

# Putting School Budgets in Teachers' Hands

*What if end-users in the classroom made purchasing decisions?*

by MICHAEL B. HORN and MIKE GOLDSTEIN

**WHO DECIDES WHAT EDUCATION PRODUCTS** and services schools buy? For the most part, it's district purchasing agents, school principals, technology coordinators, and bureaucrats—anyone but the end user in the classroom. It's an ineffective market, with products and services handed down to teachers from purchasing decisionmakers on high.

Take the \$18 billion we spend in the United States on professional development (PD) for teachers every year. For the most part, teachers don't pick the programs. Their schools and districts do. And the research on the return on that investment is damning, with all those dollars failing to move the needle on student outcomes. In a 2015 study, The New Teacher Project sought to quantify the impact of PD only to find that “despite enormous and admirable investments of time and money . . . most teachers we studied do not appear to be improving substantially from year to year.”

Perhaps the PD market is broken because it's coercive. What would happen if we put the money in the market in individual teachers' hands?

## Choices and Changes

Teacher behavior is likely similar to any other human behavior. Think adult fitness. In that sector, there's an interesting marketplace of yoga, sports leagues, CrossFit gyms, personal trainers, weight-loss centers, physical therapists, and so on. We aren't forced to run—we choose, and then we may opt to switch to CrossFit or yoga if we aren't getting results. The fitness market is dynamic and prepared for individual choices and changes, because it is tailored to human behavior, not the other way around.

PD may be similar. Brown University's Matthew Kraft studied teacher coaching—essentially personal training for teachers, rather than a conventional, “let's get the teachers together in a room” type of off-the-shelf PD program—and

found noticeable gains across 60 different studies.

The thing is, “teachers are already working really, really hard to become better” and traditional PD doesn't account for those efforts, according to former teacher Ashley Lamb-Sinclair, who founded Curio, a website where innovation-minded teachers can exchange ideas. “Many times that additional work takes place at 11:00 p.m. when we're sitting on our living room couches. Then we have to hit ‘pause,’ go back to school, jump through some hoop, or sit through some workshop to prove it,” she told EdSurge, an education-technology website.

This suggests an experiment worth trying.

Education-technology entrepreneurs, investors from Silicon Valley, and many educators have long dreamed about having individual teachers—not districts, not principals, not even teachers collectively—control the money in public schools. If



only education-product and -service companies could market directly to the end users, the thinking goes, then the market for education products and services would work better.

A superintendent—or a group of superintendents—should test the Silicon Valley ed-tech hypothesis and create a teacher marketplace so all individual teachers could make their own PD purchasing decisions. The experiment could cover other spending categories, too: curriculum, books, field trips, classroom materials (from rugs to school supplies), and education technology would be allocated per individual teacher.

The district could set up this teacher-controlled marketplace as a randomized control trial against a business-as-usual control group of teachers to see if the resulting shift to “teacher power” worked. Teachers who participated would be allocated something like 5 percent of school spending—likely initially starting as a philanthropy-funded effort. In a flush district like Boston, that could amount to \$10,000 per teacher per year. In the Midwest, it could be perhaps half of that. But either way, it would be real dollars. The district

could compare student outcomes, teacher satisfaction, and spending to see how each group did.

## **Hurdles to Progress**

There are of course barriers to this happening. The hurdle—to move funding not only away from a central district office to a school building (long the work of education reformers), but also past the principal into the hands of individual teachers themselves—has historically been too high. Most district superintendents haven't wanted to relinquish power. And amid flurries of changes to school-funding formulas, states have scarcely considered the idea.

Consider Edmodo. The social-networking site for teachers experienced rapid growth, to more than 90 million teachers across 192 countries, but only had annual revenues of \$1 million when it was acquired in 2018. All of those teachers were connected to one another, but they didn't have any real money to spend. "Our thesis was that teachers would have money that they could use to purchase apps," Edmodo executive Manish Kothari told EdSurge. "We thought districts would disburse money and give [teachers] the freedom to choose and buy what they want." But as Kothari admitted, the vision of dollars flowing to teachers was a "pipe dream." The company was recently acquired by NetDragon Websoft.

There are signs, though, that the idea may be less far-fetched today than it was just a few years ago. As districts move into the digital age, the limits of superintendents' ability to control individual teachers across a district have become clear. Teachers are selecting free and open-source curricula, flipping their classrooms, innovating in a variety of ways on their own, and often casually ignoring central dictates and setting aside district-purchased curricula.

A few districts have moved officially in this direction. For example, individual teachers in Arcadia Unified School District in California now have broad autonomy to pick the curriculum for their classroom that addresses the relevant state standards, provided the curriculum meets certain educational and technical specifications.

## **A New Type of Teacher Autonomy**

This type of teacher autonomy presents at least five potential advantages.

First, it would allow popular online tools to monetize their support and grow sustainably. Although many education-technology companies have become popular in recent years through

viral growth by individual teacher adoption, they have struggled to create a sustainable business model. A few have done well, such as Teachers Pay Teachers, which allows teachers to sell the classroom resources they create to other educators. But most have been like Edmodo. If their teacher-users had real resources to spend, companies that have spread rapidly like ClassDojo, which helps build classroom communities, and Remind, a communication tool, could find themselves on firmer ground.

Second, this new market would encourage new "niche" programs and service providers to emerge. Just as charter operators and other education services flocked to New Orleans, this could happen in "District TBA" if each teacher controlled \$10,000. Looking back to PD, if we remove coercion PD, then suppliers will focus on creating services that teachers actually want, rather than services with brochures where a superintendent can check a box. And that could allow programs and services that support

teachers with different strengths, needs, and preferences to thrive, because teachers would make the choices that they and their students as individuals need—not what the purchaser in a central district office thinks they need.

Third, teachers could use tools like DonorsChoose.org to fundraise on top of their allocation to increase the funds in the marketplace. And, it can be argued, there would be a viable marketplace that would have a greater impact than the items historically gifted to teachers through DonorsChoose.

Fourth, teachers could give their allocations to other teachers. If a math teacher was all set after spending 70 percent of her allocation, why not allow her to give 30 percent to a science teacher wanting to purchase amazing lab equipment? Or to a French teacher organizing a trip to Montreal? The voluntary collaboration, with dollars behind it, could be powerful.

Finally, it would give education reformers a politically viable rallying cry beyond "let's replace local schools" and school choice. There would be New Orleans as the mecca for charters, and "District TBA" as the mecca for "individual teacher control." This could be done in partnership with the unions.

Many of these ideas could also backfire in the form of less coherence in the curriculum, more solitary work, and so forth. But given the reality on the ground in most districts and the early signs of more districts devolving power to teachers to pick curricula, supporting individual teachers' power—including their purchasing power—it is an idea worth exploring.

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