

# Should rich families be allowed to fundraise a better public school education for their kids?

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In 2013, families at a Seattle high school raked in [more than \\$100,000](#) for a raffle to win a Tesla Model S.

The year before, the parent teacher association at Garfield High cleared \$40,000 in raffle tickets for a Nissan Leaf. Other schools in this tech-boom city rely on lavish galas to raise as much as \$422,000 [in a single night](#), and some spend almost as much as they haul in.

During the pandemic, parents at the John Stanford International School [spent \\$249,999](#) — one dollar less than the school district allows before the board steps in to review such spending — on teaching assistants for a dual language program. This year, the Green Lake Parent Teacher Association paid about half that much to cover the cost of the elementary school's vocal teacher and a portion of a full-time counselor's salary, among other supports for students.

- *About 3 in 4 students at Rising Star Elementary qualify for subsidized meals.*
- *The parent association at Green Lake Elementary in Seattle posted a sign on the outside of the school during teacher appreciation week in May.*

*Double click image to enlarge*

Meanwhile, on the city's South End, parents at Rising Star Elementary celebrate when they can cobble together even \$300.

“That’s in a good year,” said Leticia Bazemore, former PTA vice president at Rising Star.

About [3 in 4 students](#) at Rising Star come from low-income households. Parents often can’t afford to pay membership dues for the PTA — let alone write hefty checks at its fundraisers. Instead it is often up to people like Bazemore, other PTA board members and school staff to donate their own money to cover membership fees, buy lunches during teacher appreciation week or help families afford tickets to attend special events.

“We were paying out of pocket for the smallest things — movie night, fifth-grade graduation,” said Bazemore, a special ed paraprofessional. “Everyone wanted to do right by the kids. We can’t always afford it.”

*\$425 million to \$781 million — the amount of money PTAs generate each year, totaling less than 1 percent of school spending in the U.S.*

The staggering disparity in how much parent groups can raise for their neighborhood schools exists throughout the country. And debates over how — and whether — to narrow those gaps have sparked headlines from coast to coast, from [Malibu and Santa Monica](#) in California to [New York City](#). Some have called the whole issue a distraction from the real problem: A lack of sufficient state and federal funding.

Rita Green, the Washington state education chair for the NAACP, volunteered on the parent-teacher group at Rainier Beach High from 2007 to 2016. The school’s PTSA had zero assets or income as of 2018, according to a local [public radio report](#).

“I know how hard we worked at Rainier Beach to get what little money we could, so if we had to give half of that to another school, I’d be upset too,” Green said. “The real issue is Washington state just needs to fully fund education. If we had full funding, we wouldn’t have to depend so much on PTAs to hire teachers or instructional assistants or provide the support services needed at school.”

*Mothers Gwyn Hainsworth, far left, Vernee Fletcher, Jamie Zimmerman, Katy Strange and Leticia Bazemore pose at Jefferson Park in Seattle during a June 2019 soccer scrimmage. The parent associations at Green Lake and Rising Star elementary schools co-sponsored the event so students at the two schools could meet for the first time. Credit: Kam Yee*

Still, since at least 2010, a small group of Seattle parents have tried to convince friends and neighbors to practice what many here preach about equity and voluntarily divert some of their wealth to high-poverty schools.

The idea has generated opposition, mostly behind closed doors, in this deeply progressive city. Despite this, a PTA equity plan slowly gained momentum — before grinding to a halt during the pandemic. Over the past year, however, Covid-19's outsized impact on marginalized communities and the national reckoning over racial justice may have spurred more white and affluent families to reconsider the consequences of only advocating for their own kids.

“This is kind of, like, almost now or never,” said Vivian van Gelder, also a former PTA president in Seattle and co-founder of [Families and Communities for Equity in Schools](#).

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While the idea has hardly caught fire nationally, a handful of communities have already created mechanisms for redistributing parent donations between schools: Arlington, Virginia; Evanston, Illinois; Oakland, California; and Portland, Oregon are all examples. The push for equity among PTAs in those cities hit sometimes fierce resistance before advocates found ways to calm fears that wealthy parents might disinvest from — or leave — public schools. (Research suggests the practice has no significant impact on overall giving to schools.)

