

Grants benefit East Palo Alto students

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By Eliza Ridgeway, Town Crier Staff Writer



Joe Hu/Town Crier Students from Alisha Fitzhugh's music class, from left, George Naufahu, Peter Singh, Karina Fernandez, Carmen Rodriguez and Mallaree Bradford, stand in front of a mural that decorates their school.

In many local elementary schools, a student can take a lot for granted: a well-organized library with the most recent Newbery Award medalists, occasional field trips around the Bay Area, access to basic school supplies.

In the Los Altos School District, parents have tried to ensure these opportunities with projects such as the Los Altos Educational Foundation, which has set a goal of contributing \$1.5 million in supplemental funding to the elementary school district in 2005-2006.

Not far up the road, the Ravenswood City School District in East Palo Alto struggles with state and federal funding, but without the safety net of parents with the ability to volunteer copious amounts of time and money and without a well-heeled educational foundation.

East Palo Alto Kids (EPAK), a non-profit, volunteer organization, seeks to fill that gap. It delivers direct cash grants to teachers in the Ravenswood school district for books, field trips and supplemental materials.

"It is a fund specifically designed to provide a lifeline to teachers," said Jacqui Stewart, one of EPAK's founders.

Teachers write the grant proposals, spend the money and report back to the foundation on the fruits of their labors. EPAK will present 111 grants totaling \$52,625 to teachers this month. Part of that money came from the Town Crier Holiday Fund, which lists EPAK among its recipients each year.

EPAK board members such as Los Altans Julie Mahowald and Laura Roberts volunteer in their local schools as well as in East Palo Alto and have seen the positive effect the communities can have on each other.

"The program provides moral support as well as grants," Mahowald said. "It demonstrates that the community is behind the kids."

When Almond School decided to donate a portion of the proceeds from its 2004 Walkabout fund-raiser to EPAK, Mahowald and Roberts saw a surge of generous giving and enthusiasm from the Los Altos community. The walk raised almost \$8,000 for the non-profit agency.

"Parents know how lucky their kids are," Mahowald said. "There's the broader view that we're building a world and the world is not going to be made up alone of your children and your children's community. People like to help their own school but they also see that there is more to life."

Volunteers and donors gathered March 9 at Edison-McNair Academy, a fourth- to eighth-grade charter school in East Palo Alto, to learn more about EPAK's work at the school and to distribute the grant money. The group met Edison-McNair Principal Doug Harrell, who described coming to East Palo Alto from an affluent community in San Diego.

"In San Diego, the issues really weren't that overwhelming - I was wasted, I had to invent problems," he said. He described coming to a school district where 96 percent of the students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, and where almost 70 percent of the students are English language learners and concluded, "You have to want change."

Strict rules and uniforms are very much in evidence at Edison-McNair, but the students seem to respond to structure with confidence and self-respect. Just after nine in the morning, music teacher Alisha Fitzhugh's classroom was already rocking to the syncopated beat of students singing a spoken-word piece about the importance (and challenges) of committing themselves to education.

Fitzhugh has used an EPAK grant to purchase recorders for students whose parents can't provide the musical instrument. EPAK presented her with a check for an additional \$500 for her proposal to assemble a music resource library. In her proposal, Fitzhugh wrote that she wanted to teach students how to research by helping them complete classroom reports on subjects ranging from composers to the development of different musical genres.

On one wall of her classroom, a poster lists music vocabulary for jazz - scatting, syncopation. Along the top of the room in broad cursive strokes, Duke Orsino's exhortation reads: "If music be the food of love, play on."

As the students played their recorders in unison, Fitzhugh enthusiastically thudded her foot to keep time. Smiling over their heads, she announced, "My students know how to sight-read, which I'm very proud of."

This spring, grants from EPAK will bolster the fundamentals of learning with dictionaries, computer software and calculators, and will also boost the fun of learning with field trips, materials for a mural and other art supplies.

"People want to see results (from their giving). Isn't the result good enough that you've made some kids happy, that they can go on field trips?" board member Barbara Susco said.

"The Los Altos Educational Foundation asks you for \$800 per child," Mahowald said. "With EPAK, a grant of \$500 takes an entire class, sometimes a whole grade, a very long way. Just a little bit helps."