

GETTING YOUR FAIR SHARE OF THE SCHOOL'S

If you stress individualized, independent learning, you may be getting the short end of the budget stick

BY KIM MARSHALL

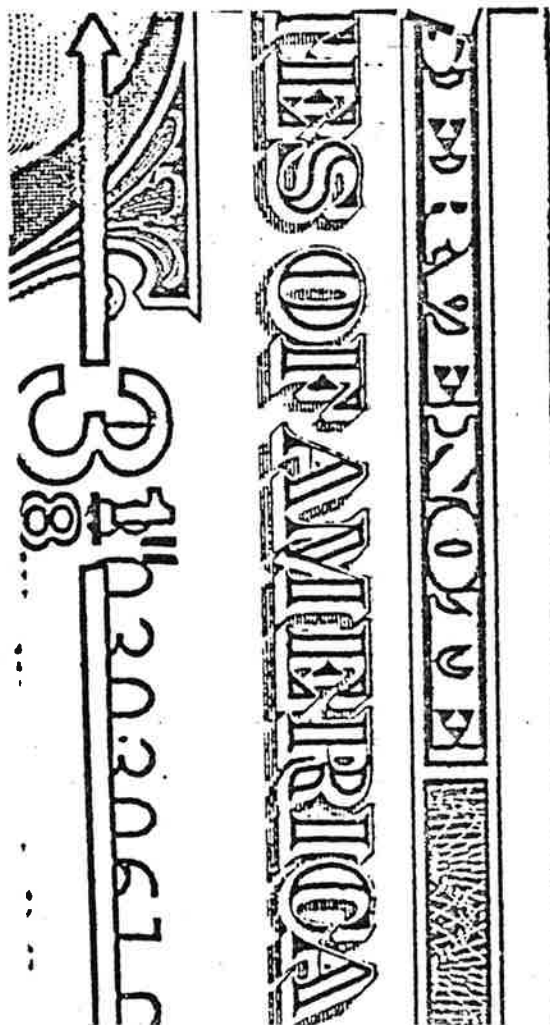
Do open classrooms cost less to run than conventional classrooms? A growing number of teachers believe so. They argue that the multitude of small expenses typical of an open classroom—paperback books, gerbil food, games, cooking materials and the like—is deceptive, that the total is actually less than the cost of sets of expensive textbooks for traditional classrooms.

But the fact that teachers who stress independent, individualized learning may be getting more bang for the educational buck should not be allowed to become a penalty at school budget time. To allocate less money to a particular classroom simply because it costs less to run is, in effect, handicapping innovative teachers and keeping them from reaching their full potential.

Many school system administrators claim that they have solved the prob-

lem by allocating funds for classroom materials on a per-pupil basis. In actual practice, the formula doesn't work out equitably, mostly because it is so much easier to order textbooks and turkey cutouts than rabbits and assorted paperbacks. All too often, therefore, only those teachers who are accomplished scroungers and builders, or who are willing to spend their own money for materials, are able to set up and run open classrooms at maximum effectiveness. In short, most funding systems discriminate against the innovative teacher.

One expression of this bias is the fact that most principals refuse to regard each classroom as an entity and give the teacher control over a budget. In most systems, each school receives a lump sum for supplies and learning resources based on its number of students, but few principals are willing to divide that up among





teachers and let them decide how it is to be spent. Teachers customarily must channel their orders through the principal and seldom are given any idea of how much money they are entitled to.

This arrangement gives principals the power to veto purchases they think are improper, since there is no obligation to provide each teacher with a given amount. Many principals, although they may tolerate open classrooms in their schools, favor requests for textbooks over requests for open classroom materials, which they often regard as frivolous.

What's more, the lists of approved books and materials from which teachers place their orders often don't include what an open classroom

teacher needs, and certainly don't provide for petty cash expenditures or charge accounts at hardware, pet or paperback-book stores. The approved lists are frequently passed around to teachers during the school day, allowing very little time for decisions. Moreover, the average teacher knows too little about new materials, dealing with salespeople, or how to make effective use of resource catalogs to make intelligent orders on the spur of the moment. The result is that many teachers wind up ordering blind, or not ordering at all—a situation that favors traditional teachers, who tend simply to order a new edition of a familiar textbook.

