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State Budget Cuts Push PTAs, Education Foundations to Seek Broader Support

By Jennifer Wake



EFO volunteers Marcie Tuttle and Nina Clark talk with Orinda business owner Peter McNiff about school needs Photo Jennifer Wake

Although the economy is showing glimmers of improvement, state budget cuts have kept schools scrambling for funds. Cuts are so widespread that monies which once afforded schools a way to enhance student education could now be going to supplement basic school services.

"The need is so great," says Moraga Education Foundation (MEF) president Shari Simon. "We're reaching out to the community more than ever before."

MEF, as well as the Education Foundation of Orinda (EFO) and the Lafayette Arts & Science Foundation (LASF) are fighting to keep small class sizes intact, and programs including sports, the arts, and enrichment programs from the chopping block.

The Foundations are working closely with local Chambers of Commerce and are finding unique ways to partner with other community organizations, offering their volunteers to coordinate existing events or to oversee components of new fundraising events as a way to save costs while raising funds.

"At LASF, we are carefully rethinking how we engage Lafayette residents who are not parents of school-aged children," says LASF president Barbara Serwin. "We want to enlist their considerable community pride and their natural concern for maintaining the relatively high value of Lafayette real estate that is in large part based on the quality of our public schools."

To create more value for business partners, Serwin says LASF is redesigning its different business sponsorship opportunities so that support of LASF is clearly worthwhile in terms of traditional advertisement measures. "We are also launching a new fundraising program that targets people completely outside of our community."

To make up for the state shortfall, Moraga parents would need to give a combined PTA/MEF contribution of \$2,000 per student to keep programs untouched. "When I meet with people, I usually remind them of what they pay for preschool for three hours a day, which usually resonates with parents," Simon says. Additionally, this year MEF is encouraging community members to give a generous \$300 per family. "We've never had a recommended amount of giving for the community before."

EFO president Joan Keikafer says her organization is looking for additional ways to reach new donors as well.

"Historically, 87 percent of EFO donations come from parents. The student population isn't growing, yet school demands are growing because of budget cuts," she says. "While we've always received donations from community members, we want to broaden our base."

Like LASF and MEF, EFO has linked with community organizations and successful fundraising events coordinated through the Orinda Chamber of Commerce. On Sept. 22, EFO volunteers set up tables at local Starbucks and other locations as part of Donation Day - a fundraiser designed to build awareness and increase giving that has been utilized successfully by MEF and LASF in the past (MEF's Donation Day is scheduled for Oct. 14).

Orinda parent Debbie Johansen, whose three children attend Orinda schools, came to the Starbucks in Orinda's Theatre Square to offer her support. "I think it's great. I think that if we have good schools, it supports our community, our home prices, and gets us all involved in community building," she says.

Business owner Peter McNiff, who next month will be opening Republic of Cake in Theatre Square, credits organizations like EFO for the quality of local schools. "They have the best schools in the state mainly due to organizations like EFO," he says.

In addition to the education foundations, local parent groups are looking for ways to expand their reach into the community.

Sleepy Hollow Elementary hopes to reach part of its fundraising goal one pumpkin at a time at their annual pumpkin patch on Oct. 17 from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the school. "This year, we are really trying to reach and invite families who live in the surrounding areas and have small children but might not attend Sleepy Hollow School," says Lisa Rodriguez. In addition to a haunted house, carnival games and jump houses, there will also be a petting zoo and magician at the event.

Other schools are utilizing the Internet to expand their outreach, launching product sales that can be ordered online, even long after the end of the campaign. Last week, Stanley School kicked off its magazine drive which has helped the school raise valuable funds.

"With many parents losing their jobs, we can no longer rely on them to dig deeper into their pockets to make up for the increasing state budget cuts," Stanley School parent Amy Goodheart says. "It's going to take a village to help keep our schools running."

MEF president Simon is optimistic. "We've done it before," she says. "I really think the community is going to rally."

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