

Ed Foundation gifted \$4.8M

SMMUSD HDQTRS — The energy at Thursday's Board of Education meeting was palpable.

The unusually-crowded board room erupted into applause after almost every presentation, from the undeniably worthy – an announcement that a local middle school class' science project would be traveling into space – to a more routine update from student board members.

When Linda Greenberg Gross, executive director of the Santa Monica-Malibu Education Foundation, took the podium at roughly half-past eight, the reason became clear.

“The Santa Monica-Malibu Education Foundation has been named as the recipient of an estate gift totaling \$4.8 million,” Greenberg Gross told the board and audience, an announcement greeted by a standing ovation and a Publishers Clearing House-style check.

The money, donated by a Pacific Palisades resident named Peggy Bergmann, was the largest of several gifts made at Bergmann's behest to a variety of charitable organizations, and the biggest donation the Education Foundation has received in its 30-year history.

Half of it will be used to establish the Peggy Bergmann Arts Endowment Fund for the purpose of providing semi-private music instruction and even purchase instruments for economically-disadvantaged students throughout the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District.

Consequentially for the Education Foundation, the remainder will go directly to benefit the foundation's new mission as the central fundraising arm of the district, a policy shift adopted amid controversy in November 2011. The gift is game-changing, Greenberg Gross said.

“This is a truly transformative gift for the Santa Monica-Malibu Education Foundation and our efforts to support every student at every school in the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District,” she said.

It certainly alters the playing field for the Education Foundation, which faced an uphill battle to change its image within the parent community from a group that raised \$400,000 a year to support education efforts in the district to one that could pull in 10 times that amount by the 2015-16 school year.

The Education Foundation became the beating heart of districtwide fundraising, a board policy adopted late last year that cut parent-teacher associations out of the business of paying for staff and additional classes at specific school sites, and were instead relegated to funding “stuff” like school supplies and field trips.

In the past, parents in wealthy areas were able to implement special programs like ceramics classes and bring in aides for teachers where other schools struggled. In one school, parents raised an additional \$2,100 per student, while another school could gather only \$65 per student.

After the policy was put in place, parents continued to question if it could be successful and why people would be expected to give for all schools rather than support their children's.

“From the beginning, we hoped for some catalyzing donor to show that this is something people could get behind,” said Superintendent Sandra Lyon.

This was it.

Bergmann *did not have any connection to the district*, but she did want her gift to benefit children's music programs and was enthusiastic about the idea that the money could jump-start the districtwide fundraising effort, said Sonya Sultan, one of Bergmann's attorneys and a member of the steering committee for the education group Community for Excellent Public Schools.

In fact, all of Bergmann's attorneys were parents that had children, past or present, in the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District, according to Greenberg Gross.

Negotiations began approximately nine months ago, unbeknownst to almost anyone in the district.

Lyon and Greenberg Gross were privy from the beginning – both kept a tight lid on the information as the details got worked out and, after Bergmann's passing, the estate worked its way through the probate court.

The final court order executing the estate came down at 8:30 a.m. Thursday morning, just 12 hours before the Education Foundation would take the stage to announce it to the Board of Education and general public.

Even her board only found out at roughly 6 p.m. that evening, Greenberg Gross said.

Although the gift was substantial – clearly exceeding the \$1 million goal held for the 2013-14 school year – officials hope that Bergmann's bequest will serve as inspiration to others to give to the districtwide fundraising

effort.

“We need to build momentum so we can reach that goal,” Lyon said.

ashley@smdp.com

[See this story as it appeared in the paper](#)