But even if the things an innovative teacher needs are on the school sys-

tem's approved list, and even if that teacher is ready when the list comes flying around and places orders for materials that are right for an open classroom, and even if those orders are approved by the principal and sent downtown, there is usually another problem. That's the length of time it generally takes for an order to be filled. The shortest wait is seldom less than three months, and in some districts, the waiting time is a full year. As if that weren't bad enough, games, puzzles and other materials headed for open classrooms, because of their number, size and attractiveness, have a much greater chance of being misdirected or stolen along the way.

The net result of these factors is to discourage innovative teachers from using the system to obtain materials and other supplies. My own situation is typical. I teach sixth grade in Boston, and I have looked at these approved lists (standing in the doorway of the classroom with my kids going bananas behind me and the messenger impatiently tapping her foot in front of me) and given up and ordered nothing. As a result, in each of the last four years, I have spent very little of my \$26-per-pupil allotment for supplies and have made a virtual gift of about \$1,500 to the traditional teachers in my school who did order. I probably should have tried harder to get my fair share out of the system, but I was too impatient with the bureaucracy and instead spent my own money—hardly a real solution to the problem.

Last spring I visited the Angier School in Newton, Massachusetts, and there came upon what I think is a true solution. When Roland Barth (author of *Open Education and the American School*) became principal of this suburban elementary school three years ago, he inaugurated a system of distributing money for supplies that has both delighted his teachers and encouraged a wide variety of teaching methods ranging from open to traditional in the school. Barth takes the annual \$27-per-pupil supplies allotment provided him by the Newton public school system and spends part of it for pen-

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cils, paper, crayons and other things that everyone in the school needs. Then he divides up the rest of the money among the staff according to the following formula: special-subject (art, music and library) teachers get \$500 a year because they have equipment to purchase; teachers new to the school get \$400 a year, since they have little to build on from previous years in the school; all other teachers and aides, including the principal himself, get \$300 a year.

Teachers can spend the money on virtually anything that will benefit their classes; textbooks, rabbits, field trips, workshops, college courses for the teacher, rugs, fish tanks and workbooks are all acceptable. They can spend their budgets by filling out order forms (a stack of catalogs in the teachers' room is a big help), getting them signed by Barth and sending them downtown for fulfillment, which results in an average wait of about 80 days. Or they can spend their own cash in under-\$20 dollops and get immediate reimbursement. Barth monitors expenditures by keeping folders on all teachers, and he informs them if they are overdrawn—in which case the overdraft is deducted from their account the next year—or have a surplus—in which case it reverts to the principal and he gets to spend it.

A lot of faith and trust in teachers is implicit in a system such as this. As Barth puts it, "I assume teachers are trustworthy until they indicate differently. They haven't." So he has no hesitation about giving his teachers petty-cash-drawing rights up to their \$300 or \$400 or \$500 limit. Nor does he read over their orders with an eye to vetoing requests he thinks aren't right; rather, he reads them out of curiosity as to what directions his teachers are taking and what the newest materials are. (He has never vetoed an order.) In a school in which he knows and cares for each teacher and is intimately acquainted with what is happening in each classroom, the chance that the system could be abused is remote.

The spending-account folders provide some interesting insights into the system's effect on teachers. To begin with, it is almost impossible to tell by looking at an account what

