



## **A VIEW FROM THE CLASSROOM:**

What Teachers Can Tell Philanthropy  
About the Needs of Schools

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# INTRODUCTION

## What can over a million teachers tell funders about the needs of schools?

No one has greater insight into the needs of students and schools than teachers. Increasingly, teachers are using their voice in identifying what American classrooms lack via crowdfunding websites like DonorsChoose. These requests reveal patterns among individual classrooms. Viewed in aggregate, they also sharpen the picture of system-level inequity in public schools. The story of the data provides an investment road map for funders seeking to support students directly, but also for funders seeking broader reform of U.S. education policy and systems.

## Is there a relationship between what teachers say schools need and what major donors are funding?

In 2019, Grantmakers for Education (GFE) released [\*Trends in Education Philanthropy: Benchmarking 2018-19\*](#), the results of a survey of education funders on their priorities and how they have shifted over time. At the K-12 level, it revealed funders are moving away from a focus on the academic core of the classroom (issues like standards and assessment) and moving toward strategies that embrace the “whole learner” (such as social and emotional learning and wraparound supports for schools). It further showed funders to have a continued interest in addressing equity in schools and growing concern that schools are not adequately funded.



**This funder brief draws on the 1.8 million requests made by teachers via DonorsChoose over the ten-year period from 2009 to 2019. The database allows us to examine the following questions:**

- 1 What are the needs that teachers identify and how have they changed over time?
- 2 How do requests and funding patterns differ in high- and low-poverty contexts?
- 3 Where is there alignment between trends in teacher requests and trends in funder priorities? Where is there not?

We conclude the brief with three system-level implications for major donors to consider.

## FINDING 1:

### The majority of requests come from high-poverty schools, but requests from low-poverty schools get funded at higher rates.



Requests for additional resources illustrate the problem of funding inequity across American schools. The rich are able to get richer, while the

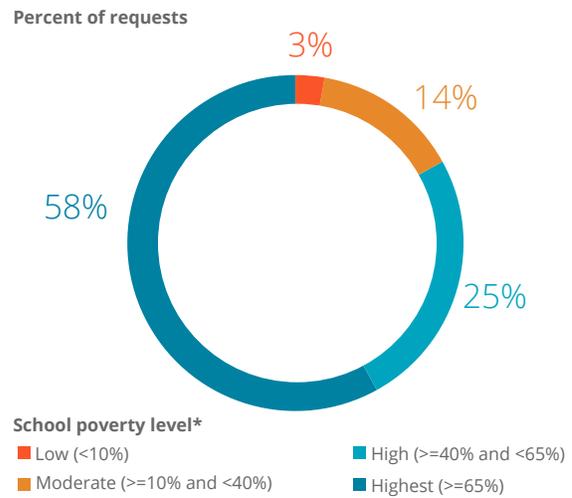
requests of high poverty schools reveal deep, systemic deficiencies that persist, year after year, across large swaths of the American landscape.

The higher the poverty level of the school, the more likely teachers are to make a request to supplement what is publicly available to their students.

In fact, **58%** of all requests come from schools in the highest poverty bracket (in which **65%** or more students receive free or reduced-price meals). Teachers serving the lowest income students increasingly are adding fundraising to their list of job responsibilities to bridge the large gap between what the government provides and what their students need to be successful in school.

Due to the sheer volume of requests from low-income schools, the vast majority of fulfilled requests reach classrooms serving students in poverty. In fact, **schools in the top quartile in terms of poverty rate received more than half of dollars that passed through DonorsChoose in the past year.**

### Proportion of projects by poverty level of schools making request, 2009-2019



However, the data look different when you consider the likelihood of a project getting funded. For most of the decade, requests from high-poverty schools were more likely to get filled.

