

# K-12 Partnership *Report*

## The Teachers Warehouse

When she was hired by the Foundation for Oklahoma City Public Schools, former teacher Robyn Hilger was well aware of the needs found within the local school district. But she had no idea that the 3,000 flat pizza boxes she happened to receive from a friend represented the starting point of a program that provides \$30,000 each month in free materials to local classrooms.

The Foundation's mission focuses on connecting the resources of the local community to the needs of Oklahoma City Public Schools, a large, urban school district serving 40,000 students, 85% of whom qualify for the free or reduced lunch program. For 25 years, the Foundation has focused on soliciting financial support and managing programs to channel that support in certain ways, such as through innovation grants, scholarships, and a community/school partnership initiative. The organization has also worked to support the passage of school bond initiatives in an effort to attract additional resources to this high-need district.

While the organization had no plans for a teacher warehouse, Hilger was well aware of the need for resources in the classroom. She notes, "I was a teacher in the school district for eight years. The school district couldn't provide everything that I needed, and my students definitely didn't come to school with everything they needed. It wasn't that their parents bought other things besides buying their school supplies; they were just trying to keep the electricity on."

So when a friend offered her 3,000 flat pizza boxes shortly after she started with the Foundation, she naturally put the word out through two online teacher networks – and the boxes quickly disappeared. "They turned into art portfolios, bulletin board covers, and other things," said Hilger. "And then word got out, and people just started giving us things."

### Development of The Teachers Warehouse

This new effort grew quickly and organically, which resulted in a certain level of chaos. The Foundation was not soliciting donations, but as community members found out that Hilger could get materials to classrooms that needed them, they began to just show up with their contributions, or call to let the Foundation know where free materials could be picked up. Members of

the Foundation's board also spread the word about the program, and donations continued to accelerate.

At this early stage, the Foundation had no dedicated storage or showroom space: donated goods were placed wherever there was room in the office. Building on the initial success they had had in letting teachers know about the pizza boxes, the Foundation began listing new resources on their website as they came in, taking orders and packaging materials for pickup during office hours.

As they saw the demand for this program from both donors and teachers, Foundation leaders realized that the

### The Teachers Warehouse

**Where:**

Oklahoma City, OK

**Partner(s):**

The Foundation for Oklahoma City Public Schools; businesses and nonprofits in the community

**Challenge:**

Provide resources for classrooms in a high-poverty urban school district

**Solution:**

Connect individual and corporate donors to classrooms with specific needs by creating an online clearinghouse for school supplies. This online resource, built from an e-commerce shopping cart, allows the Foundation to track inventory levels, create and review order histories by teacher and school, and produce detailed distribution reports for donors so they know exactly how their donations were allocated.

**Partner Roles:**

Individual donors are contributing materials for distribution; larger partners, such as Feed the Children and Chesapeake Energy Corporation, are providing donations on a larger scale and receiving detailed reports on how those materials are distributed. Other partners include groups such as the Junior League, whose members volunteer with the program.

**Outcomes:**

Less than one year old, the Teachers Warehouse is currently distributing close to 300 orders/month with an approximate value of approximately \$30,000. The warehouse has also attracted new donors who have become regular Foundation supporters.

program was a clear fit with the organization's mission and decided to formally commit to building and managing this new initiative.

Once it was decided that The Teachers Warehouse would be a permanent program, Hilger and others began considering how they could structure it so that it could be streamlined, managed, and tracked – in other words, how they could move from the chaos of a startup to the order of an efficient and effective initiative.

Given that the program had only existed for a few months, they were unsure what to expect in terms of volume; for this reason, they opted against committing to a standalone showroom, as programs in other districts had done. Instead, they decided to let teachers continue ordering materials and picking them up at the Foundation's office. But to make the process easier to manage, they set specific times during which teachers could stop by for their orders.

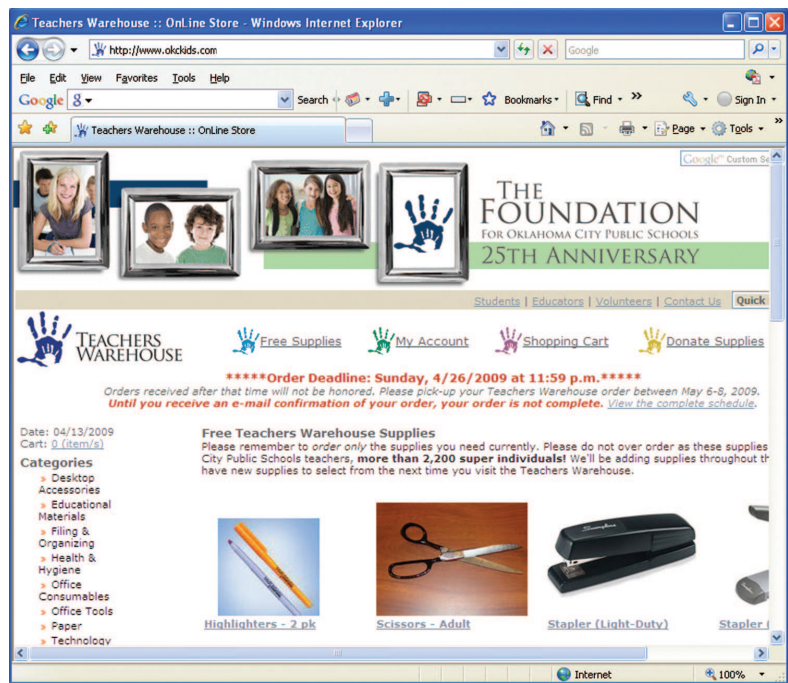
The idea for the model came from a teacher friend of Hilger's, who asked, "Why don't you do it like the food co-op? You order food by a certain point each month and pick it up at a different scheduled point; it happens at the same times every month, and you predict it like clockwork. Sometimes you order and sometimes you don't. What do you think about that?" The model was an ideal fit, since it allowed Foundation staff to dedicate specific times for packing orders and to operate with fewer interruptions in the office.