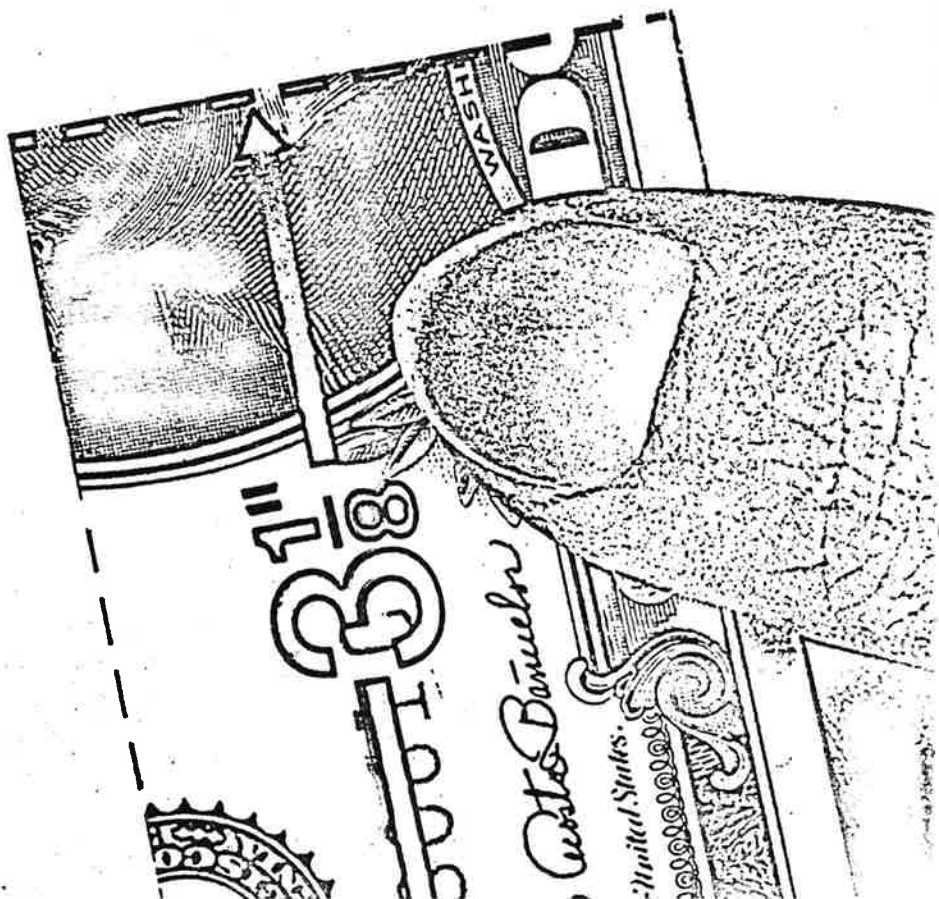
kind of instructional program the teacher runs. Teachers with different styles spent their money pretty much on the same kinds of things—manipulative materials, paperback books, maps, rugs. Nobody bought a full set of textbooks; five or six copies to be shared by a class was the largest such expenditure.

Barth says there is no doubt that teachers' attitudes have been radically altered by the system. They regard their annual allocation as almost their own money and spend it much more carefully than they would funds from a remote, rich central office. As a consequence, they are unwilling to blow half the year's account on a new set of textbooks for every child, preferring instead to purchase a wide variety of materials, both durable and consumable, that will occupy, delight and teach more children for more hours. Although the teachers enjoy easy access to petty cash in under-\$20 amounts, they are so tight-fisted that their

yearly allotments don't simply dribble away.

Instead of paying \$30 to hire a bus for a field trip, Angier schoolteachers are inclined to go by public transportation, which they feel is better for kids anyway, and spend the savings on their classrooms. When a bus is hired for a long field trip outside the city, teachers make sure that every seat is filled, because it's their money that is being wasted if the bus leaves with empty seats.

Barth's system has not only made teachers careful of their budgets; it has also encouraged them to stay abreast of the latest in books and materials and to be on constant lookout for the best, most interesting and most durable learning materials for their classrooms. When book and games salespeople call at Barth's office, he tells them he has no money. They express disbelief, and he explains that the teachers have all the money, that they are the ones who have to be sold on the products. Then he arranges a meeting in which the teachers listen to the sales pitch



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and make up their own minds. This serves both to put the decisions in the hands of those best qualified to make them and to help teachers feel more involved and instrumental.

Barth's system has also encouraged teachers to cooperate more closely with one another and to share ideas about materials. Several pooled their budgets to buy major items—an SRA Reading Kit, for example—and teachers constantly exchange ideas on how best to spend their money. Some teachers who overspent borrowed from other teachers' accounts. When cuts ordered by the central office forced a reduction in the librarian's budget, she raised \$700 in small donations from the teachers, more than doubling her fund. The only condition: that in ordering books, she follow the suggestions of the teachers who had backed her.