Despite the good intentions, the concept of funneling cash from the haves to the have-nots also raises concerns of paternalism and white saviorism. In Seattle, at least one group of parents has already worked through that issue. When the Green Lake PTA offered to help its counterpart at Rising Star three years ago, PTA vice president Bazemore and her board first set clear expectations: They wanted sweat equity, not just a hand-out.

“It was never about the money,” she said. “We were focusing on new relationships to help these kids.”

*Parents from the Green Lake and Rising Star elementary schools in Seattle meet for a spaghetti dinner in late 2019. The parent associations formed a new partnership that year to co-sponsor school events and share parent donations between the schools. Credit: Dawn Larson*

Parents from the two schools spent hours at spaghetti dinners and in mediation sessions making sure both sides understood the strengths of the other: Green Lake parents knew how to write a grant application; Rising Star parents knew a good accountant. Each PTA also had to play defense at home — against Rising Star staff making direct appeals for funding from Green Lake and against wealthy parents asking if their money was being spent appropriately at the other school.

Ultimately, the parents agreed that the Green Lake PTA would direct 3 percent of its fundraising — \$5,000 during the 2020-21 school year — directly to the Rising Star PTA and would sponsor specific events for kids and teachers during the year.

Parents from both schools believe they learned how to share power and advocate together for greater change within a system that often rewards a vocal minority of white voters.

“It feels really good to say, ‘I believe in this and that,’” said Dawn Larson, a social justice and equity co-chair of the Green Lake PTA. “To actually do the things you have to do to support that, it takes risk and maybe failing and possibly looking foolish. We are a lip-service city and not everyone feels comfortable doing that.”

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Parent-teacher associations [date back to at least 1897](#), when nearly 2,000 women met in Washington, D.C. for the National Congress of Mothers – predecessor to the National PTA. A key priority at the meeting: Ensuring all children had access to a good education and skilled teachers. The focus inspired local parent-teacher groups – at the time, [segregated by race](#) – to drive many reforms in public schools, including the additions of kindergarten, playgrounds, school lunches and water fountains, according to Christine Woysner, a [professor at Temple University](#) who has researched the history of volunteer groups in education.

“Widows and people with grown children would join,” Woysner said of the early PTAs. “This was a community cause and it was for everyone’s kids and for the benefit of the entire community.”

*Parents Grace Coleman, left, and Sarah Heath brainstorm a pen pal project for fourth graders at Green Lake and Rising Star elementary schools during a June 2019 soccer scrimmage co-hosted by parent associations at both schools in Seattle. Credit: Dawn Larson*

Over the decades, however, local PTAs shifted their attention and efforts away from advocacy work to fundraising for individual schools.

Leslie Boggs, president of the National PTA, blamed much of that evolution on the often-exhausting fights over K-12 funding within school districts and states.

“The only thing that could impact their own children immediately was if they [parents] did the fundraising on their own,” Boggs said. “But the key education resources should come from the school district budgets. It shouldn’t be linked to parents’ fundraising at all.”

Less than a quarter of public schools in the U.S. have parent groups formally associated with the National PTA, according to [The Brookings Institution](#). When local PTAs reach out to the national group to ask about splitting fundraising more equitably, they are provided with information about how funds should be raised and spent or directed back to their state PTAs, said National PTA spokesperson Heidi May Wilson. Ultimately, Wilson and Boggs said, it is the position of the National PTA that all necessary equipment and staffing at public schools should be paid for with

government funds. They encourage parent leaders in local PTAs to advocate for increased investments in public education.

*\$422,000 – the amount that parents at one Seattle elementary school raised in a single night at an auction in April 2016*

Estimates of how much money PTAs generate each year range from about [\\$425 million](#) to [\\$781 million](#), amounting to less than 1 percent of total school spending in the U.S., according to the Center for American Progress. (It's difficult to get an exact figure for PTA fundraising, as financial reporting rules offer little transparency. PTAs with less than \$50,000 in revenue, for example, typically don't need to file federal nonprofit reports. Parents also can funnel donations through athletic booster clubs, school foundations and other nonprofit or private organizations.)

Though the overall amount raised is a drop in the national education budget, it's disproportionately distributed to schools in well-heeled neighborhoods. The nation's 50 richest PTAs raised and spent \$43 million dollars for the nation's most affluent schools in fiscal year 2013-14, according to Meg Benner, a senior consultant at the Center for American Progress. In 2017, she co-authored [a report](#) that found some of the richest PTAs collected nearly \$2,000 per student. In 2013-14, average per-pupil spending on public education in the U.S. was about [\\$11,000 per student](#): Wealthy PTAs could boost per student spending at their kids' schools by about 20 percent.

