

## PLAYBOOK

# Reinventing Reading Fundraisers in the All-digital World

### Here's How One School Achieved 98% Participation in Their First All-Online Reading Fundraiser.

The year 2020 was filled with new challenges for schools. Closures, stay-at-home orders, and social distancing forced educators to quickly reimagine learning for a more digitally engaged audience. These changes made fundraising for schools harder than ever, limiting or eliminating many of the ways schools traditionally engaged their communities to encourage participation and donations. But one school built a new way forward and achieved incredible results that helped them navigate this new future.

For Julia Green Elementary (JGE), a K-4 elementary school with approximately 380 students in the Metro Nashville Public School District, one of the challenges of the new normal extended into 2021 for their annual 10-day reading fundraiser.

In the past, organizers managed this event—which inspires reading and raises tens of thousands of dollars for the school each year—through in-person and “analog” processes. But this January, with most interactions taking place virtually, the librarian and PTO volunteers knew they needed to try something new. So they turned to Beanstack, creating an incredibly successful online effort while also developing a flexible model for future digital reading fundraisers in the process.

The JGE reading fundraiser is an established tradition at the school, which is well-known in the school and broader community. Students anticipate the event with excitement, families help with promotion, and many local businesses participate as sponsors year after year. Librarian Sarah Parnell noted that “the tradition drives whole community involvement.”

Managing the reading fundraiser requires a significant amount of effort and coordination each year. PTO reading fundraiser chairs take the lead on fundraising logistics, corporate sponsorship, and community promotion, while Parnell leads the effort to inspire students to read, read, read.



# Building a New, Customized Experience

Before the pandemic, JGE staff used paper tracking, in-person assemblies, and check and cash donations. In 2021, with all students learning remotely, fundraiser leaders turned to Beanstack to take the event fully virtual. Beanstack was a natural choice, given its built-in motivational tools, ease of use for young students, and robust reporting system to give organizers all the data needed to track progress and award prizes.

Drawing on school spirit for their reading fundraiser challenge theme, they incorporated the JGE logo and mascot into a customized banner and badges. Working closely with the Beanstack Client Success Team, Parnell designed a series of custom logging and activity badges to inspire students to track their reading, collect donations, and have fun in the process. Kindergarten students logged by the book, earning badges for every 10 books read, while students in grades 1 through 4 earned badges for every 100 minutes read.

**In January 2021, the participation rate for student reading logs hit 98% in Julia Green Elementary's Beanstack site.**

**The event raised \$35,000 at a time when school fundraising is in sharp decline.**

**This flexible reading fundraiser model is effective online and can be easily adapted to allow for in-person management as well.**



## Motivating Readers by Making it Special

Individual reading motivation is pre-built into Beanstack, with virtual rewards like badges and shared progress toward a common goal that gamify the reading experience. But JGE took advantage of all the customization features as well, creating Beanstack activities that inspired kids to get creative and secure donor commitments:

- ◆ A book cover contest prompted students to draw a cover for a book of their choice.
- Another activity asked students to write reviews of books they read during the fundraiser.
- ◆ Suggestions like writing a thank-you note to a donor and finding at least five people to donate encouraged students to actively raise funds.
- A mystery guest activity displayed motivational videos created by local celebrities (including the broadcaster for the Nashville Predators and a local author) to encourage students to keep reading.

JGE's reading fundraiser leaders also supplemented Beanstack's built-in reward system with plenty of prizes from local businesses. The team awarded prizes to the classroom in each grade that read the most minutes or books and that secured the most donors. They also awarded participation prizes to each classroom in which every student reached certain badge levels or secured at least 5 individual sponsors. Classroom prizes included new books for each student, bookmarks, cookies, and toys. Did it work? The 98% participation rate speaks for itself.

## Maintaining the Excitement during the Reading Fundraiser

In the past, each reading fundraiser began and ended with opening and closing ceremonies. In lieu of those in-person events, organizers worked with staff across the school to create a fun promotional video at the start of the fundraiser and to recreate the closing ceremony (including reward announcements) in video form.

During the 10-day event, PTO leaders kept up a steady stream of digital promotion targeting students, their families, and the broader community, with a newsletter for the school community, regular updates on their reading fundraiser landing page, and social media posts. Additionally, Parnell made sure teachers had all the information they needed to talk about the event with their students and that they counted their regular classroom reading toward the fundraiser. She even sent daily reminders to teachers and students to log their reading.



# Engaging Donors and Encouraging Donations

While JGE's reading fundraiser tradition has built long-standing relationships with many community businesses that support the fundraiser every year, organizers still work hard to nurture those donors through regular communication.

PTO reading fundraiser chair Rankin McGugin noted that it's important to offer corporate sponsors multiple ways to support the reading fundraiser. Sponsors can donate goods or services that the school uses for prizes, which vary in quantity and worth, ranging from free donuts for many students to more personalized services like chess lessons for a smaller group of winners. Businesses can also sponsor the fundraiser via direct donations at various levels in exchange for a spot on JGE's official reading fundraiser shirt.

In 2021, reading fundraiser leaders were extra careful to emphasize donation participation over dollar amounts, knowing that many families were struggling financially. They set all student donation goals at the donor level rather than a dollar amount.

