The More You Have . . .
Fiscal troubles plague the public schools

The gloomiest fiscal picture in two decades is clouding American education, shouts the Boston Globe. A union leader laments the “fiscal instability from the state, from the federal government, so that the supports aren’t there for education.” A school board member asserts, “You’re going to have a bunch of shortchanged kids out there.”

The media continually parrot the claims of widespread fiscal crises in the nation’s school districts. Yet it’s hard to square these jeremiads with the simple fact that, after adjusting for inflation, per-pupil spending today is nearly three times what it was in 1960—and that spending jumps were higher in the 1990s than ever before.

Where did all this money go? How do schools seem to sponge up every last dollar? Why have the extensive investments in technology done nothing to forestall budgetary train wrecks or to produce significant achievement gains? Why does every slowdown in the economy seem to wreak so much havoc among school officials?

The authors of this issue’s cover stories, political scientist Jon Fullerton and management professor William Ouchi, address these questions from different angles. Fullerton examines the politics of school budgeting and tells us that school managers are, in effect, rewarded for overspending. Moreover, they operate with primitive accounting systems that can serve to mask financial problems for years on end. Even the best financial officers are trapped by state, federal, and union mandates. Worse, the systems are so centralized, argues Ouchi, that they waste money on bureaucratic operations and lack the capacity to respond rapidly to changing circumstances.

In a few cases, school districts’ problems are the result not of poor management but of something more serious. Taking a look at the rising problem of teacher cheating on tests of achievement, Brian Jacob and Steven Levitt have come up with an estimate of the extent of the problem in Chicago and have designed a technique that will help to bring the problem under better control. Fortunately, they show that 95 percent or more of the teachers in Chicago administer tests honestly to their students, a welcome testimony to the decency of the teaching profession.

In professions like law and medicine, the occasional bad seeds are weeded out by committees of their peers. If teachers would like to enjoy similar self-policing, argues Denis Doyle, they will need to jettison the tactics of industrial-style unionism in favor of organizations more like the medieval guilds. And teachers could further enhance their sense of professionalism, says David Ferrero, if they were able to create schools reflecting their pedagogical commitments. They might also be less inclined to leave such schools, since path-breaking research by Eric Hanushek, Steven Rivkin, and John Kain reveals that teachers’ working conditions are more likely to determine whether they stay at a school—or even in the profession—than are their salaries. The essay is based on an extraordinary set of data collected in cooperation with the state of Texas under the leadership of John Kain, whose untimely death this past summer is mourned by his many friends in the educational research community.

This, the first issue of Education Next’s fourth year, also features Ron Haskins’s penetrating examination of Head Start’s history, explaining why a program with such great promise has had so little success. Federal programs are also the focus of Diane Ravitch’s essay. Ravitch, the onetime head of the U.S. Department of Education’s research and development efforts, warns the department’s new Office of Innovation and Improvement not to be taken in by hucksters peddling the latest fad. Meanwhile, John Bishop highlights a promising innovation, Michigan’s college scholarship program for students who perform well on state tests. And in one of Education Next’s most personal and moving essays, Ann Christy Dybvik traces an autistic boy’s steps through the school day and examines the impact of the federal inclusion mandate on children with disabilities.

In publishing circles they say that a journal’s third year is make-or-break. Thank you, readers, for joining us for a fourth.

THE EDITORS

MISSION STATEMENT  In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but Education Next partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.