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SECTION: SEPARATE BUT UNEQUAL

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HEADLINE: Separate and Unequal: Fund-raisers give schools an edge;
Fund-raisers pay for things poorer facilities have to cut

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Students at Hillview Middle School in Menlo Park joke with librarian Sue Krumbine, whose position is funded by the district's non-profit parent foundation.FORGET bake sales.

Menlo Park Elementary School parents have raised more than \$900,000 for the district's four schools this year mostly from their annual auction -- the equivalent of about \$450 per student.

In Piedmont, several fund-raisers bring in about \$1.3 million each year, or about \$500 per student.

Woodside parents also raise about \$1.3 million, a whopping \$3,000 for each child -- through donation request letters and phone calls as well as an auction.

Gone are the days when parents baked a batch of cookies for new band uniforms or extra books for the library.

These days, a variety of fund-raisers, including glitzy auctions, charity running races, local cable telethons, dinners, raffles and outright requests for cash mean big bucks for some schools districts -- money that not only pays for library books, but the librarians, too.

That discretionary money has meant the difference between keeping or cut-

ting art, music, textbooks or even teachers in those districts, especially when the economy calls for cutbacks, as is currently the case.

But not all parents can pump millions into their local public schools.

The disparity in donations has resulted in students from higher-income areas receiving a public education often worth hundreds or thousands of dollars more than their low-income counterparts.

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It also means that the real condition of public education is being masked in middle- and upper-class communities -- with parents and private money literally filling in the holes left by budget cuts and below-average state spending on schools.

"We're paying for math textbooks; we're paying for a science teacher; we're paying for the librarians," said Lynne Young, president of the non-profit Menlo Park-Atherton Education Foundation, which has raised more than \$20 million since 1982. "We've really worked hard at letting our parent population know that a good public school is not free."

It's a situation that has the state's teachers union brass posing the impossible: Prevent parents from contributing to their schools so the real condition of public education is exposed, thereby forcing the middle class to direct its political pull at more public resources for everyone.

"It sounds almost un-American," said Wayne Johnson, outgoing president of the California Teachers Association. "But when you allow communities to subsidize a particular school ... it creates even larger inequities. You shouldn't be allowed to do that."

Luxury for some

In the Oakland hills, at Redwood Heights Elementary School -- where just 8 percent of students are considered low-income -- the PTA raised \$106,000 this year.

Equal to \$380 per student, the money pays for a librarian, field trips, office equipment, a lunch supervisor and classroom grants for teachers.

"We've had the luxury of being very flush with money," said Redwood Heights PTA President Anna Brekke-Yungert. "It's also totally luxury to have parents who have the time to volunteer. Unfortunately, other schools don't have that luxury."

Down in the flatlands, at Horace Mann Elementary School in East Oakland -- where 63 percent of students are poor -- there is no PTA.

A school fund-raiser last fall brought in \$900, or the equivalent of \$1.77 per student.

"If you live up in the hills, let's face it, a lot of mothers aren't working so they have time," said Horace Mann's principal, Nancy Morganti. "But we live in a socio-economic area where some parents may work a swing shift or at a time where they can't come to a PTA meeting."

And they don't necessarily have the ability to write a check to help cover school costs that state money can't.

Granted, schools with a large number of low-income students are eligible for significant public and private resources not available to higher-income schools, including technology grants, federal Title I money and taxpayer-funded teacher training.

But that money often comes with strings attached, leaving individual schools often unable to address the specific needs of students.

This so-called categorical funding might provide computers for every classroom, for example, to a school that lacks updated wiring. Or it might provide money to buy library books when there aren't enough textbooks to go around.

Yet in higher income areas, parent or community donations can mean computers, teacher salaries, building renovations, textbooks or even tubas, if desired, freeing up public money that would have otherwise been spent on those items.

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Many of those schools end up looking like private schools with a public name. And the parents, who would otherwise be paying for private school anyway, get more bang for their buck by supplementing their publicly funded school instead.

"A lot of the families in our district could go public or private and they choose to go public for a lot of reasons," Young said, adding that a local private school in Atherton costs about \$25,000 per year. "So writing a check for [the average donation to the non-profit foundation] is a lot less."

Feeling the pinch

After 1978's Proposition 13 shifted the financial burden of educating children from school districts to the state, schools started to feel the pinch caused by the lack of local control. They could no longer raise taxes to pay the bills.

So parents started to step in.

They started forming nonprofit foundations -- allowing them to essentially hand over cold, hard cash to the districts to buy whatever the community felt the schools needed.

