Ana Hernandez and Barry Schmell come from very different backgrounds, but they have at least one thing in common: They both lead their schools’ parent-teacher associations — Ana Hernandez at Junipero Serra Elementary in Bernal Heights, Barry Schmell at the Harvey Milk Civil Rights Academy in the Castro.

Once upon a time, PTAs held bake sales to pay for field trips and annual gifts for the teachers. Those days are gone.

Today, after five years of severe budget cuts in the San Francisco Unified School District, PTAs are being asked to pay for teachers, specialists, staff training, e-books, school psychologists, computers, basic school supplies, and more.

But not all PTAs can afford these things. Parents at just 10 elementary schools raise more than half the PTA money that all 71 elementary schools in the district take in. Many of the rest raise nothing, or almost nothing.

Parents at some schools have personal wealth and other advantages, such as better language and organizational skills. Fundraising has become an essential part of public-school finance in San Francisco — and that is triggering far-reaching changes in the culture of the schools.

**DIFFERENT FAMILIES, DIFFERENT SCHOOLS**

Barry Schmell’s daughter, Jonesy, attends fourth grade at Harvey Milk Civil Rights Academy, which raised more than any other elementary school in the district in 2011 — but in subsequent years lost funding. Schmell is divorced from his adopted daughter’s other father, and works from his home in the Castro as Google’s senior technical instructor and a father to his daughter’s life and education. Schmell was raised in Baltimore, the youngest of five in an Orthodox Jewish family, and studied at the Applied Physics Lab at Johns Hopkins. “I grew up in a home where my mother was the PTA president,” Schmell said. “I grew up stuffing envelopes in our living room, and so I kind of feel like that’s part of school. I was surprised that public schools in San Francisco required so much fundraising.”

Ana Hernandez, seated second from left, is PTA chapiter president at Junipero Serra Elementary in Bernal Heights, where her daughter Jasmine (far right), sent to her big sister’s school to go to school. Hernandez emigrated from Guatemala in 2004, facing poverty and a society shattered by 50 years of civil war. Today, she supports the entire family working 42 hours a week as a laundry mechanic. She’s the main breadwinner and sometimes a second job to support Junipero Serra families facing economic emergencies. Because almost all the school’s families live in poverty, their financial contributions tend to be modest — “They can help with one dollar, two dollars,” Hernandez said. “Even when they have no money, people help in different ways.”

**Two PTA Presidents, Two Realities**

During “morning circle” at Harvey Milk Civil Rights Academy, Schmell shows off invita-
tions to a roller-skating party fundraiser. He and members of the Parent-Family Club aim to raise $50,000 for supplies, field trips and arts programs this year. “It isn’t just the fundraising — this is my community,” Schmell said. “This is my existence through the school.” The families are diverse, and Schmell and daughter Jonesy know others who are like theirs: multiracial, with gay parents and adopted children.

Ana Hernandez serves food at a monthly dinner party hosted by Junipero Serra’s PTA. She first got involved by working on the school’s food bank, distributing food to hungry families. This school year, PTAs raised $2,000 to support field trips, buy computers for the library, underwrite the fifth grade graduation project. The PTA also set aside part of that fund to support Junipero-Serra families facing economic emergencies. Because almost all the school’s families live in poverty, their financial contribu-
tions tend to be modest — “They can help with one dollar, two dollars,” Hernandez said. “Even when they have no money, people help in different ways.”
I waited tables in college, and I hated pooling the tips,” Schmell said. This memory makes him reluctant to support a system in which San Francisco businesses give a tip directly to her, in appreciation for a delicious meal. “I always share the tip with the other line cooks. ‘Everybody’s working hard,’ she said, ‘so we share.’” Watters also pool their tips, she said, because “the bus boy, the person working at the bar, the cooks, everybody’s working hard.” She always shares the tip with the other line cooks. “If people think the government pays for everything at school, but it’s not like that,” she said. “They need to do a targeted fundraising campaign for that.”

After years of cuts, the Junipero Serra library now has an annual budget of just $500. Many parents said the library was actually improved in recent years, thanks to book donations and volunteer efforts. Even so, the shelves feel underpopulated, and the room under-used. With a limited budget, Principal Evelyn Cheung had to make hard choices, so she prioritized the computer lab and technology training for the kids ahead of other costs. Hernandez supports Cheung’s priorities, and the PTA has been able to buy computers for the lab. “Some people think the government pays for everything at school, but it’s not that,” he said. “We need to make fundraising, because that is how we can help the school.”

The same is true for Castro businesses that support the school. They might not give as much if they thought their money was going to children in other communities. “But maybe it would be better for us,” Hernandez thought. “If other people are able to do more, then we’ll do more.”

San Francisco’s low-salary pay scale politician, honored by a shrine in the hallway. Milk briefly worked as a teacher and made his name successfully campaigning against the 1978 Briggs Initiative, which would have excluded California schools from the gay and lesbian teachers. “I’m concerned about tech infrastructure. ‘If we had everyone at Harvey Milk give $250 for the year, then we wouldn’t have to do severe fundraising,’ he said. ‘I’m very concerned about technology. I’ll have to buy a computer lab, and we need to do a targeted fundraising campaign for that.’

BUILDING COMMUNITY IN A TIME OF BUDGET CUTS

Schmell shows off the school library to a group of parents who are considering sending their children to Harvey Milk Civil Rights Academy. They are all working hard.” All the families at Junipero Serra Elementary School work hard, she added, even if they make very little money. If schools shared, she said, “they would work together and they’d build trust.”

TURNING UNIQUE CULTURES INTO SUPPORT

Harvey Milk Civil Rights Academy is named after California’s first openly gay elected politician, honored by a shrine in the hallway. Milk briefly worked as a teacher and made his name successfully campaigning against the 1978 Briggs Initiative, which would have excluded California schools from the gay and lesbian teachers. “I’m concerned about tech infrastructure. ‘If we had everyone at Harvey Milk give $250 for the year, then we wouldn’t have to do severe fundraising,’ he said. ‘I’m very concerned about technology. I’ll have to buy a computer lab, and we need to do a targeted fundraising campaign for that.’

A Central American indigenous dance troupe from the University of California, Berkeley, leads a “friendship dance” at Junipero Serra’s annual fundraiser, which this year netted $3,000 — almost half the PTA’s goal. Most of Junipero Serra’s students are immigrants or the children of immigrants, mainly from Latin America. So all gatherings are conducted in both Spanish and English; parents and staff said bonds between immigrant and native-born communities are strong. Parents in both groups make a conscious effort to build community across cultural and linguistic barriers, Principal Evelyn Cheung said. “These are not isolated groupings,” she said. “They work together and they’ve built trust.”

SYMMETRY IN FLORAL DESIGN

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