It occurred to me that when teachers spend money in this way on their own needs over a period of years, it gives them quite a stake in the school, if for no other reason than the fact that what they buy belongs to the school and can't be taken with them when they leave. This is the opposite of my own situation, for I feel that I could pick up stakes at any time and take everything with me to another school because I bought it all with my own money. It is not surprising to learn that Barth has an exceptionally stable faculty, a group of teachers who spend their budgets with future years in mind, investing in games one year, math materials the next, language arts the next.

Perhaps this is the reason that the Angier School's halls ring with the joy of learning, and varied teaching styles flourish side by side. Teachers were unanimous in their approval of the fiscal responsibilities they had been given. Helen Herzog, sitting in the midst of the planned clutter of the converted auditorium that she shares with Sandra Porter, 50 kindergartners and first graders, and 15 small chickens, summed it up this way: "You know what you've got." She recalled that when she first arrived at the school, in pre-Barth days, she had been told to order what she needed, but the limits had been kept an ad-

ministrative secret. So she ordered only \$200 worth of materials, half of what she would have been entitled to as a new teacher under Barth. The \$300 a year she now gets is never enough, she said, but it is a good start and gives a teacher the kind of guidelines needed for intelligent spending. She deeply appreciates the faith Barth has in his staff and reciprocates with respect and responsibility. When I asked about possible abuses, she and others around the school looked at me as if I were crazy.

Debbie Horwitz, a fifth grade teacher, shared the considerable cost of *Man: A Course of Study* (an interdisciplinary unit developed by the Educational Development Center in Newton) with her colleague, Dick Salinger. With this major item paid for, both plan to concentrate on different areas next year. Another pair of cooperating teachers working in a fifth and sixth grade program, Jeffrey Weisenfreund and Marge Hartl, pooled their resources and built a seven-foot-high loft in one room.

Marjorie Byers, a third grade teacher, had worked in New York City the year before and had been restricted there by an oligarchic funding system in which all purchase decisions were made by a small group of teachers, and quite often, expensive items sat around unused in closets. She was delighted with Barth's system and volunteered that it had caused her to spend her budget money carefully.

Kathy Moe, a second and third grade teacher, recalled that the year before, in another school district, she had spent more than \$600 of her own money because she couldn't get at her allocation from the system. At Angier, she spent only \$75 of her own money but had used Barth's system to build tables, a workbench and animal cages, and to buy math materials, paperback books and a reading series with tapes. She spent her own money on cooking materials and art supplies only after she had exhausted her \$400 budget.

All the teachers I talked with said they still spent about \$75 a year of their own money over and above their budgets. Barth's system doesn't discourage people from doing that, but it lightens the burden enough so

that all can equip their classrooms in ways that enhance their own teaching styles.

Probably the biggest barrier to the transplanting of a funding system like Barth's is that most schools don't fully support, let alone encourage, teachers' instructional decisions. The under-\$20 petty-cash arrangement is essential if teachers are really going to be able to spend as they see fit, but it would undoubtedly bother principals with less confidence and professional expertise than Barth. Professionalism and trust are the essentials of such a system.

The other prerequisite for such a system—and this is something that good schools have anyway—is a series of in-service meetings and workshops dealing with new materials, equipment and ideas, enabling teachers to order and spend their money intelligently share ideas.

Because the underlying issue is the degree to which a teacher controls a classroom—in short, basic professional autonomy—a system like Barth's would seem to be a natural for teachers' unions to support. You certainly don't have to be an advocate of informal classrooms to believe that teachers should control the materials that come into their classrooms and have the freedom to teach the way they think is best.

Clearly the most important teaching resource, the teacher, isn't part of the supplies budget, and clearly a new system of distributing money can't offset bad teaching any more than a traditional funding system can completely smother good teaching. But a system such as the one that is working so well in Barth's school can contribute to a climate that nurtures good teaching over the years. And ultimately it would result in far more efficient and effective use of tax dollars, because every dollar would be spent by the person best qualified to spend it, the classroom teacher, and for the people for whom it is really intended, the kids. ■

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