"It's probably natural for parents to make sure their children have everything to maximize their education," Benner said. "Unfortunately, not all parents have the opportunity to do the same for their kids."

The 2017 report closely examined perhaps the longest-running experiment in redistributing parent donations – in Portland Public Schools.

*Students from Green Lake and Rising Star elementary schools in Seattle play ultimate frisbee at Jefferson Park in June 2019. Credit: Dawn Larson*

Statewide cuts to K-12 funding in Oregon prompted some parents in 1994 to ask Portland's school board for permission to raise private dollars to pay for teaching and staff positions at their schools. The board agreed, but required a central equity fund to collect one-third of all funds over \$10,000 raised at an individual campus. A school foundation that raised \$40,000 would keep the initial \$10,000 plus two thirds of the rest, for a total haul of \$30,000. The remaining \$10,000 would flow into a citywide foundation, which would share the funds with other schools based on student demographics, federal funding and other factors.

Last year, local school foundations in Portland raised \$4 million, with [\\$1.1 million](#) set aside for the equity fund. In 2019, a new superintendent established a



Fund for Portland Public Schools that coordinates fundraising, including parent donations, across the entire school district. Some have suggested to Jonathan García, the district's chief engagement officer, that the new arrangement might be good excuse to get rid of the local school foundations entirely, which would effectively stop parents from spending their money on staff salaries. ([Austin has just banned parents from covering staff salaries.](#))

García isn't sure what message it would send to families to make rules about what they can contribute.

“How do we honor — not vilify — what parents are trying to do at their school level?” García said. “My mom would give tamales, not money ... what does that say about commitment to campus?”

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Additional support for citywide giving was provided by the 2017 study, which suggested that early fears that the central fund would diminish parent contributions were exaggerated. Benner and her co-authors compared three years of financial data for PTAs in Portland and Seattle — enrollment size, per pupil spending and socioeconomic data are similar between the two. And while data limitations restricted their study to about half of all PTAs in either district, the comparison found the equity policy in Portland “did not substantially reduce overall parent contributions.”

Skip Card, a New York City parent who's [written about the Portland model](#), rejected the idea on principle.

*“Are we going to be the board who tells families they can't buy counselors for their school right after a pandemic?”*

*Chandra Hampson, president, Seattle School Board*

Card described the PTA at his daughter's elementary school — which during her first year there raised \$800,000 — as “a parents association on steroids.” Card, who grew up near Seattle and attended the University of Washington, didn't dispute that parent fundraising exacerbates inequities in schools.

“I don't think that's the intention,” he said. “No one raises money for their parent association hoping to hold other people down. But the idea of taking private donations and diverting them to a place that the government thinks could be better served, people don't really realize just how revolutionary that is.”

Card used the example of alumni donations to colleges to make his point. “I don't donate to UW and expect the state of Washington to say, ‘Well, Seattle Central

College needs much more money, so we're just going to take it.”

*The parent associations at some Seattle schools can raise hundreds of thousands of dollars in a single night at auctions and galas. Parents at Rising Star Elementary often struggle to fundraise even \$300 in a good year. Credit: Neal Morton/The Hechinger Report*

Back in Seattle, advocates for a PTA equity plan have encountered similar arguments.

Van Gelder, a former PTA president at Montlake Elementary who advocates for equity in Seattle schools, pitched the idea to other parents at her kid's school. Only **6 percent** of students come from low-income households at Montlake. The reaction was intense, van Gelder remembered. A meeting to discuss the proposal lasted nearly three hours. Many parents supported the idea, but some balked at the thought of moving money they donated specifically for their children to another school. Others suggested high-poverty campuses already get much more federal funding, through Title I, to support high-needs students.

Van Gelder has little patience for the Title I argument because she thinks the kids getting that funding need it just to start in a more equitable place.

“It's like having an elevator in a school,” she said. “The extra money that goes into maintaining the elevator is so kids using a wheelchair can at least get to the classroom.” Classroom access should be considered the bare minimum, she said. In contrast, “PTA funding provides more materials, better programming. It's an enhanced education experience, not just basic access.”

*\$43 million — the amount the nation's 50 richest PTAs raised and spent for the nation's most affluent schools in 2013-14*

More than 2,000 miles away, in Evanston, Illinois, a diverse group of parents spent years working through such debates.

