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SF schools rely on a fraying patchwork of grants, programs and donations for funding

By: Amy Crawford | 10/09/11 3:00 AM

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The floor was shaking in an upstairs classroom at Monroe Elementary School in the Excelsior district, where two dozen fourth- and fifth-graders were practicing a dance routine. “Waka waka! Hey hey!” the singer Shakira chanted over a boombox as the children jumped, spun and clapped.

For many of the giggling children, dance class was the week’s highlight. And the arts are not merely fun, studies show they help kids do better in math and reading.

But at Monroe, students don’t spend much time in arts classes. Their dance teacher, Jakey Toor, is one of just 18 traveling elementary arts teachers employed by the San Francisco Unified School District. She spends just one day a week at Monroe. The school, which brings in a different traveling art teacher every semester, also offers weekly percussion classes led by a contractor whose fees are partially paid for by the Parent Teacher Association.



A DANCE CLASS AT MONROE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, TAUGHT BY JAKEY TOOR. (MIKE KOOZMIN/THE EXAMINER)
 A dance class at Monroe Elementary School, taught by Jakey Toor. (Mike Koozmin/The Examiner)

That’s less arts education than received by some crosstown kids. For instance, at New Traditions School, art and music teachers come twice a week, along with lunch monitors, supplies and a coach to teach P.E. “Basically, the district’s budget pays for the teachers — the classroom teachers,” said Johanna Haag, president of the New Traditions PTA.

“That’s it. Schools that have a wealthier population have more programs because the parents give bigger donations. It’s frustrating to me.” Haag, also a member of the council that assembles the school’s budget, said the PTA raised \$90,000 last year. Monroe’s parents and faculty are also committed to arts education, but that commitment can be tough to maintain.

“Every year I kind of look around for where the money is going to come from,” said Monroe Principal Jennifer Steiner, who cobbled this year’s \$56,000 arts budget from about \$20,000 in funds from the Parent Teacher Association along with grants and savings from the school’s general budget.

“As funding has gone down over the last few years, we’ve had to get a little more

creative,” Steiner said. “For example, my computer teacher is an artist, so she does art once a week. It comes from us being resourceful.”

This patchwork funding of arts education troubles advocates, who believe visual and performing arts should be on par with math and reading.

Voters tried to address this issue with 2004’s Public Education Enrichment Fund. This year’s fund was \$46 million because the mayor deferred \$15 million in contributions. Of that, \$15 million is dedicated to preschool; \$15 million to expenses such as custodians, nurses and translators; and \$15 million to sports, P.E., libraries, art, and music. That might sound like a lot of money, but it is spread thin in a district with 56,000 students.

Prop. H means every elementary school sees a traveling art, music, dance or drama teacher at least once a week, and middle and high schools offer at least two periods a day of arts electives.

But despite the district’s good intentions, the options available and the amount of time children spend in arts classes can vary between schools.

“It’s really inconsistent,” said Michelle Holdt Roderick, who this year founded Arts Ed Matters, a parent-led campaign for more arts education in city schools. “It doesn’t allow the arts to be essential, to build over the years.”

Roderick is troubled by the reliance on PTA fundraising to supplement arts education, because low-income parents cannot afford to give as much as parents from well-to-do parts of town.

“Schools where the parents are not as active in terms of fundraising, there is a lot less of the arts,” she said.

Principals also must prioritize arts education, Roderick said, but that can be hard when reading and math testing is paramount. “There’s plenty of schools where they’re not even really thinking about it,” she said.

San Francisco’s situation reflects conditions that exist across California, said Mark Slavkin, chairman of the California Alliance for Arts Education.

“The northeastern states are spending twice as much on education as California,” Slavkin said. “What these states take for granted, like dedicated art and music teachers, is something of a luxury in California.”

Like many of the challenges faced by California education, low arts funding can be traced to Proposition 13, the 1978 ballot initiative that limited property taxes. Budget cuts since 2008 have only made the situation worse.

