, chair of the AEF since 2007, says, "The original goal of the Foundation is still the central objective of its board of directors. That is, to enhance student and adult learning in Avon through innovative educational programs that enrich the schools and other segments of the community." The programs funded by the AEF go beyond funding available through the town and school budgets or other public sources.

The AEF Differential

The Foundation is totally independent of the Avon Board of Education (BOE) and the Parent Teacher Organizations (PTO) of the 5 public schools. The AEF makes every effort to fund initiatives that support the BOE's priorities. However, it is not an alternative revenue source for the schools. For example, the AEF does not pay teacher salaries or provide professional development resources. The AEF does not fund projects routinely of interest to the PTOs either such as buying books for the school libraries. The AEF is sometimes confused with the Avon Education Association (AEA) probably because of the similarity of the names. The AEA is the organization that represents Avon's certified teachers. And the AEF isn't Avon Dollars for Scholars, Avon's community scholarship fund.

The AEF Operating Structure

The AEF is a 501(c)3 tax exempt, non-profit, non-partisan organization that depends entirely on donations and volunteered time and talent to achieve its mission. Approximately one-third of its revenue comes from corporate matching funds. This

reflects donations by people giving through charitable payroll deductions including the United Way campaigns. The Foundation encourages its donors to check with their employers, and their spouses', whenever they give. Employer matching funds make individual donations worth so much more. Most of the rest of the revenue comes from individuals and businesses interested in advancing education and maintaining the quality of Avon's public schools.

Two special fundraising programs are worthy of note. In 2004, the Foundation established its **C.H.E.E.R!—Celebrate and Honor Exceptional EducatoRs**—program. This program enables families to recognize teachers and others who affect their children's lives every day. With a donation of as little as \$10, the AEF will deliver a letter and a C.H.E.E.R! certificate to the honoree. C.H.E.E.R! donations go into the Foundation's general account. As Margaret Kaseta, world language teacher at Avon Middle School said, "I am so honored to have been a recipient of the C.H.E.E.R. certificate. There is no better way to honor a teacher than to support our education system."

Recognizing the opportunity for the newly renovated High School to become a center for the arts in Avon, in 2007 the AEF kicked off its "Pavers for Posterity" fundraiser. The first sidewalk pavers, commissioned in honor of students, loved ones, businesses, coaches and educators, were installed in the walkway at the student entrance this past summer. There is still plenty of room for more custom engraved pavers with a donation of \$100 or \$225, depending on size. Those commissioned by February 1, 2009 will go in next spring. Paver funds will be used to support education in the arts for the benefit of the entire community.

Nearly everyone who gets involved with the AEF does so because of the opportunity to have a direct impact on education in Avon. The board of directors currently has 8 members. They are elected to staggered 3 year terms, and they come from a wide variety of backgrounds including human resources, data management, accounting, finance and operations. Past boards have included a professional fundraiser, lawyers, a health professional and a retired superintendent of schools. Diversity is a challenge in a town like Avon, so the AEF is always looking for new people to bring their unique backgrounds and ideas to strengthen the organization. When asked about the obligations of being a board member, Ms. Beers said, "I expect them to give as generously of their time and their income as they can afford, and they need to attend our board meetings on the third Monday of each month. We don't want to discourage people who can't afford to be big monetary donors if they can contribute great ideas and get things done. We encourage people who are interested to volunteer first. This gives them a chance to get to know us and assure the needs of the Foundation fit nicely with the priorities of their own lives. It's too bad when family or business schedules keep people from becoming board members, but they can still be the AEF's strongest supporters in the community."

Grants to Educators

The high point each year is reading grant applications and the wonderful ideas offered by Avon's educators. Anyone in the community can apply for a grant as long as there is an educator involved who is employed by the Town of Avon, the Avon Public Schools or the Avon Free Public Library who will fill the role of the project director. The

full grant process is documented on the AEF website, www.avonedfoundation.org, and applications must be postmarked by the Tuesday following Martin Luther King Day, January 20, 2009 this cycle. Applications go to the grant committee which is composed of volunteers and one or more board members. The committee's mantra is: "The AEF doesn't just want to buy stuff." "Stuff," including computers, quickly becomes obsolete while programs have the opportunity to survive and evolve and make an impact over the longer term.