That money was on top of the traditional PTA contributions -- which typically don't pay for teacher or staff salaries and are usually tangible gifts, like computers, books, building renovations and art supplies.

Only about a dozen foundations existed before Proposition 13; there are now more than 500 such groups across California that raise an estimated \$30 million each year.

"Foundations do bring in untapped resources," said Susan Sweeney, executive director of the California Consortium of Education Foundations. "The local community can decide what's really important to them."

In years past, that used to mean educational extras, maybe field trips, guest speakers or expensive art equipment.

But local parent groups are saying the foundations are increasingly paying for basics, such as librarians, facility upgrades or other teaching staff.

"Without the PTA, our kids wouldn't have access to art and music, and the library," said Patrice Fusillo, president of Oakland's Hillcrest Elementary School. "The sad reality is that as the state cuts more and more in what they're giving to schools, parents have no choice but to raise money if they want to have things."

In Menlo Park, Young said the foundation pays for librarians at each of the four schools, an elementary school science teacher, the middle school art program, math textbooks and materials, musical instruments and field trips, among other things.

"I think it's very unfortunate, but it's just reality that in California you have to contribute to your public schools," she added. "The government is just not giving enough funds and paying for things to give a quality education."

Parents make a difference

So what does that mean if parents can't pick up the slack?

Study after study shows that parent involvement at a child's school -- be that financial or personal time -- makes a difference in boosting student performance, reducing dropout rates and alleviating behavior problems.

Minority and low-income parents, as well as those with lower levels of education, are less likely to participate in back-to-school night, science fairs, parent-teacher conferences and school board meetings or to volunteer, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

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In Berkeley, for example, parents in some neighborhoods don't understand how to help their schools and so they don't try, said parent Trina Ostrander, who is also executive director the Berkeley Public Education Foundation.

In wealthier neighborhoods, however, families have personal resources and understand how to connect them to the schools.

"They have friends who own Pixar," she said. "Parents who have expectations, they know where to go to get extra support."

For those schools, that parent support produces a chain reaction:

- The extra resources help create a strong educational environment.
- Teachers are drawn to schools with resources and parent support.
- Students perform well with good teachers and significant resources.
- Parents with resources are drawn to the neighborhood because the school is good.

And the cycle continues.

The opposite is often true for schools without such resources.

Especially in lean budget times, schools without parent resources have to cut programs, layoff teachers and reduce overhead.

Music, art, small classes and librarians get the ax.

While they might still have computers bought with special public funding, they don't have anyone to help incorporate them into the curriculum.

Students already at a socio-economic disadvantage face even greater obstacles.

Teachers don't want to teach in such a difficult environment.

And the cycle continues.

"Schools are based so much on parent participation," said Anthony Hall, chairman of the Parent Teacher Club at Hoover Elementary School in low-income West Oakland. "You really need parents to be involved with the kids. But our parents -- most of our parents -- are just not available. Their life situations are more than they can handle. I know three kids who have relatives who were shot to death recently."

The Hoover Parent Teacher Club raised about \$1,200 this year for the school, where test scores rank at the bottom of the state.

Hall is the club's only member.

PTA's pairing up

In some communities across the country, including Bethesda, Md., and Memphis, Tenn., PTA organizations in wealthier areas are pairing up with those in lower socio-economic communities to sponsor fund-raisers together. The pairing has apparently helped schools with fewer PTA members to increase recruitment and share the time-consuming responsibilities of raising money.

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Locally, in some of the larger districts, like Fremont, which has diverse demographics, the parent foundations are helping spread the wealth across all district schools, regardless of how much parents at each campus contribute.

"Every Fremont school has either a PTA or PTO [parent-teacher organization], but the amount of money they can raise and the amount of participation they have varies greatly," said Nina Moore, outgoing president of the Fremont Education Foundation and the district's school board president. "Our whole idea was to do something that we could do equitably across the district."

The foundation has raised about \$80,000 each year since 2000 through a telethon and mailing campaign. The money buys an after-school band program in all 27 elementary schools.

Music in the those grades had been absent since the early '90s -- cut during the last serious budget crisis.

About 1,000 students now participate in the program.

Moore said she left her job as a director at Sun Microsystems to concentrate on her children and their education. She has thrown herself into the task, multitasking through fund-raisers for the foundation and budget cuts on the board.

She acknowledged the schools that need the most resources for their students are likely to get hit the hardest because there will be no one to help fill the gaps.

"I really think it's so important to have people fighting for all the schools," she said. "If you are a single parent or if you're two working blue-collar parents, working split shifts, that doesn't mean you don't care about your child's education. It means you can't be as involved."

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