The next question to be answered: How they could manage incoming materials, orders, packing, and reporting. The answer here came from Melissa Milligan, Communications Coordinator for the Foundation, who had experience building online resources. Rather than just post items to an ever-changing list on the Foundation's website as they came in, Milligan took an online shopping cart program called Comersus and modified it to suit their needs. The system tracks inventory, allows teachers to browse materials and place orders for multiple types of resources at once, and produces order labels and reports that allow staff to monitor the system and report on activity.

While there is still a flurry of activity around pickup times, chaos has been greatly reduced, and the Foundation is able to accept and allocate a great deal of resources to where they are most needed.

### Continued Growth

With a structure in place, The Teachers Warehouse was better prepared for additional growth. And that growth continued to come through donations by individuals, retailers, businesses, and nonprofit



organizations. Additional support has come in the form of volunteers: The Teachers Warehouse has been picked up as a project by the Oklahoma City Junior League, and other volunteers, such as retired doctors and teachers, are contributing their time to the program.

While The Teachers Warehouse benefits greatly from individual contributions, the program has attracted larger-scale support as well. Hilger points to Chesapeake Energy Corporation, which is serving this year as the Foundation's annual campaign matching sponsor, with a commitment of up to \$100,000. After hearing about The Teachers Warehouse, the utility arranged for the Foundation to take advantage of their purchasing power with Office Depot. Chesapeake had been interested in purchasing and disseminating materials to high-poverty schools but had not found an efficient way to distribute materials to where they were most needed, a challenge neatly solved by the Foundation's program. Feed the Children, another partner, provides palettes of materials to The Teachers Warehouse; the organization already distributes supplies to school sites, but partners with the Foundation as an additional outreach channel.

One of the benefits made possible by the online ordering system is the creation of detailed reports that can be provided to donors. By coding donations with certain SKU numbers, the Foundation can report back to large-scale donors like Chesapeake Energy and Feed the Children with specific information on exactly where contributed materials went.

This online reporting has also allowed Hilger to determine which schools have not participated in the program. Knowing that there are needs throughout the district, she is able to contact schools that have not placed orders to make sure their teachers are aware of the

program. It is important to note that, while they have not spent any time soliciting donations, they have been active in promoting the program to schools and to teachers, participating in meetings and convocations and getting the word out through other channels.

Because teachers can order every month, there is little incentive to “hoard” supplies, though some items in high demand may have quantity limits. “Teachers love Expo markers, for example,” says Hilger, “and we only have a certain number, so they can only order one pack of markers at a time. But because they can order each month, they can order a pack each month if they need to.”

### Outcomes

After just one year in existence, there are more than 700 teachers registered in the system, and the Foundation is disseminating close to 300 orders each month with an average total monthly value of \$30,000.

Melissa Milligan notes that staff members are continually trying to improve the system. “We send out an email survey to teachers after their first visit and then every few visits thereafter,” she says. “They’ve given us a lot of feedback on the system, and we’ve acted on that feedback. It’s clear that many of them feel a real sense of ownership for the program as a result.”

One unexpected side effect is an increased interest by teachers in the Foundation’s other initiatives. As one example, they have seen a 300% increase in the number of applications for one of its grant programs.

Hilger expects the program to continue to grow, noting that the Foundation has not done any outreach to date to solicit materials. Word of mouth by teachers, board members, and donors, and a number of unsolicited press appearances, has driven activity to date. The

Foundation is considering options for increasing storage capacity, and as space is allocated they will work with existing partners, such as the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce, and its own resources (such as its email list), to solicit support.

Some might worry that donors contributing to The Teachers Warehouse would be doing so instead of giving to other Foundation programs; Hilger has seen that this is clearly not the case. “This is not replacing support at all,” she says. “In fact, it has ramped up support from donors already involved in our other programs.” Beyond that, The Teachers Warehouse is attracting support from people who had not previously been involved with the Foundation, and those people are being told of the Foundation’s other work and added to its mailing lists, allowing them to develop those individuals into regular supporters.

The Teachers Warehouse was not a planned initiative, and credit is due to the Foundation for Oklahoma City Public Schools for listening to its donors and teachers and identifying the need for this sort of clearinghouse. While many organizations operate from a “top-down” model, allowing the market to demonstrate the need for such an initiative has allowed the Foundation to offer a valuable new program that aligns directly with its mission.

### Resource Links

The Foundation for Oklahoma City Public Schools  
[www.okckids.com](http://www.okckids.com)

The Teachers Warehouse  
[www.okckids.com/educators/tw.asp](http://www.okckids.com/educators/tw.asp)

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