

School budget computer tool gets high marks

By MICHAEL SPIELMAN

Creating a school budget — a complex, intimidating task at best — will be a lot easier with a new computer program that allows leadership teams to tailor the budget to their educational priorities.

The program, called Galaxy, is being road-tested in five districts this year and will be expanded to 19 districts next February and eventually to the entire school system.

In the hands of staff experts, Galaxy is a time-saving, flexible instrument that not only saves budgeteers a good deal of grief but lets them juggle funds in ways that can save money for their schools and enhance the services they provide their students.

That's the impressive report one of the test-drivers, The Ditmas Educational Complex at IS 62 in Brooklyn, gave to the UFT's School-Based Budget Advisory Committee two weeks ago.

But don't expect miracles.

Mastering the program so that you can bend it to your will, rather than being its servant, requires time, computer skill, budgeting experience and a pretty thorough knowledge of Board of Education financial procedures.

Ditmas' Chapter Leader Beatrice De Sapio just happens to have all those attributes so she was able to make Galaxy jump through hoops for her school. For example, she was able to rearrange the way certain funds were designated so that she could spring enough money to create a full-fledged after-school program. Sixty-two educators now work in the afternoons on such things as helping students with



Galaxy whiz and budget manager for the Ditmas school, Bernice De Sapio (left), and principal Nancy Brogan explain some of the marvels the computer program can do for schools.

homework and teaching extra reading classes, extra math classes and critical thinking classes.

In another example, De Sapio said she was able to use the funds that had paid for one math teacher who ran a pull-out program for a few dozen students to pay instead for a remedial math program that now serves 400 students.

"All this happened only because we controlled our own budget and could play with the numbers," De Sapio said.

Ditmas principal Nancy Brogan told the committee that when her school had been offered the opportunity to test the new budgeting procedure she was interested but knew that the point person had to be someone with skills she did not possess. Fortu-

nately, she said, she and De Sapio have an excellent working relationship so she knew just who the point person should be.

"Beatrice has become my arms and legs on this," Brogan said.

De Sapio, a social studies teacher and a 23-year veteran of the school system, the last 19 at Ditmas, had also been a member of the community school board in another district for 12 years. "That experience allowed me to learn all about budgets," she said.

Such a background, she thinks, is essential to working with Galaxy. In fact, she said, when a trainer sent by the board started to teach her the program "he was very nice but didn't have a clue about school budgets or the Board of Education." De

Sapio had to explain all that to him. "I wound up training the trainer," she said.

Time-saver though Galaxy is, budgeting for a school is a time consuming task. Ditmas, by voting to approve a special school-based option, has allocated half of a teaching position to the new function of "budget manager" — De Sapio. That has proved to be extremely helpful.

District 20 Representative Marv Reiskin said Ditmas is the only school in the district that has done that, so far. He also said it is the only school in the district that has not complained to him about Galaxy.

Both Judy Solomon, the Board of Education's deputy budget director and Mark Gullo, District 20's director of operations, took note of De Sapio's comments about trainers and agreed that better training is vital.

Still, Gullo noted that all of the schools in his district have shown progress and he is confident that they will reach Ditmas' level of expertise within "a couple of years."

But it will take a lot of practice and probably much gnashing of teeth. The district, he said, offers "a tremendous amount of hand-holding" and De Sapio credits Gullo with being "absolutely wonderful" in teaching how to use Galaxy in creative ways.

The growing pains are obvious and the learning curve is steep. Nevertheless, almost everyone who has worked with Galaxy believes the upside of mastering the program is enormous and far, far outweighs the initial difficulties.

"It's our money and we have to take responsibility for it," De Sapio said.