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SCHOOLS LEAN ON PARENTS TO CLOSE THEIR BUDGET GAPS

SHARON NOGUCHI, *Mercury News*

Pamela Cutkosky sent her daughters back to school last week carrying emergency forms, permission slips and about \$1,000 in checks for the school and PTA.

That's not counting the \$1,000 that the **foundation** supporting the **Palo Alto** Unified School District requested from the two girls. Because Cutkosky donated to that group, Partners in Education, last spring, she's holding off a bit on her 2006-07 gift.

As schools around the South Bay open, public school parents are again engaged in a peculiar rite of the academic year: making private contributions for schools they already fund with their tax dollars. This year, the pleas are even more intense, as a growing number of community **foundations** vie with PTAs, home and school clubs and other groups for support.

Palo Alto illustrates the trend. This year PTAs are asking for as much as \$350 per child, and the education **foundation**, known as PiE, is suggesting \$500 a student. Teachers and supporters of sports, music, science, technology, libraries and journalism also are seeking money now.

Donations add up to thousands of dollars for such parents as Barb Schroeder, who has children in the fourth, sixth and 11th grades. "I came from Connecticut, and they didn't do it that way there," she said. But schools back **East** were in much better shape, she said, so she understands the need. Now, like many **Palo Alto** parents who have a reputation for generously supporting schools, she ponies up.

"Of all the stuff I spend money on, it's the most worthwhile thing," said Katie Young. "Instead of buying junk it's nice to donate to school." With four children -- two in **Palo Alto** schools -- she splits her giving, and also factors in time she spends driving on field trips and doing other volunteer work.

Educators outside **Palo Alto** envy the tax-rich district -- voters passed a parcel tax last year -- and the quality of **Palo Alto** schools, where students rank among the highest in standardized tests.

Still, schools in every sort of community see unmet needs on campuses. And to meet them, they're looking for private help, often through **foundations** that can tap the broader community rather than just parents.

In 2004, school **foundations** raised more than \$70 million in California. That's compared with \$30 million in each year from 1997 to 2001.

Statewide budget cuts and a stronger awareness of education and achievement might be a factor in the push. "There's more sense of urgency in the last five years," said Susan Sweeney, executive director of the California Consortium of Education **Foundations**.

In Los **Altos**, the educational **foundation** is asking parents for \$800 a student and hopes to raise \$1.55 million, largely to provide aides, teachers and docents for the district's 4,179 students this school year. The Menlo Park-Atherton Education **Foundation** has set a goal of \$1.6 million this year to benefit the 2,255 students in the K-8 Menlo Park City School District.

In San Jose, the approach is more traditional. At elementary schools, PTAs and home-and-school clubs are the focus, and they raise \$2,000 to \$200,000 annually, said Andrea Wheeler, president of the San Jose Unified PTA Council.

In fact, the PTA culture emphasizes support and community, not money. "The PTA very strongly encourages PTAs to do three non-fundraising activities for every fundraising activity," such as boosting school spirit or educating parents, Wheeler said.

In June, San Jose also joined the **foundation** trend in a big way, as the first professionally run **foundation** to support the 19 school districts in the city opened its doors. The San Jose Education **Foundation** hopes to raise \$1 million in unrestricted funds this year to support 194,000 students in 87 schools. That's half of what PiE wants to raise for **Palo Alto's** approximately 10,750 students, but it's a start.

"As budget cuts happen, a lot of superintendents see this as a clear venue for fund development," said Muhammed Chaudhry, executive director of the San Jose Education **Foundation**.

Parent-generated funds have become a staple of schools. In high-wealth areas such as **Palo Alto**, principals see those funds as essential, not supplementary, paying for counseling, classroom aides and reading programs.

The evidence of parent generosity is visible. **Palo Alto** High opened a \$2 million, 35-meter swimming pool this year, funded largely by parents and alumni. Three years ago, parents built a \$750,000 track at the school.

Some are concerned that parent fundraising widens the gap in school finance and fairness that California has struggled to close.

"It certainly does create inequities among schools," said Norton Grubb, professor of education at University of California-Berkeley. "On the other hand, it's very hard to tell parents, 'You can't spend money on your **kids**.' "

Studies, however, haven't proved that parent donations, even in areas raising \$500 a student, significantly throw school funding out of balance. "If you think of that as a percentage of the total district spending, it's still kind of a drop in the bucket," said Jennifer Imazeki, associate professor of economics at San Diego State, who has researched parent giving to schools.

In **Palo Alto** Unified, where this year's budget is \$127.2 million, the PiE donation is about \$1.89 million. The **foundation** was formed in part to equalize contributions among schools in **Palo Alto**. It aims to raise \$2 million this year.

Just across the freeway and at the other end of the income scale, several of the schools in the Ravenswood City School District don't even have PTAs. Last year the **East Palo Alto Kids Foundation**, run by community members and former Ravenswood teachers, raised \$193,000 for teachers at 11 schools.

In between the income extremes are districts such as Fremont Union, whose **foundation**

brought in \$100,000 last year for five high schools.

Some parents are wary about the explosion in fundraising. School boosters shouldn't take advantage of parental support for schools, said Jim Wang, parent of a first- and eighth-grader in **Palo Alto**. "Before you ask for money, you should be checking to make sure you are running efficiently and implementing cost-saving measures," he said.

Still, he said he responded to pleas for donations.

Sondra Glider, parent of a Gunn High School freshman, said, "It seems like a lot of money but to me it's money well spent."

She knows the difficulty of fundraising; her husband wrote the annual direct appeal letter when their daughter attended elementary school. "It's a gift to our children."

Illustration:Photo, Chart

PHOTO: JOANNE HO-YOUNG LEE -- MERCURY NEWS

Xio Pinto practices on Wednesday with the water polo team at the **Palo Alto** High School pool. The \$2 million, 35-meter swimming pool that opened this year was largely funded by parents and alumni. Three years ago, parents built a track at the school.

CHART: MERCURY NEWS
SCHOOL GIVING

Schools ask parents to give various amounts per student:

Palo Alto High School
\$500

Partners in Education (district educational **foundation**)

\$325

Parent Teacher Student Association

\$25-\$500

Music boosters

\$150

Sports boosters (per athlete participating)

\$35-\$50

Sports boosters (game admission)

Theater boosters:

no specified amount

.....
Bellarmine Prep, San Jose

\$11,800

Tuition

(excludes books)

Annual fund:

no recommended amount; average gift is \$2,000

.....
Castilleja School, **Palo Alto**

\$25,000

Tuition

\$3,000

Annual fund

.....
Los **Altos** Educational **Foundation**

Supports two junior high and five elementary schools in Los **Altos**

\$800

Annual fund

Source: Mercury News reporting

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