“Schools are just up against horrific choices,” Slavkin said. “Even in communities that have resources, it’s getting harder and harder.”

Although the community often steps up to prevent art and music from getting cut, Slavkin said that approach was no longer sustainable.

“It’s a pretty noble gesture, but it can be self-defeating in the long run if it’s not coupled with advocacy,” he said. “The arts can sometimes dig ourselves a hole by saying, ‘Don’t worry, we’ll have a bake sale, we’ll raise money.’”

Robert Daniels, supervisor of SFUSD's visual and performing arts department, said he also wished things were different. Although he noted that money from The City had helped the district hire 43 arts teachers since 2005, he said the state and federal governments needed to come through as well.

"The schools just can't do it all," he said.

Physical education also short on funding

Arts education is not the only subject that California schools have struggled to fund since the passage of Proposition 13. Although state law says elementary students must have 100 minutes of physical education a week and older students must be in gym class for 200 minutes, the district cannot afford to hire enough certified P.E. teachers to cover that much time.

At SFUSD elementary schools, 15 certified physical education teachers travel between different schools. These teachers, along with specialists who train teachers and design P.E. lessons, are paid with city money given to the district through the Public Education Enrichment Fund.

Some schools also receive funds from their Parent Teacher Associations to hire coaches, usually nonprofit employees who lead the children in games. Most elementary P.E. lessons are run by classroom teachers.

Cheryl Richardson, a senior program manager at the Washington-based National Association for Sports and Physical Education, said this setup was common in California.

"It's primarily a California thing, but with budget cuts we are seeing it in other states now," she said. Richardson said children miss out when classroom teachers and non-accredited coaches teach physical education.

"Behavior management in an activity and classroom management when students are at desks are completely different," she said. "Would you want someone to just come in and teach your child reading? Not really; you'd need some expertise."

Richardson said the situation might get better, as national figures such as first lady Michelle Obama draw more attention to the benefits of physical activity to prevent obesity and improve academic performance.

"There's a lot of light shining on phys ed," she said.

Where the money comes from

Without sufficient funds to hire full-time teachers at every school, SFUSD makes do with a patchwork of funding to provide art, music and physical education classes.

Proposition H, the Public Education Enrichment Fund: A ballot initiative passed in 2004 that runs through 2014-15. Funded at \$46 million this year, city money pays for preschool, the arts, sports and libraries, as well as supplementing the SFUSD budget. SFUSD uses some funds for itinerant art, music, drama, dance and P.E.

teachers. **Fourth- and fifth-grade instrumental music:** There are 14 teachers districtwide, with each school getting one visit per week. Funded by The City and philanthropists, with loaner instruments provided by SFUSD. **STAR (Students and Teachers Achieving Results):** Federal Title 1 funds used for 10 arts teachers in 18 poorly performing elementary schools. **Elementary Arts Program:** Long-running program uses city funds to place artists in schools for a few weeks a year for \$22 per pupil. **Grants:** From the state and federal governments as well as private foundations and philanthropists. **PTA fundraisers:** Upward of \$100,000 raised at some schools each year. Varies widely depending on socio-economic level of families.

Per-pupil spending

Public education is most expensive in big cities, but California has less money to spend per student than most other states. Although The City supplements the district's budget, SFUSD's per-pupil spending is still far lower than in urban areas on the East Coast.

\$10,313 - San Francisco \$9,657 - California average \$10,499 - United States average \$18,126 - New York, the most of any state \$16,271 - New Jersey \$14,118 - Massachusetts \$6,356 - Utah, the lowest of any state

Sources: U.S. Census data from 2008-09

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Correction: *This article was updated on Oct. 12, 2011. The Oct. 9 story about arts funding in the San Francisco Unified School District incorrectly identified the supervisor of the district's visual and performing art department. It is Robert Daniels.*

Read more at the San Francisco Examiner:

<http://www.sfxaminer.com/local/2011/10/sf-schools-rely-fraying-patchwork-grants-programs-and-donations-funding#ixzz1kKlivE1D>