Disney C.E.O. Apologizes to P.T.A. Asked to Pay After ‘Lion King’ Screening

Two months after a Berkeley, Calif., elementary school showed a privately owned DVD of the film at a movie night, a licensing representative for Disney told the school to pay a $250 fee.

The chairman of Disney said on Thursday that the company is apologizing to a California elementary school that was asked to pay for a license after it showed “The Lion King” at a fund-raiser organized by students’ parents in 2019.

Robert A. Iger, the chairman, said in a post on Twitter that the company “apologizes to the Emerson Elementary School P.T.A. and I will personally donate to their fund raising initiative.”

The event on Nov. 15 was meant to be a fun night at the movies for students at Emerson Elementary School in Berkeley, Calif., with pizza and a showing of “The Lion King.” Students were encouraged to bring blankets and wear pajamas to the fund-raiser, although no children would be denied entry if they could not afford one of the $15 tickets.

But on Tuesday, Emerson’s parent-teacher association said it had been asked by Movie Licensing USA, a licensing company representing Disney, to pay $250 for a screening license, a request that pitted the school against a corporate behemoth and set up a broader conversation about public school funding. “We recently were fined by Disney for a movie night,” the group said on Facebook, where it also announced a fund-raiser to help pay for it.

“Disney taking money from a public school is completely uncalled for,” another person commented. “They could have just sent a notice and asked that you follow protocol in the future.”

On social media and in interviews this week, parents, elected officials and the school district framed the flap in ways that echoed themes from the movie itself, which tells the tale of a cub named Simba who must face down far mightier foes.

“It was an interesting collision of worlds,” Lori Droste, a P.T.A. representative and a member of the Berkeley City Council, said in an interview on Wednesday. “I thought the irony was really rich.”

Movie Licensing USA is the licensing agent for Walt Disney Pictures and other major studios. It made the request in an email sent to P.T.A. members on Thursday.

Corey Goellner, a licensing manager with Movie Licensing USA, cited copyright law, and pointed to a $536 annual licensing option as well as discounts on multiyear agreements.

In the email, which was reported last week by Berkeleyside, Ms. Goellner said the company had received an “alert” that “The Lion King” had been screened on Nov. 15 at the school.

“We have been asked by the studio to contact you to make this showing and any future showings legal,” she wrote.

The email said most school librarians and technology directors were aware of the rules, and often approached Movie Licensing USA to secure permits in advance. She said 25,000 schools across the country had licenses.
Ms. Goellner could not be reached for comment on Wednesday and on Thursday. It was not immediately clear whether the company was still requiring the licensing fee after Mr. Iger’s tweet.

Ms. Droste said on Wednesday that about $800 had been raised the night of the screening, but that more has been gathered through the fund-raising drive that was started after the request for the payment. (She declined to say how much.)

On Wednesday, Trish McDermott, a spokeswoman for the Berkeley Unified School District, said the school had had an increase in donations.

“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,” she said in an emailed statement. “Elementary school P.T.A.s in Berkeley, and throughout the state, hold small fund-raising events to contribute additional revenue to their school budget.”

According to Ms. Droste, the DVD copy of the 2019 version of “The Lion King” used at the screening last November had been purchased from Best Buy by a father at the school.

The day Movie Licensing USA sent notice to the Emerson P.T.A., Ms. Droste reflected on Proposition 13, a 1978 voter initiative in California that critics say has made it difficult for public school districts to obtain proper funding.

“Who wants to hear an unbelievable story about how Disney is essentially fining Berkeley’s Emerson Elementary School PTA $250 while reaping millions of dollars through a corporate loophole that has decimated public schools across California?” Ms. Droste wrote.

“The fundamental message is this,” she added. “It’s absurd that PTAs throughout California have to raise money (a lot!) to pay for teachers and financial scholarships when this can be easily remedied through investment in our public schools.”

Christine Hauser is a reporter, covering national and foreign news. Her previous jobs in the newsroom include stints in Business covering financial markets and on the Metro Desk in the police bureau. @ChristineNYT

A version of this article appears in print on Feb. 6, 2020, Section B, Page 3 of the New York edition with the headline: School Screens ‘Lion King.’ Disney’s Response? Pay Up.