

Offering the Best Price for Learning Supplies: Free

By AMY MAYER

BOSTON — Matt Knapp, a middle school history teacher, used to spend a lot of his own money on supplies for his classroom. Now, he goes to the warehouse-style shop of Extras for Creative Learning.

"I come here for the free loot," Mr. Knapp said, holding two reams of paper above his head.

Extras for Creative Learning is a nonprofit organization that funnels castoff items from businesses into the hands of teachers, day care providers and parents. And the economic downturn is fueling a boom in some donations.

"We actually have been getting all kinds of office things from places that are either downsizing or moving to smaller offices," said Jodi Schmidt, the director of the group.

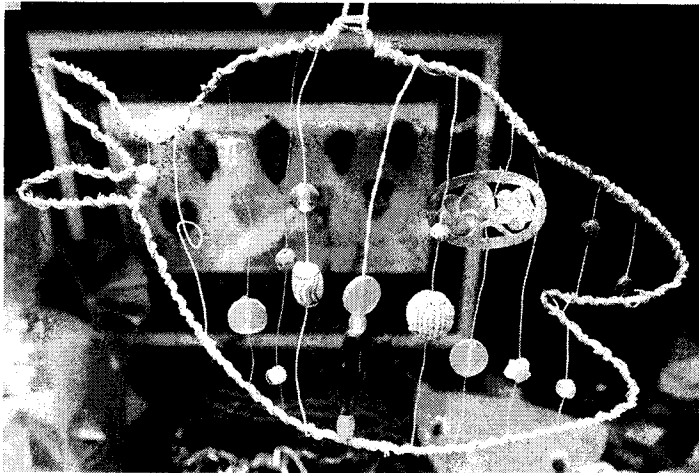
Mr. Knapp pays \$40 a year for eight visits to the warehouse, during which he can take as much as he wants. He usually stocks up on poster board and drawing paper, markers and pens, binders, and sometimes cups, fake coins and other props for skits in his classes at the Lilla G. Frederick Pilot Middle School in Boston.

Ms. Schmidt said the center received items that would otherwise be destined for landfills or incinerators, allowing businesses a tax write-off.

The center, which has an annual budget of \$175,000, picks up donated items at no charge. To raise money, it sells new and used donated furniture, like filing cabinets, tables, desks and chairs.

When Reebok moved a division to South Carolina from Canton, Mass., last spring, all the paper clips, in-boxes and other supplies that employees did not want were sent to Extras for Creative Learning, said Becky Snow, chairman of the Reebok Environmental Action Team.

The company also reduced its



garbage cost by donating more obscure items. Heavy rolls of polyurethane film, most likely used to make prototypes of the cushioning mechanism in sneakers, turned out to be great for

making music.

"Artists and school groups have been using it for drums," Ms. Snow said.

Recycling for Rhode Island Education, in Providence, also redistributes corporate castoffs with an environmental angle — ensuring that materials are reused rather than trashed. The Kids in Need Network gives free school supplies to low-income students in 23 cities.

Extras for Creative Learning has nearly 1,000 members. Anyone can join, though rates are lowest for Boston public school teachers. The school district provides free space for the center in the basement of the Boston Latin Academy.

Since August 2008, the center's data show, the school district has received more than \$300,000 worth of supplies.

On a recent visit, Su Theriault, an education instructor at the University of Massachusetts,

Jodi Schmidt, director of the organization, said corporate downsizing had helped with donations of some materials — which a touch of creativity can turn into art.

Boston, chose some short cardboard tubes, felt and paper for a preschool project she coordinates.

Then an Extras for Creative Learning worker brought out the items she had called ahead for: 50 canvas tote bags so children could take materials home.

"I just saved \$693," Ms. Theriault said as she surveyed her items.

Along with the paper clips, paste and cardboard, there is the occasional must-have oddity — like the centrifuge once donated by a scientific company.

"You can't pass up an opportunity like that," said Teresa Marx, a chemistry teacher at nearby Excel High School who saw the item listed on the center's blog and rushed over. "It was just too amazing."

The demand for supplies is steady, and Ms. Schmidt said there was never a shortage of material donations. But like some of its contributors, her 28-year-old organization has its own budgetary troubles. Membership increased fourfold from 2005 to 2008, but furniture sales are currently down because of fewer donations. Cash contributions are also down, and expenses are up.

"We are going to be facing a budget shortfall, probably in mid-July," she said.