To collect donations online, the JGE PTO leaders used a simple online service called JotForm, which allowed them to accept online payments from families with little technical or logistical overhead. This was quite a change from years past when the bulk of donations came via cash or check—but the \$35,000 raised speaks to the effectiveness of online payments.





## Key Takeaways

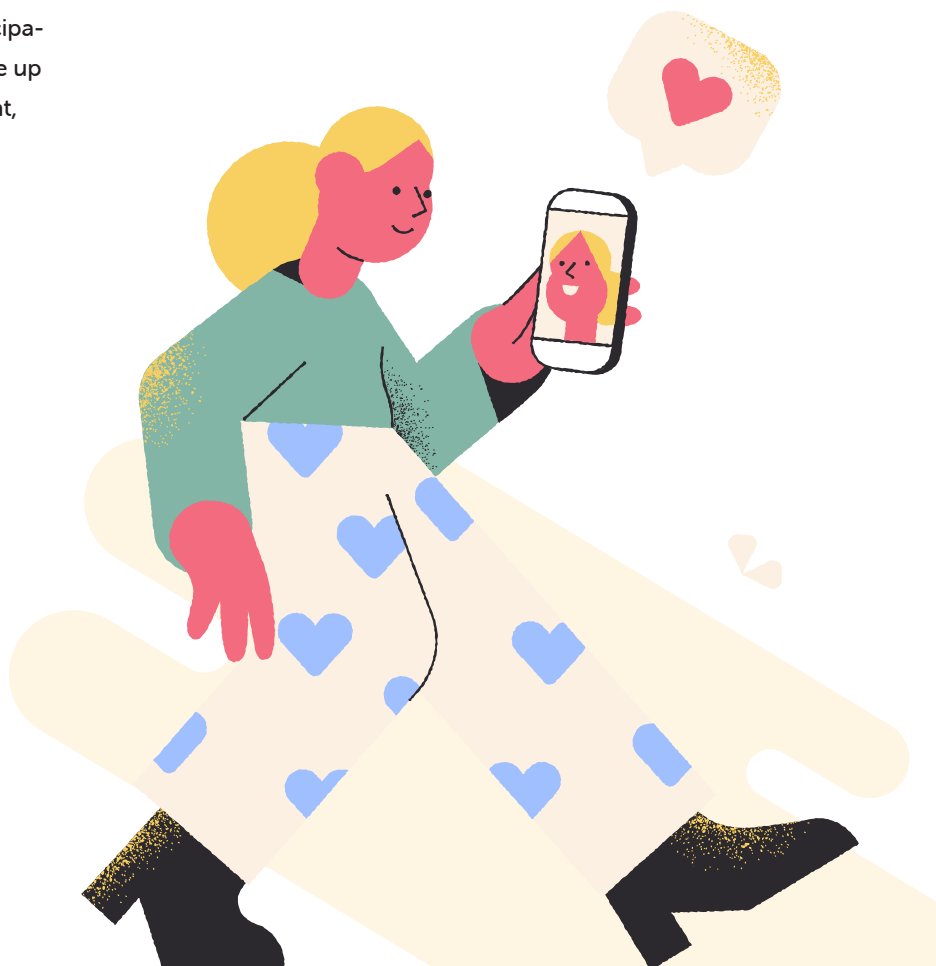
The importance of reading and keeping kids motivated to read is well-documented. Reading is one of the most powerful ways to grow student academic success and boost mental and social health. JGE's reading fundraiser also demonstrates the power of online reading-based fundraising:

- ◆ The 2021 reading fundraiser managed through Beanstack successfully helped JGE and organizers engage their community, motivate readers to a 98% participation rate, and raise \$35,000 in donations, even when in-person events were not possible.
- This new online model is incredibly flexible, with components that can be adapted for in-person or online elements. That kind of flexibility is key during these uncertain times.
- ◆ The effects of the reading fundraiser continue to manifest even after it ended: While the participation rate dropped, reading logging rates were up more than 25% compared to before the event, even two months later.

## Preparing for a Digital Future

The onset of the pandemic in 2020 rapidly accelerated the adoption of digital tools in schools, at home, and beyond. Experts agree that most people will be unwilling to give up the convenience to which they've now become accustomed, even after all in-person services are re-implemented. Providing an accessible, online option to engage students and school communities is more important than ever. Beanstack makes that easy.

*Beanstack is a great tool for your reading fundraisers, and we're building more features to make the end-to-end process smoother & help schools keep more of their donations. Learn more about running reading fundraisers in Beanstack & get a demo at [beanstack.com/reading-fundraiser](https://beanstack.com/reading-fundraiser)*





# About Beanstack

Beanstack helps educators build a culture of reading in their schools and districts through the power of reading challenges. Many common reading programs focus too heavily on assessments, which can discourage students and make reading less enjoyable. With Beanstack's reading challenges, educators can encourage independent, choice reading time - the number one way to build strong readers.

Beanstack is the flagship product of Zoobean, Inc., created to help people read more and read together. Beanstack is licensed by over 10,000 public libraries, school districts, and corporations around the world. Zoobean's investors include Kapor Capital, Mark Cuban, RevUp Capital, the AT&T Aspire Accelerator, and Amazon's Alexa Fund. Its founders were previously Washington, DC's Teacher of the Year and Google's first Head of K-12 Education Outreach. Learn more at [beanstack.com](https://beanstack.com).