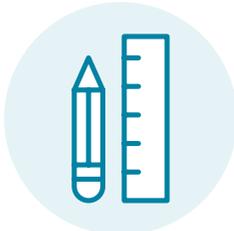
### Share of projects completed (fully funded) by school poverty level



\*High and highest poverty level. | \*\* Low and moderate poverty level. \*\*\* As of Sept. 1, 2019

In 2009, **70%** of requests from high-poverty schools were filled; while only **58%** from low-poverty schools were funded. In 2017, that pattern began to flip. For the past two years, requests from more affluent schools have been funded at higher rates (**64%** from high-poverty schools and **68%** from low-poverty schools at the time of our analysis in September 2019).

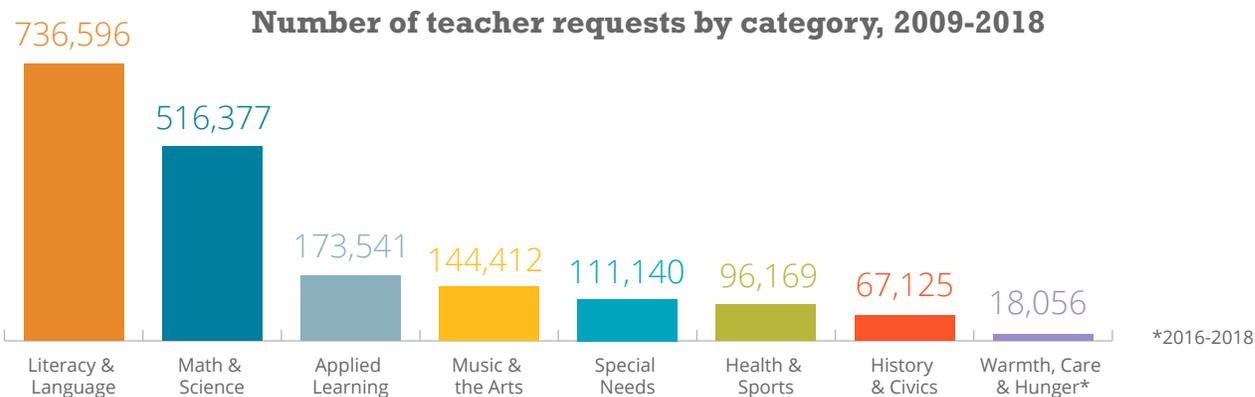
This funding shift comes at a time of growing concern about the role of crowdfunding in filling gaps left by inadequate state funding. If government funding is inadequate but affluent families negate the problem in their districts, an important constituency in the fight to solve the problem at the system level is lost. Students and families in poverty are then further disadvantaged.



