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-

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