

Martin Snapp: Education fund fills in the gaps

By Martin Snapp

Columnist

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Wilson Elementary School in Richmond, where I used to work as a substitute teacher, is an example of everything that's right and wrong with our schools.

The right part is the students and teachers. The kids are so sweet and so eager to learn. And the teachers are so dedicated, despite laboring under constant fear of losing their jobs.

But the wrong part is the appalling lack of resources. All the cultural enrichment programs have been cut, and these are kids who desperately need them because many have never had the cultural experiences that you and I take for granted.

Many have never been to a ballgame. Or the library. They have never traveled on BART. Or seen San Francisco, or the ocean, or snow. They have never seen the Cal campus, much less allowed themselves to dream that they might go to school there someday.

But for the past 28 years a nonprofit support group called the West Contra Costa Public Education Fund -- Ed. Fund for short -- has tried to fill in the gaps. A few years ago it gave a \$500 mini-grant to Wilson to fund a music program -- the only music program in the school. The grant paid for tiny flutes called soprano recorders.

Five hundred dollars isn't much, but it's made a huge difference. Now 180 4th, 5th and 6th graders each year have instruments to play.

There's nothing cuter than little kids singing and playing their flutes. There's such joy on their faces.

And the ripple

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effects keep coming. The children are not only learning to work with others, they're learning a priceless life lesson: If you keep practicing something, you get better at it.

Oh, and by the way, their test scores are climbing, even in nonmusical subjects. Not surprisingly, so is their self-esteem.

The Ed. Fund has distributed 67 mini-grants like this at 36 different schools in the district over the last 12 months, impacting nearly 10,000 children.

At Wilson the grant went for musical instruments, but at other schools the money pays for physical education, which has also been cut.

At yet another school, the mini-grant funded a science project called the Egg Drop Challenge, where the kids learn the mathematical relationships between mass, velocity, elevation and acceleration by dropping eggs from steadily increasing heights until they break.

The teachers come up with the ideas themselves, then the Ed. Fund comes up with the money.

And the more money the Ed. Fund has, the more worthy projects it can underwrite. It throws an annual Excellence In Education Banquet as its chief fundraiser of the year, and this year the big bash will be at the Craneway Pavilion in Richmond on May 20.

It's always a great party. "We want people to be so wowed that they'll come back in droves again next year," says Executive Director Joel Mackey.

This year, the entertainment will feature the Jazz Mafia All-Stars, which includes some of the finest jazz musicians in the Bay Area, as well as the Pinole Valley High School Jazz Band.

For information and tickets, call 510-233-1464 or visit www.edfundwest.org <<http://www.edfundwest.org>>. If you can't make the party but would still like to help, you can also contribute on the website.

Remember what Hillary Clinton said about it taking a whole village to raise a child. We are that village.

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