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When the teacher brings the apple

The Monitor's View

Enthusiasm to teach students can be costly. Just a few weeks into the academic year, many public school teachers start to notice a shortage of pencils, paper, books, or food for the class hamster. That's when they start to dip into their own pockets.

Schools that have cut back their budgets often leave teachers on their own to scrounge for basic classroom supplies. Based on a 2003 survey, teachers end up shelling out more than \$443 a year on average for professional teaching tools. For some teachers, this unheralded generosity can run into the thousands.

These private purchases of learning materials have become part of the public-school culture, like working extra time to grade papers, prepare lessons, or help slow learners. In other professions, such out-of-pocket expenses would be compensated or discouraged. No workplace boss should expect workers to subsidize the basic cost of running things.

For many teachers, the compensation is simply knowing they've provided a minimum learning experience for their students, perhaps an extra globe to learn about geography or a learning game to study math or simply enough art supplies to inspire a student's imagination. The payoff is in the heart - while the payout comes from a salary that's low to begin with.

And then there are the costs to the students if teachers can't make up for reduced school spending. Who knows what history point wasn't mastered or math concept not understood for want of a teaching tool?

Full government funding of schools would help reduce or end such private sacrifices. But so far, other ways are being devised to bridge the expense gap for teachers, not all without their problems.

In Florida, a \$250 stipend is given directly to teachers by the state to pay for supplies. Some schools ask parents to "volunteer" money. Parent-teacher associations, of course, are famous for fundraisers that make up for budget shortfalls. (In richer districts, such money can make public schools look like private schools, with high-level learning programs.)

In many areas, private groups and companies set up an "adopt a classroom" program for donations. In the San Francisco area, a group called Resource Area For Teaching, or RAFT, helps teachers find low-cost school supplies to buy. RAFT also locates extra supplies from companies that can be used creatively in classrooms - fabric for costumes, or plastic bottles for experiments.

An innovative, national website, DonorsChoose.org, acts as a place for "citizen philanthropists" to fund specific needs solicited by teachers. So far, it has funneled more than \$8 million from 16,418 individuals to 12,327 teachers. Donors receive a photo and accounting of how the money was used. The site was started in 2000 by a young public-school teacher in the Bronx, Charles Best.

The danger of using private money for such a public purpose is that it further erodes taxpayer support for government-run schools. Teachers or donors who pay for supplies are to be commended. But is this any way to run a railroad? States and local governments need to meet basic standards for education, and fund them.

Public education should not be a charity, but an obligation - a social contract between generations.

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