



Groups aiding schools get creative to keep donations up in downturn

Shaking the foundations

By Marjorie Hernandez
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Throughout the year, teachers and school staff members apply for grants from their local education foundations to supplement classroom activities or special projects.

From trips to the Getty Museum in Los Angeles to art therapy for special education students, these grants provide financial support as district coffers continue to decrease because of state budget cuts.

Like many nonprofit groups, however, the local education foundations say they now are concerned that donations and grant funding might decrease this year. Right now, donations are holding steady.

“We are conscious of how difficult it is to ask the community for donations during this time of economic downturn, but we are conscious of the quality of education that can be offered through these donations,” said Barry Myerson, board chairman of the Friends of Oak Park Schools, and Education Foundation. “We are concerned about the situation, but we hope our concerns will not be realized.”

The group has raised \$30,000 so far this school year for its first endowment fund and an additional \$35,000 through an annual fundraising letter drive.

Although donations have remained about the same as this time last year, Myerson said, he is worried that could change.

“We ask reluctantly,” Myerson said. “At this point we’re not seeing less donations, but we are also nowhere where we should be.”

The Las Virgenes Education Foundation is hoping some star power will help bring in thousands of dollars for the Las Virgenes Unified School District this year.

Recording artists Michael McDonald of the Doobie Brothers, Tommy Shaw of Styx, and the band Venice will perform with student musicians for the first Benefit for the Arts on Feb. 27 in the Fred Kavli Theater in Thousand Oaks.

All proceeds will go toward funding of the arts in Las Virgenes schools, said Jaime Alcroft, executive director of the Las Virgenes foundation.

“We’re trying to figure out the best way to save programs in the public schools, and I think one of the best ways to do it is to show the community what you are doing with the money,” Alcroft said. “That’s why we have student musicians onstage playing and singing with professional musicians and performing as if they were already in the music business.”

The foundation recently gave the district \$135,000, which came from profits from a summer school program. Students take classes for a fee, and the foundation oversees the program. Funds go directly back to the schools, Alcroft said.

“With Sacramento hacking education funds, the foundation and the community really have to come through,” Alcroft said.

Although the Simi Valley Education Foundation awarded 56 grants for this 2008-09 school year, there was a \$2,500 shortfall.

To cover the gap, foundation board member Jim Riley asked his employer, Waste Management Inc., to help out. The company agreed.

Cindy Jacoby, the foundation’s executive director, said it receives about 100 grant requests from teachers every year. “We do what we can,” Jacoby said. “We’d love to give the same amount we have given in the past, but we tell them, ‘This year, we can give you this.’”

“We might be giving less, but we award grants that will affect more students.”

For the past two years, the Ventura Education Partnership has consolidated its annual programs and events to cut costs, said Debbie Golden, its vice president of finance and a Ventura Unified School District trustee.

The group has raised \$102,150 this school year — a slight increase from the \$100,000 raised by the same time last year, Golden said.

Ventura teachers can apply for the GrantSmart Program, which provides \$1,000 grants twice a year. About \$40,000 to \$50,000 a year is awarded under the program.

“Education Partnership cannot take over the kind of help our school district needs, but we can help,” Golden said.

Outdoor clothing company Patagonia recently gave \$5,000 to the partnership. Teachers with environmental projects or lessons can apply for some of that money, Golden said.

“We are reaching out and trying to broaden our base of support and looking for more corporate sponsors,” Golden said.

The Conejo Schools Foundation also received a grant from a local corporate sponsor. Verizon recently donated \$25,000 for an Internet safety program for students in the Conejo Valley Unified School District.

“Most education foundations are challenged to overcome the hesitance of some parents to send support beyond their own children’s school,” Conejo Foundation Executive Director Cindy Goldberg wrote in an e-mail. “This is especially true when budgets are tight and the parent might be able to save a program at their school — art, music, etc.”



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