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## THE DARK SIDE OF PARENT FUNDRAISING



Choir trips to Africa. A yearbook, a school newspaper, a series of pricey building renovations, and multiple Advanced Placement offerings. A grant of up to \$1,000 per teacher per year for classroom instructional supplies.

All of the above and more were made possible by parent donations to a Denver public high school where NEPC graduate assistant researcher (and CU Boulder doctoral student) Anna Noble once taught.

As Noble wrote in a [recent piece](#) for the non-profit journalistic website *Chalkbeat*, she has long felt gratitude for the parent gifts that helped make her school a great place to teach and to learn. Yet as her professional role changed and she started visiting schools that served families that could not afford to make donations, she was shaken by the inequities. She saw schools without theater programs, and teachers who spent a large portion of their paychecks on classroom supplies. Even worse, she saw sinks with mold, drinking water with lead, and walls harboring asbestos.

“[A]s wealthy parents are publicly praised for bridging the gap for their own kids, we must always ask, ‘Who will be responsible for the other kids?’” Noble wrote. She urged readers to keep in mind the “kids whose parents love them just as much, and want for their kid the same opportunities that others are given?”

It is difficult to say precisely how much money parents and others raise annually for K-12 public schools. Although the U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) collect information on private donations, the data are incomplete for the school districts attended by one in three U.S. students, an [Education Week analysis](#) found. NCES has only just started collecting finance data for individual schools—where many donations occur—rather than school districts.

However, other less comprehensive information sources suggest that, predictably, wealthier communities are able to raise more money for schools than poor ones. And this is just the tip of the funding-inequity iceberg. As Temple University Associate professor Maia Cucchiara writes in an NEPC [review](#) of one of those sources (a think tank analysis of fundraising by 50 Parent-Teacher Organizations): “[It] is important to note that most funding inequalities arise at the state level; funds raised by parents represent only a minute portion of overall school spending.” The amount of money donated by parents is equivalent to less than two percent of total public school spending, Cucchiara writes.

Yet although donations are dwarfed by overall public expenditures, these donations can make a real difference, especially when combined with the volunteer time and political clout that more affluent families are better able to contribute to their schools. And “little” resources can add up to big results. A robust theater program or robotics team can engage students, encouraging potential dropouts to stay in school. Educators feel appreciated when they are provided with refreshments during evening parent-teacher conferences—and feelings of appreciation can reduce turnover. And then there are the roles that parents play when taxpayers don’t provide basics like safe buildings, potable drinking water, and sufficient support for students with special needs.

So what can be done?

Noble has been active in her local union, and she suggests that teachers’ unions have a role to play. These unions, she writes, can press for transparency around parent fundraising and can advocate for systems that share the money raised at affluent schools with schools that serve a less privileged student body. According to *Teaching Tolerance*, some districts have indeed banned donations to individual schools, instead distributing the funds equitably throughout the district.

But what about districts where none of the schools serve affluent families? Or the larger problem of schools with low-income populations that need considerably more resources yet often receive less?

Noble expresses hope that parent donors like those helping her former school can be persuaded to push for legislation to adequately and equitably fund all schools. After all, she writes, these wealthy parents have long shown that they’re a force to be reckoned with.

## NEPC Resources on School Finance and Funding

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