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Albany schools try to balance parent-funded extras


EDUCATION




Jill Tucker, Chronicle Staff Writer

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In front of a mosaic tile called the call "The Snake Wall," Marin Elementary School students play during recess on Wednesday, Nov. 24, 2010 in Albany, Calif. The wall is an art project funded in part by the school's PTA and parent donations.

Mike Kepka/The Chronicle

Call it the battle of the bake sales.



The city of Albany is up in arms over new district-imposed controls on PTA cash at each of the city's three elementary schools, with the school board dictating what parents can - or more specifically can't - buy for their kids to supplement their public education.

Things like school-day art, music and chess.

It's an attempt to take on a long-running problem: public schools that are supposed to be equal, but aren't.

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Earlier this year, Albany district officials decided it wasn't fair for two of the schools, Marii academic extras like chess, art and music class while Ocean View, their less affluent sister suspended those extra classes.

District officials then began public hearings and formed a task force to figure out how to balance what parents want for their own children with the desire to level the educational playing field.

One option would require PTAs to pool donations from all three schools into one district pot, which would be doled out equally.

"We just wanted to make sure something offered during the school day at one school is offered at all schools," said district Superintendent Marla Stephensen.

Public education, the supposed great equalizer, isn't supposed to favor one child over another, but unequal funding formulas mean some schools get more money per child, buying smaller classes, boosting teacher salaries and ensuring up-to-date materials.

Parent contributions in some districts tip the scales even more, raising hundreds if not thousands of dollars extra for each child.

That means some students get library books and librarians, art, music and technological gizmos, while the less affluent may go without enough paper and pencils.

In wealthy Hillsborough, for example, parents raise more than \$3.6 million annually through their foundation, which works out to an extra \$2,400 for each of their 1,500 elementary and middle school students.

The money pays for foreign language programs, drama classes and counselors, among a laundry list of extras that aren't available in neighboring San Mateo County school districts.

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Addressing disparities

Jack O'Connell, the state schools superintendent, has spent the past eight years visiting hundreds of schools across the state and has seen the disparities firsthand.

"The inequities do cry for significant education financial reform," he said.

Some communities have been able to absorb severe recessionary budget cuts, while others have not. But O'Connell doesn't believe the answer is to take resources away from those able to contribute to their schools.

"If you want to see these funding disparities eliminated, it's not about discouraging those districts that have the financial means to do art, music ... the field trips. I want to encourage that," he said. "But we have to find ways ... to enable these communities that have historically not had the wherewithal or funds to rise to the level of the other districts."

In Albany, the disparities are relatively minor compared with the inequities among schools statewide.

PTA fundraising took in about \$47,000 at Ocean View last year, compared with \$50,000 at Cornell and \$81,000 at Marin.

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Ocean View has more lower-income students and English learners than the other two schools; many of the parents are UC Berkeley students, including a number from outside the United States.

The PTA at Ocean View spends more money on lunchtime supervision and field trip transportation than the other schools, leaving less for in-class extras such as chess or art.

The bitter community debate over a few thousand dollars might seem silly given that all three schools rank among the top 10 percent of schools on state standardized test scores, but the fight for equity is never inconsequential, parents and district officials say.

"The main issue is all about instructional time," said Edel Alon, president of the Ocean View PTA. Parents "should not tell the district how to teach the students, or else you'll definitely see a disparity with schools that have and schools that have not."

The district's debate revolves around eight or so extra hours each of chess, art and music during the entire school year, taught by experts brought in from outside.

District officials have identified resources to pay for those extras at Ocean View this year, which means the other two schools can restore their classes.

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Trying to pool funds

The task force, composed of parents and district officials, is expected to recommend policy changes by March. In the meantime, PTA parents are looking at ways to work together to raise pooled funds for field trips and other programs.

"I really think each child in Albany deserves a wonderful education and enrichment experiences," said Marin PTA President Jeannie Paulovich, adding that there should be similar programs at each school - but perhaps not exactly the same depending on teacher and parent priorities.

"We work hard for our money," Paulovich said. "We work hard to raise these funds."

Written By
Jill Tucker

Reach Jill on

Jill Tucker has covered education in California for 22 years, writing stories that range from issues facing Bay Area school districts to broader national policy debates. Her work has generated changes to state law and spurred political and community action to address local needs.

She is a frequent guest on KQED's "Newroom" television show and "Forum" radio show. A Bay Area native, Jill earned a master's degree in journalism at the University of Colorado, Boulder and a bachelor's degree from the UC Santa Barbara. In between, she spent two years as a Peace Corps volunteer teaching English in Cape Verde, West Africa.

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