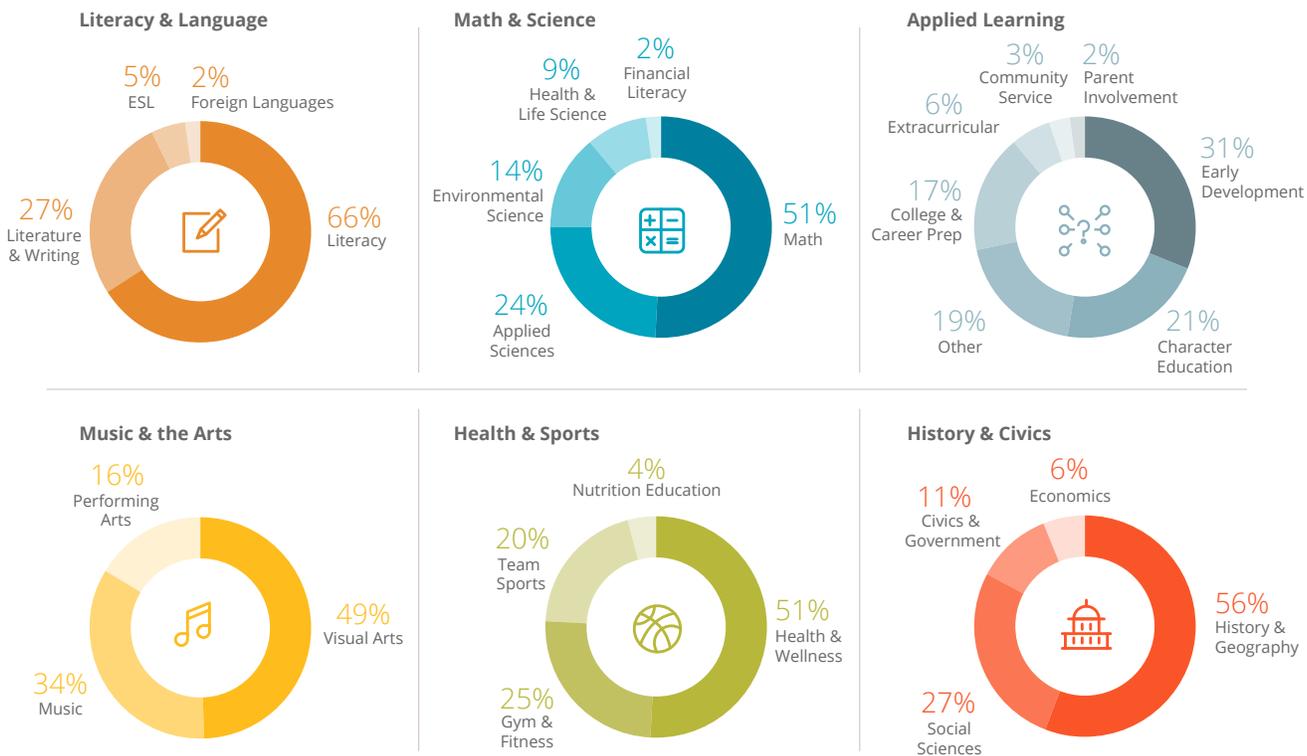
# FINDING 2:

## Teacher requests for academic materials far exceed any other type of request, regardless of context.

When making a request via DonorsChoose, teachers indicate its type by grouping it in one of eight main categories. Within those eight categories, teachers can tag one of 30 sub-categories. The range of request topics is wide, from the strictly academic, such as Literacy and Mathematics, to the needs of the whole child, such as Character Education, Team Sports, and Warmth, Care & Hunger.



### Percent of teacher requests by sub-categories, 2009-2018



Note: *Special Needs* and *Warmth, Care & Hunger* do not have sub-categories.



Across time, the categories with the most requests have been consistent and focused on academics. The Literacy & Language category is the runaway winner in terms of requests, with the Math & Science category making a strong showing in second. Over the course of the past decade, those two categories alone have accounted for roughly seven of ten requests.

The U.S. education system allows for great variation across states and regions. There are some states that invest more heavily in education, with per-pupil spending exceeding **\$30,000** per year in some locations, while the investment of other states is more modest, resulting in per-pupil spending barely over **\$5,000** annually per student. Some regions prioritize certain elements of the school experience differently than others (see [NPR's Why America's Schools Have a Money Problem](#)).

Based on test data, it is evident that some states have higher-performing school systems than other states. Does this variation in school spending, in performance, and in regional preferences about the educational experience show up in teachers requesting different resources?

### **Patterns by per-pupil spending**

Regardless of how much the government is investing in the education system, the needs that teachers present have noteworthy consistency. While much of the conversation among funders is shifting toward students' needs beyond the academic, teachers are focused on garnering additional academic resources.

Using the [Annie E. Casey Foundation's Kids Count](#) data, we identified the top five highest-spending states per pupil and the five states that invest the least in education. In every case, the top request categories were the same: Literacy, Mathematics, Literature & Writing, Applied Science and Special Needs.

### **Patterns by performance level**

[Education Week's annual Quality Counts](#) analysis allows for state ranking based on student performance. Based on 2019 data, we compared teacher requests from the five highest-performing states to the five lowest-performing states. Again, the focus was on the academic, and the rankings were identical. Literacy, Mathematics, Literature & Writing, Applied Science and Special Needs swept the top spots.

