

Metropolitan News

Copyright © 1990 The New York Times

NEW YORK, NEW JERSEY, CONNECTICUT/THURSDAY, DECEMBER 20, 1990

L B1

Trying to Donate a School: Generosity vs. Regulations

By JOSEPH BERGER

Joseph H. and Carol F. Reich are rich, like the sound of their name, and for almost a year now they have been trying to give the New York City Board of Education a school. But they are finding out that it is not easy to give something to the board.

The Reiches, an unassuming but fiercely determined Manhattan couple, have been told by middle-level officials that the building they want to use for an elementary school, which is in District 14 in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, does not meet the board's standards for asbestos content, for types of urinals or for the number of windows in a room. Accepting the gift, some board officials have said, would even cost the board money.

William Rogers, the district's tough-talking superintendent for 18 years, said the Reiches had been interested in "a school within a school," and it was he who had suggested that they try to find an independent site. His greatest qualm, he said, was the vagueness of the idea, particularly the uncertainty about what role he and the school board would play.

Unanswered Questions

"Who's responsible?" he said. "Who runs the whole operation? Who are they responsible to? What children would go there? What would be the role of the chancellor's office? There were many questions that were never answered."

The Reiches have sometimes felt that their quixotic good intentions may not be up to the challenge of the board's bureaucracy. They have even concluded that they may have been naïve.

"It's neophytes in glueland," Mrs. Reich said.

Still, the story may have a happy ending. The Reiches are now meeting with Schools Chancellor Joseph A. Fernandez and his

'The biggest obstacle is "It's never been done."'

deputies, Stanley S. Litow and Amina Abdur-Rahman, and are finding them more responsive than the middle-level officials. They are still hoping to have the laboratory school open in September with a nursery, kindergarten and first grade.

But they are warier than when they began their odyssey. And they hope that their experience will provide a "road map" through the system for companies and foundations that Mr. Fernandez recently invited to establish and operate new and experimental schools.

Education has long been the Reiches' passion. Mr. Reich, a 55-year-old investment banker, is a reserved self-made man who speaks with the drawl of his native West Virginia. He considers himself retired, though he maintains an office on Third Avenue and a staff to handle investments for himself and some friends. His wife, 54, a Chicagoan whom he met in college 35 years ago, is a lively woman with a gift for figures of speech who is the president of the Lexington Center for the Deaf.

Almost four years ago, they decided to sponsor two graduating sixth-grade classes in Williamsburg as part of the much publicized "I Have a Dream" program. The Reiches, who have three grown daughters, promised to finance the college educations of each student who went on to finish high school, a pledge that will cost more than



Dith Pran/The New York Times

Joseph H. and Carol F. Reich across from the building in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn they would like to donate for use as a school.

Continued on Page B5

Donating a School: Generosity vs. Regulations

THE NEW YORK TIMES **METROPOLITAN** THURSDAY, DECEMBER 20, 1990

Continued From Page B1

\$250,000 and hundreds of hours of working intimately with the 60 children and their families.

"Business can't sit around and say we have kids who can't read and write," Mr. Reich said. "We've got to get involved."

A Lottery for Parents

But they have learned that no matter how intensely they immerse themselves, many of the students they are sponsoring are hobbled by the poor education they received in the early grades. How might they fix this?

"Joe got this idea that we should start a school," his wife said.

It would be a public school drawing on the \$6,500 a pupil the board now spends but would be enriched by donations, including a contribution of \$150,000 from the Reiches. It would be run by trustees selected from among parents, community leaders and educators. It would choose its own principal and would pick students through a lottery among parents who would volunteer their children for the school.

"It would be responsible to the marketplace," Mr. Reich said. "What works in education? Private schools run by interested community leaders that work with parents."

After broaching the idea to board officials, he and Mrs. Reich went in April to the Community School Board of District 14 and proposed their plan.

The Reiches say the district superintendent, Mr. Rogers, never got back to

them. Mr. Rogers says the Reiches never got back to him.

Sweeter Proposition

In May, through his executive contacts, Mr. Reich was able to sweeten his proposition. He learned that if he could make his plan workable Pfizer Inc., the giant pharmaceutical manufacturer that started business in Williamsburg in 1849, was willing to consider turning over, without charge, a 50-year-old office building.

The Reiches thought that the school could be free of local district control by operating as a chancellor's school and taking children from three districts around Pfizer.

In June, the Reiches had a sympathetic hearing from Mr. Fernandez at board headquarters and he urged them to take the details up with his subordinates.

"That was in June," Mr. Reich said. "Once you get beyond the top level at 110 Livingston Street, it's hard to make progress. I always worked in small businesses and never dealt with bureaucracy, and when they got to be a bureaucracy, I started a new business."

At a series of meetings with what they remember as an army of division heads and their assistants, the Reiches were met with skepticism.

Questions were raised about the cost of removing asbestos, about security, about the need for a new school in a largely industrial area that is one of the

few underpopulated school districts. The Reiches noted that the Pfizer complex had its own security force of 30. They pointed out that 500 apartments are planned for the area so it will need a school. But questions persisted.

"There had to be so many bathrooms per floor, rules about how big a classroom should be, how big the windows should be, a whole series of these things," Mrs. Reich said.

"The biggest obstacle is 'It's never been done,'" she said. "They don't have a way of thinking about it. The biggest obstacle is for people to understand the possibility, not to give a reason to stop something."

Board officials who spoke with assurances of anonymity suggested that the Reiches' gift might cost too much to accept.

"Here they're saying we're giving you a building and then there are all these costs associated with it, and they're mad at us for not having the money," the official said.

Late last month, the Reiches met with Mr. Litow. He suggested, they say, that building and health code regulations would be reduced somewhat if the building was leased by the board through a nonprofit corporation.

For now, the Reiches are putting their faith in Mr. Fernandez's ability to overcome his own bureaucracy. Still Mrs. Reich says that they are gradually learning a lesson.

"As a Catholic friend of mine once said to me, 'No good deed goes unpunished.' I think it's true."