

The Principal

JOANNE YATVIN

Purse Strings and Apron Strings

Three years ago our school district began a program it calls "School-Based Budgeting." Under the pilot plan, five schools were chosen to be allowed to spend district funds as they wished. Those schools got no more money than other schools, nor—considering the overall skimpiness of elementary school budgets—did they gain much flexibility, but the plan did impart a sense of individuality, importance, and freedom that had been lacking before. For the first time a principal and his or her teachers could build a budget based on *their* view of school needs rather than on a predetermined set of categories, and they could tap funds previously under the control of central office departments.

As one of the pilot schools, we chose during that first year to spend our money on people and time rather than on things, on our own school projects rather than on district projects. We took money from supply, capital, and textbook accounts to hire more aides to do clerical tasks and to tutor children. We eliminated the Reading Resource Teacher position and created the role of Computer Coordinator instead. We wiped out the workbook account and bought supplementary books, kits, and units. We put the money designated for staff development for teaching the gifted into the more general category of "School Improvement," where we could use it to release teachers for whatever tasks seemed most important at the time.

All together, we shifted around about \$8,000 and did nothing outrageous. We wound up with the same kinds of programs as other schools, but we placed greater financial support where we needed it most and less where we were already well established and did not need what the central office people thought we needed. That is, we still bought text-

books, but we shared them among children and classrooms instead of sticking to the traditional pattern of buying one per student. We maintained the same level of programming for gifted children, but we did not continue with the district emphasis on staff development activities that we felt we'd had enough of. The same was true for our reading program: we continued everything we'd been doing for children but decided that a Reading Resource Teacher was a redundancy

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when our staff was so competent in reading. The only radical change—at least in relation to other district schools—was eliminating workbooks. But it wasn't radical for us. For several years we had been moving in that direction, cutting back on our purchases as we developed our own literature-based reading and writing program and as we adopted a hands-on, problem-oriented approach to math.

Nevertheless, changes did not come easy. Despite the district commitment, for every move we made that first year, we faced an overwhelming amount of paperwork and bureaucratic foot-dragging. Ex...a work time for teachers had to be approved in advance. The comptroller's office devised uniquely complicated and nonsensical forms for recording our changes in budget categories. Central office people held on to money as if it were their own life savings. With time, problems have lessened but not disappeared.

Although "accountability" is often given as the reason for so much red tape, less admirable reasons play their part: some central office people don't trust school people to spend money wisely; others fear that loosening the purse strings may lead to elimination of their jobs. They want to keep on playing the "Top-Down Control" game they have played so successfully for 50 years. From the vantage point of schools that game is as out-of-date as "Spin the Bottle." If American schools are to prosper, we must use all means available to foster enthusiasm, creativity, and responsibility in the teachers and principals who live their professional lives there—not set up rules and processes elsewhere that pronounce school people incompetent and render them impotent. □

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