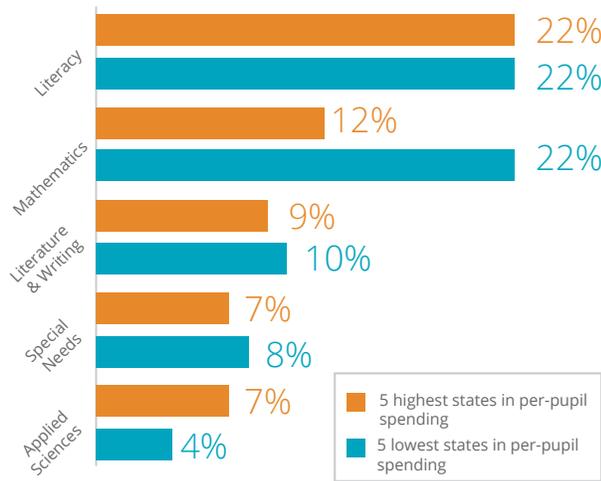
The remarkable consistency of requests across these varied contexts sends a message about the current state of funding in American schools. Teachers across the nation are seeking the basic tools to teach their subjects.

### **Patterns by region**

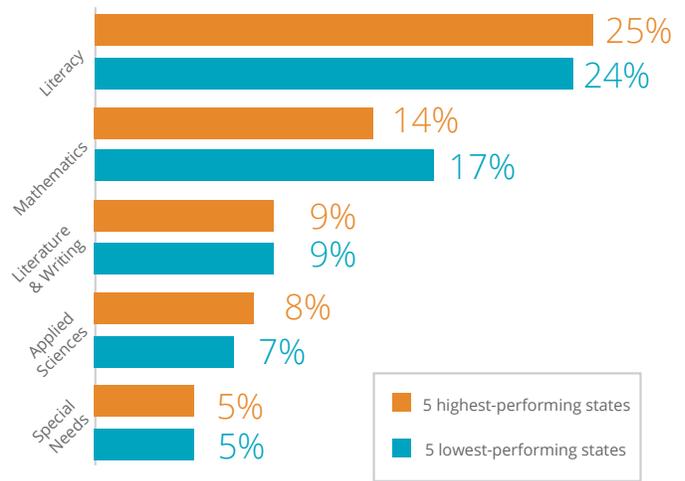
Using data from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, we can divide the nation into eight regions. Across those regions, there is remarkable uniformity in requests. Again, Literacy, Mathematics, and Literature & Writing sweep the top three spots. Applied Science and Special Needs flip flop between fourth and fifth place in seven of eight regions. The only exception is in the Southwest where English as a Second Language beats out Special Needs as the fifth most requested area.

