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Foundation spreads the wealth

EPAK GRANTS HELP RAVENSWOOD TEACHERS CLOSE FUNDING GAP

By Sharon Noguchi
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Alisha Fitzhugh got her E note, and she's ecstatic.

E, as in do-re-mi. To add a vibrato depth to her classroom's wooden xylophone, her fifth- and sixth-graders at Edison-McNair Academy in East Palo Alto play single bars that each sound one note. She had D, F, G, A, B and high C, but the missing E made songs sound, well, like they were missing a note.

Thanks to a \$500 grant from the East Palo Alto Kids Foundation, ``Now we've got a beautiful E bar. We have the full gamut, so we're rolling," the ebullient Fitzhugh said.

She is one of nearly 200 teachers in 11 Ravenswood schools who received grants this fall from EPAK, as the foundation is known. Previous grants funded maracas, snare drums and other instruments for her music classes, the only non-academic courses offered to fifth- and sixth-graders at the charter middle school.

The foundation is celebrating a milestone this year. Since its birth 13 years ago, it has raised more than \$1 million, all of which has been awarded in direct grants to people working with Ravenswood students.

Of course, the sum is tiny compared with those of neighboring school foundations. While EPAK raised \$193,000 in 2005-06 to benefit approximately 4,300 students, the Menlo Park-Atherton Foundation raised \$1.4 million for fewer than one-third as many students.

Factor in the need, and the disparity widens. Including governmental and other sources of income, Ravenswood receives about \$3,000 less per child every year than some wealthy neighboring districts. Yet in Ravenswood, the educational challenges are greater: 96 percent of its students are poor, qualifying to receive subsidized lunches, and 69 percent are English-language learners. Many come from families with little formal education.

``Parents don't have the resources to fill that gap," said EPAK board President Tasha Castañeda, who taught in Ravenswood for seven years.

So conscientious teachers fill in as best they can. Castañeda said she spent about \$3,000 every year buying supplies as well as shoes or medication for needy students. She created a classroom library and taught students how to check out and care for books.

EPAK tries to provide a bit of the enrichment that students across Highway 101 take for granted.

In fact, thinking about how much Palo Alto parents contribute to their kids' schools spurred attorney Jacqui Stewart to found EPAK in 1993.

The PTA at her children's school, Duveneck Elementary in Palo Alto, had tens of thousands of dollars left over one year. She said she proposed donating it to a Ravenswood school, but ``Their reaction was no, it wasn't raised for that purpose, and we'd have to go back to the donors."

So Stewart and others founded EPAK. The bulk of its donors are outside Ravenswood, including a core of Duveneck parents, Stewart said. To ensure independence and effectiveness, the foundation only gives grants directly to teachers, up to \$500 each in twice-yearly cycle.

With no office and no staff, EPAK funnels all donations straight to classrooms. An anonymous \$50,000 grant received in spring 2005 will cover the foundation's operating expenses for several years, something that thrilled board members at last month's session, where they mailed 4,000 appeal letters. ``Before, each board member had to bring her own stamps," Castañeda said.

If discouraged by need amid wealth, EPAK donors find reward in their impact. Their contributions have enabled class visits to zoos, theaters, parks and farms -- because field trips don't happen in Ravenswood unless the teacher secures a grant to pay for transportation.

This fall, EPAK bought three digital cameras for Cindy Chin's photography class, the only non-academic class aside from physical education that's offered to Willow Oaks middle schoolers. Chin, who says she normally spends more than \$1,000 annually on supplies, said she probably would have paid for the cameras herself.

Belle Haven teacher Ann Funn, one of three Ravenswood teachers who sit on the EPAK board, uses the grants to buy literacy aids for her

second-graders. (A subcommittee that doesn't include teachers screens the applications. Castañeda said in the past two years, the foundation has granted all qualifying applications from Ravenswood teachers, about 466 in all.)

And next month, an EPAK-funded library will open at Edison-McNair.

Besides narrowing the funding gap in a small way, EPAK ``helps teachers realize that the outside world believes their work is important," said Castañeda. And it enables teachers like Fitzhugh to transform their passion into lessons.

The music teacher is looking forward to someday getting curtains for the school's stage. Or replacing the crates she painted white and decorated with music notes for students to stand on during performances. ``I'd love to have risers, oh my gosh," she said.

When teaching middle schoolers, she said, ``Sometimes it feels like I'm just spinning my wheels." She thinks about leaving for a job with less chaos, but as a Ravenswood alumna she feels committed to her community. Receiving grants that recognize her efforts helps inspire her. ``They do great work," she said of the foundation. ``I'm sure some people are burning the midnight oil to keep that going."

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