

A school played ‘The Lion King’ at a fundraiser. Disney’s licensing firm fined it for not having usage rights.



By [Lateshia Beachum](#)

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A dad-run Parent Teacher Association in Berkeley, Calif., hosted a “parent’s night out” fundraiser for their kids’ elementary school that served pizza, soft drinks and the chance to watch the 2019 remake of the Disney classic “The Lion King.”

The Emerson Dads Club for Emerson Elementary School raised about \$800 from the event and moved on to their list of PTA priorities. Then, on Jan. 30, the PTA and the school’s principal received a letter from Disney’s licensing company, Movie Licensing USA, that they had broken copyright law and needed to cough up \$250, [CNN reported](#).

It’s not clear how the firm found out about the viewing, but it prompted the letter that informed the school that showing a Disney movie for entertainment purposes requires a public performance license, [Berkeleyside reported](#).

A dad brought the DVD of the 2019, star-studded remake from home, PTA President David Rose told [KPIX](#).

“We just basically threw it on while the kids were playing in the auditorium,” he told the outlet.

The dads had no idea that the club needed to pay a one-time licensing fee of \$250 to show the film at its fundraiser that had an optional \$15 cover for admission, Rose told KPIX.

The fine costs the same amount of money as a single-use permit, according to Berkeleyside's review of the letter. Schools can also opt to pay \$536 for an annual license. Ownership or rental of a movie doesn't legally allow someone to show a movie without proper licensing, Movie Licensing USA's website states.

About 25,000 schools nationwide have licenses that allow them to show movies, and school librarians and technology directors are typically the gatekeepers who are aware of the laws and who guard against fines like the one Emerson is facing, said Cory Goellner, Movie Licensing USA's copyright manager, in an interview with Berkeleyside.

Movie Licensing USA counts DreamWorks, Lionsgate and Paramount among its list of clients whose work it protects, according to its website. The movie companies will not hesitate to seek action that could result in prison sentences and fines of up to \$250,000, the company warned.

For Walt Disney Pictures' licensing firm to go after a school is "very rare," said Berkeley City Council member Lori Droste, who had been very vocal about her disdain of the company's actions on Twitter.

"I was a public teacher for five years, and this [showing movies] happens all the time. Not to excuse it," she told The Washington Post in an interview Tuesday. "It seems very bizarre to me that this is the battle they choose to fight."

Droste, who has children who attend Emerson, said other parents are shocked about the fine and still others accept the "fair criticism" that the school should've known about the rule.

"The argument I'm making is just the irony of Disney making billions of dollars and picking on a dad who owns this movie," she said, referencing Proposition 13.

The law, passed in 1978, reduced property tax rates on homes, businesses and farms. The cross-the-board breaks have strained school funding throughout the state. Schools districts previously relied heavily on property tax revenue, and they had more discretion about how to spend such funds before Proposition 13 passed, KQED reported.

The Disney firm is going after the wrong people, Droste said.

"School funding is a growing challenge in California, as state funding cannot keep pace with the increasing expenses school districts across the state are experiencing," Berkeley Unified School District spokeswoman Trish McDermott said in a statement. "Elementary school PTAs in Berkeley, and throughout the state, hold small fundraising events to contribute additional revenue to their school budget. Emerson Elementary School's PTA has seen an increase in donations since this story broke. They will use the money to pay the \$250 usage fee for the Lion King."

Voters will decide on another Proposition 13, called the School and College Facilities Bond, in March. The primary ballot asks voters whether they want to pass a \$15 billion school bond that would raise local property taxes to fund repairs for K-12 schools and public colleges and universities, the Orange County Register reported.

Neither Disney nor its licensing firm, Movie Licensing USA, responded to requests for comment.

Rose, president of the PTA, told KPIX that the fine will be paid and hopefully recovered through donations.

“The event made \$800, so if we have to fork over a third of it to Disney, so be it,” he told the station. “You know, lesson learned.”

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