# Topics requested are remarkably consistent

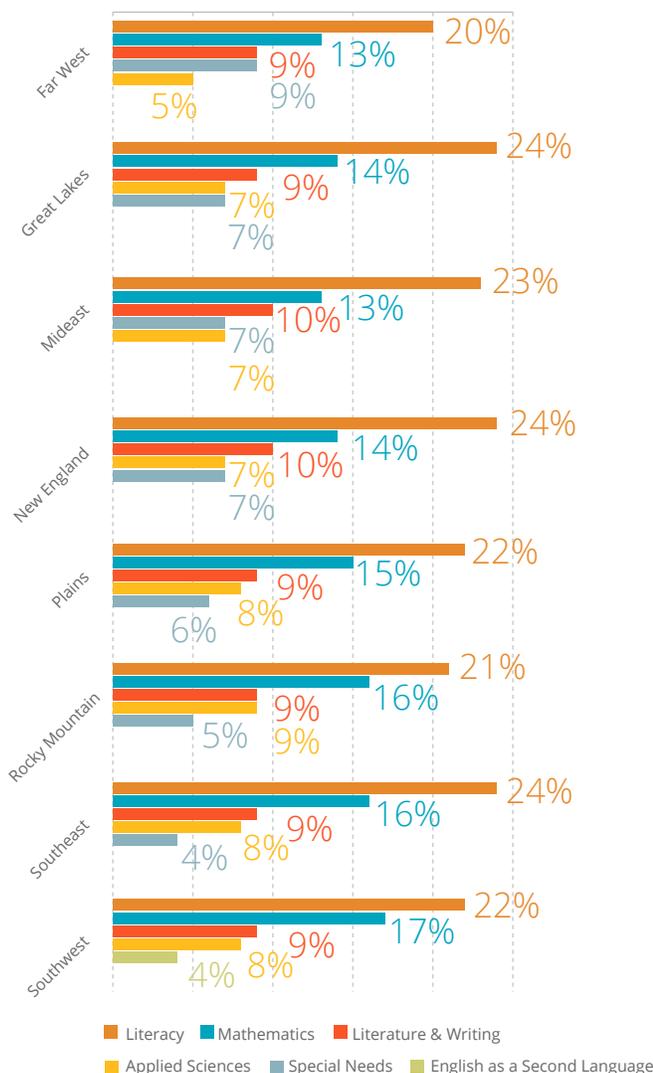
**Top 5 sub-category requests by state spending**



**Top 5 sub-category requests by state performance level**



**Top 5 sub-category requests by region**



## FINDING 3:

**The fastest-growing categories of requests are nonacademic, focused on the needs of the whole learner.**

Requests in all categories grew at a compound rate of **23%** annually from 2009 to 2018. However, a few sub-categories grew faster than others. Warmth, Care & Hunger, Health & Wellness and Character Education represent the fastest growing areas. Warmth, Care & Hunger, a category added in 2016, shows the most rapid growth at an annual compound growth rate of **187%**.

### Top 3 fastest growing sub-category requests



**Warmth, Care & Hunger\***

187%



**Health & Wellness**

47%



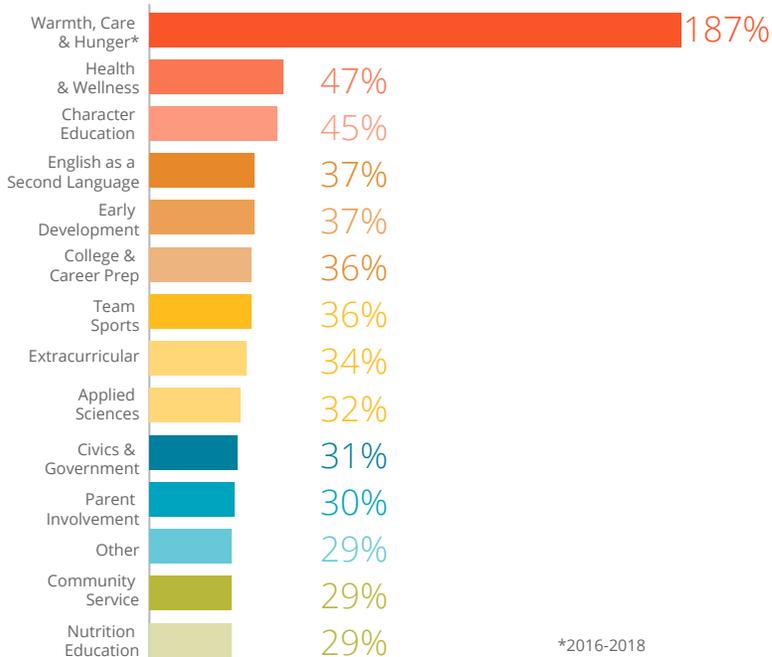
**Character Education**

45%

\*2016-2018

All three of the fastest-growing request sub-categories, as well as many of the other sub-categories with higher than average growth rates, are associated with supporting learners' nonacademic needs. These requests underline a growing acknowledgment of the expanded role of schools in supporting the whole learner: preparing students for more than solely academic success and helping students be ready to learn by attending to basic needs that might not be supplied at home.

