

A moral dilemma and a solution

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"Teachers dip into their own pockets for school supplies" (April/May issue, p. 41) should have been a lead story on page one of Reading Today, as well as in every newspaper in the United States. The National Education Association finding that the teachers polled spent average of nearly \$1,200 out of their own pockets yearly in non-reimbursed school expenses confirms that schools are underfunded and also demonstrates the dedication of members of the teaching profession.

Of special interest to IRA members is how much teachers spend on books. The NEA reported that teachers spend an average of \$250 of the total \$1,200 on "books and videos" for their students. This is quite close to what others have found. In a recent article published in Reading Horizons, Christy Lao of San Francisco State University reported that the New York City teachers she interviewed spent an average of \$378 per year of their own money on classroom library books for their students. If these data are typical, teachers are spending more on books than school libraries are. According to a survey published in the School Library Journal in 2003 by Marilyn Miller and Marilyn Shontz, school libraries now spend about \$9 per year per student on books. There are about 50 million public school students in the United States. From this we can estimate that about \$400 million is spent on books in school libraries, assuming 90% of all students in the U.S. have access to a school library.

If the average teacher spends \$250 on books for students, this amounts to three quarters of a billion dollars (3 million teachers nationwide). If Lao's figure of \$378 is typical, they spend about a billion dollars, more than double the amount spent for books in school libraries. If teachers' practices reflect the need, this figure suggests that we should spend at least double the amount we are now spending on books.

Teachers face a serious moral dilemma. If they don't spend their own money on books, equipment, and even toilet paper, the students suffer, especially students from low-income families who often attend seriously underfunded schools and have little access to books outside of school. If teachers do spend their own money, there is no pressure on the system to supply these essentials. The only solution is to create pressure by doing studies such as the NEA and Lao did and by publicizing the results.