



# Operational Excellence Under 90 Days

*How DonorsChoose.org Operations helped make a \$29 million donation come to life*

## Summary

At DonorsChoose.org our mission is to make it easy for anyone to help a classroom in need, moving us closer to a nation where students in every community have the tools and experiences they need for a great education. Our model is straightforward:

### One →

Teachers create projects to request classroom materials.

### Two →

Citizen donors and/or corporate partners donate to projects.

### Three →

When funded, we purchase and ship materials to schools.

### Four

Donors get thank-you letters and classroom photos from teachers.

To ensure integrity and a seamless experience for our teachers and donors, our Operations team is there through every step of the process. We vet all project requests, ensure teacher eligibility, purchase all items, ship materials directly to verified schools, and track and review student thank-you letters before sending them to donors. On a “typical” day, we apply roughly \$400k to nearly 700 classroom projects that our Operations team fulfills and supports.

**On March 27, 2018, we applied nearly \$26 million to all classroom projects bringing more than 35,000 classroom projects to life.** To the 28,478 teachers who woke up to find their projects fully funded, March 28 is better known as Best School Day. **This is the true story of how DonorsChoose.org came together to make this happen—all in less than 90 days—and the crucial role of our Operations team!**

## The backstory

DonorsChoose.org has a rich 18-year history. Every year of our existence, we've grown and increased our impact. Bringing more materials and experiences to classrooms across the country has always been central to our organizational goals.

In January of 2018, we were tracking poorly against our goals and it looked like—for the first time in our history—we were going to raise fewer donations than in the previous year. For an organization focused on growing our impact, this was a frustrating outlook.

We weren't ready to rest on our laurels, though. We wanted to continue growing, experimenting, and expanding—three things that had become part of our DNA. Our executive team came together and decided to do something a bit audacious to hit our goals. Enter...

*DonorsChoose.org  
impact at a glance...*

**3.5 million**  
Citizen donors mobilized

**\$770 million**  
Raised for classroom  
projects

**31 million**  
Student lives impacted

## The players

**CEO and Founder, Charles Best** - Charles set the wheels in motion by asking Ripple, a San Francisco-based company that uses blockchain technology to facilitate international payments, to fulfill every classroom project on our site in a single day—to the tune of \$29 million.

This donation would mark **the largest single-day event in our organization's 18-year history**. And, in order to make it work, the donation had to remain a closely held secret only shared at the executive leadership level for some time.

**Executive Leadership** - Once Ripple was fully committed and on board, our executive team took the reins on initial planning.

- Our CFO converted Ripple's XRP (cryptocurrency) donation into dollars over the course of several weeks to avoid flooding the market and affecting price.
- Our CTO began work with his team to develop a process to fund all projects quickly and inconspicuously, marking by far the largest application of funds in our history.
- Our CMO oversaw marketing, PR, and partnership efforts. A leader on her team led the org-wide project management of this event and brought this partnership to life for Ripple.
- Our COO focused on ensuring that we could execute the core operations of project screening, teacher and donor support, and ordering to make this a seamless customer experience.

**Board of Directors** - Our board even got in on the action. For example, Stephen Colbert and his team kicked off plans to break the news with a live announcement on his show, The Late Show.

# Making it happen

On March 8, 2018 the Operations team was told that we had approximately three weeks to prepare for and execute this once-in-a-lifetime event—an event that would see us, in a single day, support more than 50 times our daily average! And we had to keep any word of the event internal to our staff.

Our Operations team at the time was split into three core functions:

Content Operations	Customer Operations & Experience	Project Fulfillment
Mobilizes and manages a 200+ volunteer workforce	Advocates for customers based on data	Manages integrated vendor relationships
Reviews and approves project submissions	Ensures DonorsChoose.org is a safe and trusted platform	Purchases materials for funded projects
Reviews thank-you packages	Supports teachers and donors	Ships materials to schools

## Operations highlights included:

Project screening is typically done by teacher volunteers. In order to keep the funding a secret and complete the batch funding, we had to suspend volunteer access to screening prior to the event. So, during this black out for volunteers, full-time staff members screened 1,000+ projects in under 24 hours to ensure as many classrooms as possible would benefit from this funding. The week following Best School Day, volunteers screened 25k+ projects, which marked a 220% increase from the same time period the prior year.

Our Trust & Safety team rigorously vetted 60+ high-cost projects. And they added to our integrity measures by sending inventory reports to the 100 schools that benefited most from Best School Day and to any schools with high-cost projects.

Our 26 partner vendors in many ways feel like an extension of our staff, and our Business Relations team often keeps them informed about upcoming events that may cause inventory spikes. For this event, because supply chain management often requires second- and third-degree contacts, the risk was too high to give advance notice to all vendors. Our team worked closely with vendors days before the event, and for weeks following it, to monitor the availability of materials.

In preparation for placing orders for more than 35,000 projects, the Project Fulfillment team worked to clear all ordering queues. This team also worked with Finance to increase our credit limits by \$13 million. This increase made it possible to order and ship materials for all of the fully-funded projects without delay. As a result of this team's diligent planning, preparation, and re-prioritization, 87% of all projects funded on Best School Day (31,151 projects) were ordered and delivered within one week of the event.

Fully funding every project and fielding associated questions from teachers, donors, and other excited members of our community led to the largest customer support spike in our history. In the two weeks following Best School Day, we experienced a 73.5% increase in support inquiries (compared to the same time period the previous year). Despite this increase, optimizations made prior to the event enabled us to reduce resolution times by 14.2% without increasing staffing.

## Impact and learning

The lasting impact of this one-time event is felt to this day. It opened us up to entirely new audiences of teachers, corporate partners, and donors. By June 30, 2018, we had raised a total of \$145 million for classrooms in one year, blowing our \$133 million goal out of the water. And we received 120 million media impressions with featured coverage by nationwide sources like The New York Times, Fast Company, San Francisco Chronicle, and CNN.

Rallying around this single, massive event also acted as a catalyst for optimization and innovation. We continue to leverage process and tool improvements conceived for Best School Day. Examples include:

- A cross-team effort to prioritize website functionality for high-traffic days resulted in the creation of a “graceful degradation” plan that we continue to leverage during high traffic. We can now temporarily restrict some parts of the website that cause performance issues without bringing operations to a halt.
- Conceived as a special way to thank Ripple employees, we now have a function that allows us to request bulk honoree thank-yous based on a donor’s locale. This is now an everyday part of our site functionality and toolkit.
- Optimizations to customer support processes first implemented during Best School Day have continued to improve efficiency with no hit to customer satisfaction. Despite 46% project growth and 18% ticket growth through the first quarter of our current fiscal year (i.e., July 2018 - September 2018) compared to the previous year, we’ve seen no increase in resolution times.

*In the five weeks following Best School Day (compared to prior year)...*

**72%**

More donations received

**94%**

Increase in new donors

**101%**

Increase in return donors

**151%**

Increase in new teachers posting projects

Reflecting on this event now that the dust has settled, we’d be remiss not to acknowledge initial reserve—doubt, even—that we could successfully pull off this unprecedented event and all its operational challenges in less than 90 days. We rallied around what is most fundamental to the DonorsChoose.org mission—getting students across the US the resources and experiences they need to get a great education—and made a moonshot a reality.