### Sub-categories with above average annual growth

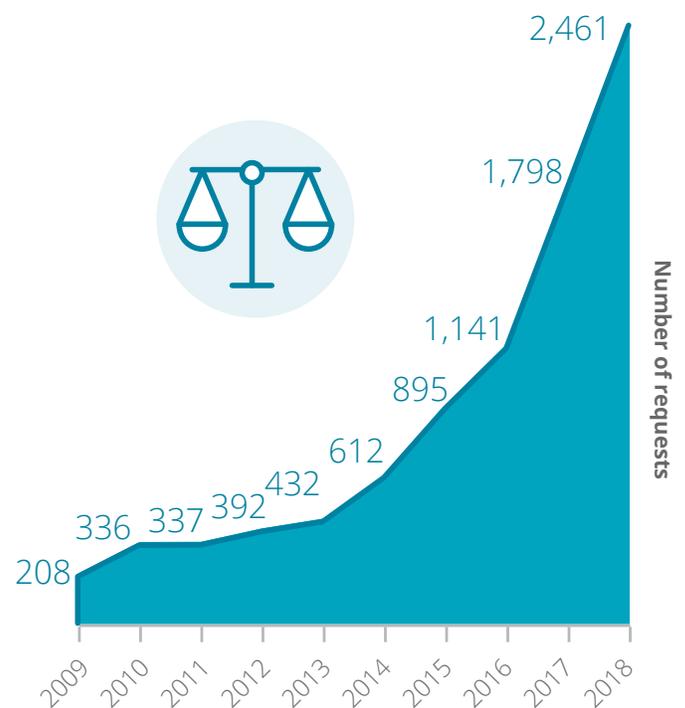


Related to supporting the whole learner, requests to fulfill projects relating to equity and social and emotional learning are also on the rise.

Interestingly, this growth reflects findings in our report, [Trends in Education Philanthropy: Benchmarking 2018-19](#). The survey of the education funding community shows a profound shift toward philanthropic investments in social and emotional learning and steady prioritization in funding of equity issues.

While equity in itself is not a category or sub-category in the DonorsChoose database, the number of teachers mentioning "equity" or "social justice" in their project requests grew at a compound annual rate of **32%** from 2009 to 2018, as compared to the all-project rate of **23%**; requests continue to increase.

### Growth of requests mentioning equity and social justice

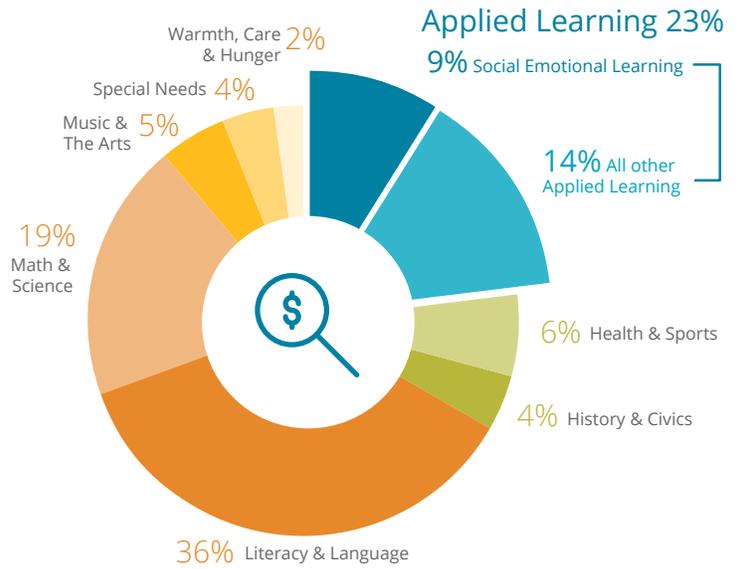


Demand for projects in social and emotional learning (SEL) has grown so much that DonorsChoose took the rare step of adding SEL as a new sub-category within Applied Learning in 2019. Through December 4, 2019, SEL accounted for 9% of projects posted in all categories and is the fourth most frequently requested sub-category for the year. Prior to its inclusion as a stand-alone

area, between 2012 and 2018 teachers mentioned a variation of “social and emotional learning” increasingly in their project requests, and mentions nearly quadrupled from 2017 to 2018. The fast-growing sub-category of Character Education likely also reflects a strong interest in social and emotional learning.

