

How Computers Help Kids To Learn

WESTLAND
Extra individualized attention and the use of audio-visual equipment are the keys to the experimental program at Jefferson Elementary School, where a private firm is helping students and will get paid by the number of pupils it helps.

The company, Learning Foundations, Inc., received a performance contract from the Wayne Community Board of Education in February and will get a maximum of \$9,000 if it helps 150 students in the third through sixth grades reach a pre-set reading level.

THE COMPANY will be paid on the basis of \$60 for each student who reaches that pre-determined level.

The specific elements of the Learning Foundations curriculum were spelled out for The Observer by Robert Thompson, Jefferson principal and director of the project at the Westland school, and Howard Hulsman, Learning Foundations advisor.

Both Sides

Can a private company built around the profit motive step into public schools and improve students' achievement levels? Some think so and others don't. But, either way, there is some controversy about the present trend by some school boards to spread the issue called "performance contracting." To find out what private firms do and how public school teachers feel about the issue, Editor Leonard Poger talked with people on both sides of the issue.

Thompson pointed out that each student works at his own pace, pre-determined by scores of tests given before the program starts.

The scores are programmed through a computer, and the computer prescribes the needs of the student, who will use audio-visual and other "software" materials.

THOMPSON and Hulsman described the teaching machines as the "hardware" in the Jefferson Learning Center, where the performance contract is implemented, with the materials, slides,

films, and books being the "software."

The three key factors in the private firm's curriculum are (1) the extra individualized attention given students, (2) the "software" and (3) the "hardware" used in the learning center, Hulsman said.

Another feature of the program is the "learning center," a classroom which was carpeted and decorated with colorful art work on its walls to provide a more cheerful surrounding for the students.

Thompson said that the learning center, where the performance contract's provisions are implemented, is made "more aesthetically

appealing," and several partitions were installed for study carrels along with audio-visual equipment.

ANOTHER key feature of the contract is that five aides are assigned to the learning center to work under Mrs. Gwen Sinila, a Wayne Community School District staff member who previously taught at the Vandenberg School.

The 150 students to work with Mrs. Sinila were picked because of their "reading deficiencies," or lack of progress in reading skills - Thompson said.

The project's director also said that the faculty doesn't have the time for individual

prescribed learning, and the teacher doesn't have the time to plan a program on an individual basis.

The Learning Foundations' computers do the planning for the students, and the Wayne Community teacher does the actual work, Thompson added.

Hulsman also pointed out that the performance contract contained a "turnkey" provision which enables the Wayne school district to keep the "hardware and software" and other educational materials after Learning Foundations is finished with the project at the end of the current school year.

THE ADVISOR said that "we have the opportunity through performance contracts to do what public school teachers have been talking about and wanting to do for years," referring to extra teacher aides, pre-planned programs, and individualized attention for students.

"There is no mystery or gimmicks involved," he added.

"We find out what works and what doesn't and Jefferson school is buying that experience."

"The school is buying a \$500,000 investment in the research we put into the system."

Performance Contracts Stir Controversy

WESTLAND
Everyone is for anything that will improve the progress of students in classrooms. No one is really opposed to new programs or techniques that achieve that goal.

But there is some dispute about who and what should be in front of the students; who will get credit or the blame for the students' progress or lack of it; and whether the same improvements in the classroom should have been started sooner.

THE AGE-OLD issue now involves a new feature on the education scene. It promises to stir future debates and battles among public school boards, teachers, and private learning companies.

The issue is "performance contracting," in which a private learning firm comes into the classroom, uses its own techniques with students and gets paid by the number of students who actually improve in the classroom.

The company gets its money if the students improve in their specific skill. It gets nothing if there is no progress.

The profit motive has worked fairly well in other areas. But until a few years

ago, it was never tried in public schools.

One of the schools getting involved in performance contracting is Westland's Jefferson Elementary School, in the Wayne Community School District.

LEARNING Foundations, Inc., with offices in Livonia and headquarters in Athens, Ga., has a performance contract for 150 Jefferson School fifth grade students.

The company receives \$60 per student—or a maximum of \$9,000—if the students reach a pre-determined level in their reading achievement.

The issue of performance contracts has already stirred a controversy in educational circles after the first contract was implemented in Texarkana, Ark. schools.

It turned out to be a minor scandal. Anti-performance contract people use that as an argument against the entire concept.

But private learning firms reply that the Texarkana issue, which came up a year ago, is being abused.

In that school system, where the country's first performance pact was used in 1969, school officials discovered that the private company was "teaching to the

test" given at the end of the program.

The school board stopped payments to the firm when it was found that the firm's programs contained questions identical to or closely resembling the questions appearing in the tests.

An employee of the private company admitted that "teaching to the tests" was planned. "I did everything I could to see that the company made money on the project," the employee said.

THE TEXARKANA project was the first performance contract in American schools and steps have been taken in the past year to assure that more effective safeguards are used to protect any abuses of the system.

But the Learning Foundations' advisor at the Jefferson School reminded the Observer that the Texarkana pupils scored the same on other tests as they did on the allegedly rigged exam.

Advisor Howard Hulsman said that the students who passed the rigged test also passed other tests, while those who failed the rigged exam also failed other exams.

Performance contracting is also viewed by the National Education Assn., which includes a majority of public school teachers as members, as a threat to the job security of teachers.

It is possible that school boards will use performance contracting as a means to lay off teachers and use performance contracting firms—usually paid by federal funds—as an economy move.

BUT EVEN the National Education Assn. recognizes the benefits of having a private firm operating under the profit motive, work with students in a move to improve their skills in the classroom.

"Performance contracting has the potential to put instruction into a new packaged and delivery system which can be related directly to the learning needs of individual children."

Other benefits are these: It focuses on the individual student's achievement rather than on group norms or group achievement.

It can stimulate research and development for improved instruction and testing.

It can encourage school systems to examine the efficiency of time-consuming activities unrelated or vaguely related to instructional objectives.

Performance contracting can result in early identification and remedial programs for children with learning problems.

It can also "be a way out of the increasing criticism that additional funds for schools for salaries and instructional materials do not make any difference in pupil learning."

THE LEARNING Foundations firm working at the Jefferson School is four years old, but it is only its first year in performance contracting.

Across the country, federal funds are being more pro- vided to private firms to have the chance to get into public schools and try their learning systems on the profit motive system.

The federal anti-poverty agency, Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), has awarded 18 contracts to six private firms, with Grand Rapids, Flint, and Monroe being the first Michigan school districts to approve experimental programs under performance contracts.

4 To Join SEMCOG Exec Board

Four Observerland officials were elected delegates and alternates to the executive committee of the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG) for 1971.

Delegates include Robert E. Fitzpatrick, of Detroit and Livonia, chairman of the County Board of Supervisors; Edward McNamara, mayor of Livonia; and James McCartney, member of the County Board of Commissioners from Westland.

Elected as an alternate was Mrs. Jane K. Moehle, Schoolcraft College trustee. The SEMCOG executive committee oversees administration of policies prescribed by the general assembly and is elected by general assembly delegates from member units of government.

LIVONIA
Airman Larry I. Harnack, son of Mr. and Mrs. Ivan L. Harnack of 36855 Devon Livonia, has completed basic training at Lackland AFB, Tex.

He has been assigned to Lowry AFB, Colo., for training in the Army's systems field. Harnack is a 1970 graduate of Stevenson High School.

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