Volunteers from each campus in the Evanston/Skokie School District 65 started meeting in 2016 to study the pros and cons of various redistribution models. They eventually settled on asking PTAs to pool their resources, donating up to 12 percent of their total income to a central fund that will distribute money to schools with a higher proportion of students living in poverty. And last December, **every PTA** in the K-8 school district voted to voluntarily join a three-year pilot that starts this summer.

“There was definitely a moment in the pandemic where we could have given up. But no, this is the exact time to put everything we've practiced into action,” said Suni Kartha, co-facilitator of the **PTA Equity Project**.

Kartha, also a member of the school board, considered pushing for a formal policy. But she worried about inspiring widespread opposition, noting that after the Santa Monica-Malibu school district started redistributing donations equally between all schools in 2011, Malibu, the more affluent city, tried for years to [split its schools](#) from the district.

*Only about one in 10 students at Green Lake Elementary in Seattle come from low-income households. The school's parent association directs 3 percent of its revenues each year to Rising Star Elementary, where 75 percent of students live in poverty. Credit: Neal Morton/The Hechinger Report*

The grassroots approach appears to be growing in other communities: An equity fund in Oakland, California, operates entirely on voluntary donations from participating PTAs. So, too, does a countywide council in Arlington, Virginia, where schools must apply for grants from a central fund.

In Alameda, neighbor to Oakland, Brian Dodson, the district teacher of the year in 2020, said he and his colleagues felt the need to take some action following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis last year.

“There’s this national crisis that’s out of our control,” he said, but added he feels “stubbornly optimistic that people want to make a positive change right now.”

Dodson and other teachers will make a formal pitch to the individual PTAs at their respective schools throughout May, hoping to convince them to sign up to develop an equity plan among Alameda schools.

Last summer, [the Seattle Council PTSA](#) — an umbrella group of parent teacher associations — decided to move forward on a 2019 resolution and form a committee to explore advocating for more equitable funding, but a call for volunteers to work on the committee remained unfilled.

*“No one raises money for their parent association hoping to hold other people down.”  
Skip Card, parent*

“Everything’s at a standstill for a lot of reasons,” said Edna Iglesias, a mother of three and an elementary school teacher who chairs a separate committee on the council. “You’ve got the people who like to talk about equity and then backpedal a little bit, and then you have others impacted so severely (by Covid) there’s no extra time or extra effort to work on those things.”

The Seattle School Board, meanwhile, will get a chance to weigh in soon. Board President Chandra Hampson plans to revisit the [\\$250,000 cap](#) on parent donations later this year — “Something will get done before I leave office,” she said — but she also expects the past year to complicate any public debate over a potential PTA equity plan.



“Are we going to be the board who tells families they can’t buy counselors for their school right after a pandemic?” Hampson said.

Meanwhile, a coalition of 12 schools in Seattle’s South End – many of which see little PTA spending in normal years – tried a pilot redistribution plan among themselves in May. Families and volunteers raised money through a virtual walkathon, then will dole it out to each participating school. As of early June, the “Moveathon” had [raised \\$152,000](#) – well above its goal of \$120,000.

“There’s not a lot of resources here,” said Sarah Igawa, president of the parent association at Maple Elementary, one of the schools in the new coalition. “But if we want everyone to do this, let’s start with ourselves and prove it’s possible.”

It remains unclear to committed advocates of a citywide PTA equity plan here whether a renewed push after the pandemic will create actual change, or wither amid the rush for a return to normal.

*“The real issue is Washington state just needs to fully fund education.”*

*Rita Green, education chair, Seattle King County NAACP*

Kaleb Germinaro, a doctoral student at UW, started working behind the scenes in Seattle in 2019, connecting parents and organizations interested in the idea of redistributing PTA revenues. That work mostly stopped as he focused on the basic needs of families during Covid and the recession; he wondered whether the shared devastation would create a moment to reimagine a new normal.

“This is the first time that white people ever felt oppressed, obviously not to the degree of folks of color by any means,” Germinaro said. “But a lot of people lost jobs, a lot of people died. A lot of other people have been dealing with that for centuries. So, what comes next?”

*This story about [PTAs](#) was produced by [The Hechinger Report](#), a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education. Sign up for the [Hechinger newsletter](#).*