A rapid rise in interest in SEL is also apparent in teachers’ increasing use of specialized social and emotional terminology. [The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\)](#) identifies five SEL competencies such as self-awareness and relationship skills. From 2009 to 2018, the number of projects featuring one or more of these competencies in teachers’ needs statements **grew ten-fold**.

### SEL requests in 2019 as a percent of all funding requests



## FINDING 4:

### Certain categories of need are more likely to go unmet than others.



An appealing feature of crowdfunding sites is the ability for the donor to self-select the topics, grade levels and geographies that matter most to them. In aggregate, this creates an uneven landscape, where certain requests are quickly filled while others experience a far greater likelihood of going without funding.

#### Patterns by grade level

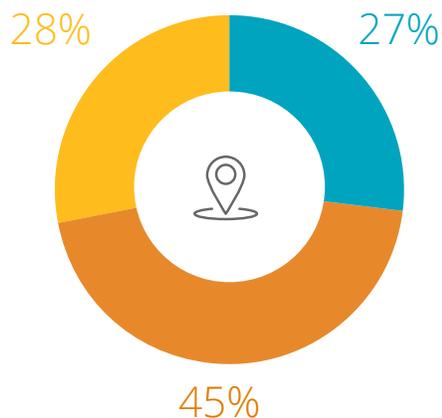
Across time, roughly **64%** of all projects receive their full funding request on the database. Projects serving pre-K students top the list in terms of percent that receive full funding. Perhaps surprisingly, projects at the other end of the spectrum, high school, are almost equally likely to get funded, sometimes nudging pre-K out of the top spot. For the last six consecutive years, middle school projects are least likely to receive funding.

Among major donors in [GFE’s Trends in Education Philanthropy](#) report, the trend toward funding transitions to college and postsecondary issues has been growing. The DonorsChoose database presents a counterpoint to that trend. College & Career Preparation is a category that routinely falls among the least likely to receive funding. In 2019, College & Career Preparation had the single lowest percentage of projects filled at **56%**.

#### Patterns by geography

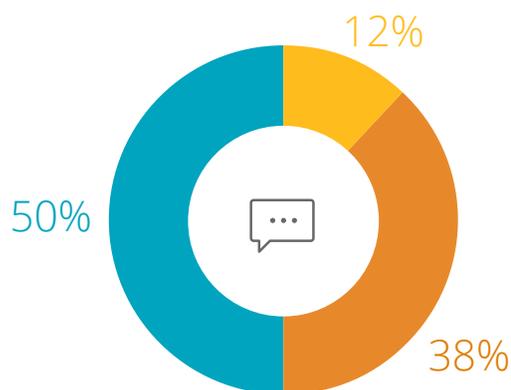
DonorsChoose originated in New York City as a tool for urban schools to remedy elevated need in low-income schools. That point of origin has an imprint on its users today. Although **28%** of the nation’s schools are classified as rural as of 2017, only **10%** of projects that get funded come from rural schools. By contrast, **27%** of schools are classified as urban, but **50%** of projects that get funded come from urban schools.

## Urbanicity of public schools nationwide, 2017\*



City (Urban)

## Requests from schools by urbanicity, 2016-2018



Suburb/Town



Rural

\*Source: Bellwether Education Partners and U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (ELSi).

## Patterns by project type and size

Projects in the category Warmth, Care, & Hunger have a far greater chance of being funded than any other category. Over **80%** of projects, on average, are funded in that category, almost **15 percentage** points above the average. Not only

the type of project, but also its size matters. Almost **82%** of projects requesting under **\$300** get fully funded, while only **45%** of projects requesting over **\$900** get fully funded. In this way, DonorsChoose remains a platform for the small-dollar giver.