Grant applications are judged on six criteria: innovation, educational merit, impact, need, sustainability (if applicable) and thoroughness/comprehensiveness. The most exciting and creative idea will not make the cut if it affects only a few or if it conflicts with the goals and curriculum objectives of the town. A multi-year initiative must be able to sustain itself beyond the initial funding period, and the application needs to show a plan for that. A budget is required so the grant committee understands where the generosity of the AEF's donors is going and that the amount requested is reasonable.

"Everyone has an opinion of what is innovative or creative or unique," says Micky Dorsky, the AEF grant chair. "The challenge for the grant committee is to achieve a majority in favor of—or against—projects that are submitted to us and to make our recommendation to the board of directors." Some very laudable projects have been turned down because they failed to meet the grant committee's criteria or were not consistent with the Foundation's mission. A few projects haven't been huge successes, but the grant committee believed trying those ideas was worth the investment.

The Foundation celebrates successful grant applications and has done so from the beginning. Once the board of directors has affirmed the grant awards, the grant chair works fast to find the right time to surprise the successful applicants. The AEF Prize Patrol--board and grant committee members and major donors--arrives with balloons, oversized facsimile checks and a camera during learning hours. Everyone thoroughly enjoys the presentations. There are touching moments, too, as when a special education student gave out big hugs after his teacher received a grant award.

Making a Difference

About a year after a grant is awarded, the project director has to submit an evaluation of the effort and a final budget report. This describes how the funds were used and the impact the grant had on the educational process in the classroom(s), the school(s) or the community. The report also compares the outcome of the project to the original objectives. Finally, it addresses whether the project will continue in some way. Last year, Wendy Zacchera, 4th grade teacher at Roaring Brook School, received a grant to bring the Connections Literacy Program presented by the Hartford Stage Company to Roaring Brook School. This generated such positive feedback that the PTOs of Roaring Brook School and Thompson Brook School are looking for a way to expand it this academic year. One of the earliest projects to receive a grant was Avon High School's FIRST Robotics Team, the Überbots. In the spring of 2008, the Überbots became national champions on the Archimedes field and semi-finalists on the Einstein field during the FIRST Competition Event in Atlanta. These are exactly the kinds of outcomes the AEF likes to see.

Ms. Beers says, "In 2009, we expect huge pressure to hold tax increases to an absolute minimum. The school transportation contract is being renegotiated, there are salary increases to be paid, and we can expect health benefit costs to rise again. This means the Foundation's role in Avon is more important than ever." If you would like to learn more about how you can help the AEF as a donor, a volunteer or a board member, contact Ms. Beers at info@avonedfoundation.org. The AEF will be volunteering at the WTIC/Salvation Army Holiday Store on Monday, December 15 at Avon Old Farms Hotel and would be very pleased to meet you when you drop off your donation of a new toy, new clothing, non-perishable food or money.

PICTURES:



2004 Mini Grant "FIRST Robotics Team" – The Überbots designed and built reusable packaging for shipping and storing their equipment that transforms into a mobile workstation at competitions using funds from an AEF mini grant.



2006 Avon Town-Wide Choral Festival at The Bushnell funded in part by a grant from the AEF.



Avon Middle School students releasing salmon, May 2006



2008 UNICO Grant "Avon TV" - Melissa Mirabello (R), Avon High School English and journalism teacher, being congratulated by Ryan Pavano (L) and Bob Galliette representing UNICO. Avon TV will deliver high quality broadcasts of local events potentially benefitting the entire Avon community.



Joanne Beers, AEF chair, with David Pena, member of Avon Town Council, at the Avon High School 50th Anniversary Gala, April 2008, co-sponsored by the AEF and the Avon High School Parent Teacher Organization



Dr. Richard Kisiel, Superintendent of Avon Public Schools, with Sue Bertolini, AEF founder, on the announcement of the Susan L. Bertolini Scholarship established in her honor with Avon Dollars for Scholars



2007 Leo & Jean Duffy Memorial Grant "Fitness for Life" – Roaring Brook School physical education students running. Students throughout the district are motivated to improve their fitness by tracking their progress in activities like running and stretching.



Joseph Pavano, president Avon Chapter of UNICO National, talks with Fran Russo at the 2008 UNICO Annual Golf Tournament at Tunxis Plantation Golf Club. The AEF has partnered with UNICO on this tournament and named two grants for UNICO in 2008: "Avon TV" and "It's Time to Learn...Pass the Remote" which brings Technology-Enhanced Formative Assessment (TEFA) to science classes at the high school.