

Pier Party raises \$125K for SMMEF

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The Pier Party is over, but the Santa Monica-Malibu Education Foundation's fundraising campaign — and the debate over its effectiveness — are not.

The foundation's second-annual event at Pacific Park on the Santa Monica Pier and an accompanying online auction brought in about \$125,000, according to SMMEF officials.

More than 1,500 people attended the April 26 fundraiser, which was part of the organization's ongoing push to raise \$4 million for instructional assistants, literacy coaches, arts and other enrichment activities in local schools.

The event came amid discussion among school officials, families and community members about the district's current fundraising model, which puts SMMEF in charge of a centralized effort.

"This was a beautiful community event," SMMEF board president Kathleen Rawson said in a press release. "With 35 corporate sponsors, over 100 volunteers, eight restaurants donating food for the VIP event, and over 1,500 community members enjoying fun in the sun on the Pier, Pier Party is the perfect example of our community coming together to support our students."

The foundation had raised about \$2.2 million as of May 4 in a cycle that began Feb. 1, 2014. The deadline is June 30.

In the previous fundraising cycle, which generated about \$3.2 million, the Board of Education approved a one-time allocation of about \$800,000 to cover the gap. School district Supt. Sandra Lyon has said a shortfall this time could lead to cuts in programming.

Supporters of the centralized system say it ensures equality across the district. Critics argue it has negatively impacted parents' willingness to contribute and should be discarded in favor of the former school-based model.

"It's a simple truth built into human nature: we give more willingly if we can see where our donations go and what good they do," Patrick Adams said. "It's easy to get a parent to feel school spirit for their own child's school and therefore volunteer to help. Like it or not, nobody feels school spirit for a school board or a school district. ... It's time to acknowledge a failed attempt and return to the system that worked."

Meanwhile, SMMEF has planned two private events for major donors in the next few weeks. A screening of the film "White Water," which will be hosted by Edison Language Academy at Aero Theatre in the fall, will also support the foundation. A spring mailing is encouraging people to contribute before the end of the fundraiser.

Students from Will Rogers Elementary School recently contributed about \$100 to the fundraiser by collecting plastic bottles at their jog-a-thon.

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