# FINDING 5: The needs of high-poverty and low-poverty schools differ.



While the majority of requests in the DonorsChoose database come from high-poverty schools, there are differences in what high-poverty schools and low-poverty schools request most. An examination of the categories in which the variation between the requests of high- and low-poverty schools are the greatest, is illustrative of systemic inequities.

In high-poverty schools, one sees a struggle to ensure students' basic human needs, the desire to keep pace with a growing population of non-native English speakers, and an attempt to provide

out-of-school programming. By contrast, low-poverty schools are making a greater proportion of requests in areas that might be classified as enrichment.

In terms of percentage of requests, **94%** of all Warmth, Care & Hunger requests come from high-poverty schools, **92%** of all requests to support English as a Second Language come from high-poverty schools and **89%** of requests to support Team Sports come from high-poverty schools.

## Greatest differences in sub-category requests between high-poverty and low-poverty schools, 2009-2018

### High-poverty schools

Warmth, Care & Hunger\*



English as a Second Language



Team Sports



\*2016-2018

### Low-poverty schools

Economics



Foreign Languages



Special Needs



By looking at the proportion of requests in each category for high-poverty schools and comparing that to the proportion of requests in each category for low-poverty schools, we are able to determine where each group is disproportionately seeking support.

In high-poverty schools, supports in the category of Warmth, Care & Hunger are **3.5 times** more likely to be requested than in low-poverty schools. Teachers from high-poverty schools are **2.5 times** more likely to make requests for English as

a Second Language support than teachers in low-poverty schools. Teachers in high-poverty schools are almost two times more likely than those in low-poverty schools to use DonorsChoose as a tool for funding Team Sports.

Teachers in low-poverty schools are **2.6 times** more likely than teachers in high-poverty schools to request supports to teach Economics. They are also proportionately more likely to make requests to support Foreign Languages and Special Needs.



## CONCLUSION

Crowdfunding sites like DonorsChoose are a tool that teachers increasingly use to communicate and fill the needs of their schools. While part of their growth in use is likely attributable to teachers' awareness of the existence of such tools, it is worth considering whether the need for their use reveals growing inadequacy of government funding of schools, especially high-poverty schools. For those in philanthropy, teacher requests point to directions for giving, whether one's giving is focused on individual schools, policy and advocacy or system reform.

**Resource equity is a central challenge in American schools.** For teachers in high-poverty schools, crowdfunding for the basic resources students need is becoming a way of life. Requests are not evenly distributed, demonstrating how state funding formulas still fail to adequately account for the additional costs of educating the students who start with disadvantages. Further, requests are not fulfilled evenly, demonstrating an ability for those in more affluent areas to use the tool to solidify advantage.

**High-poverty schools are increasingly shifting attention to nonacademic supports for students.** As the safety nets of our larger society become more frayed, schools and teachers in high-poverty bear additional burdens. The addition of categories like Warmth, Care & Hunger, and the rapid growth of these types of requests, are evidence of the expanding role of schools. Viewed through the lens of teacher requests, the needs of high-poverty and low-poverty schools look very different.

**Academic supports remain at the core of what teachers need to succeed.** As funders increasingly recognize the needs of the whole learner and shift their investments toward wraparound supports for students, it is important to keep the need for core academic supports in view. The picture painted by the DonorsChoose database is one in which vast numbers of schools struggle to adequately equip students with basics for literacy, math and science. That the volume of requests in these categories has remained so strong over a decade tells us how important this message is from teachers.



**Grantmakers for Education (GFE) is the nation's largest and most diverse network of education grantmakers dedicated to improving educational outcomes and increasing opportunities for all learners. For more information, visit [www.edfunders.org](http://www.edfunders.org).**

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**Contributors:**

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