

Better organization, better grades

CAMBRIDGE

Neat binder helps students in class

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For every young student who has gotten in trouble for forgetting to complete a homework assignment, David Schwartz has a solution.

In 1996, in response to his 8-year-old son's request for help in organizing school papers, Schwartz invented a binder system with color-coded folders matched to different school subjects and tabbed pockets that separate homework from reference sheets and tests or quizzes.

The system had an immediate impact on his son's grades, which jumped from C's to A's and attracted the attention of the school principal, who commissioned binders for the entire class at the Fay School in Southborough.

The **DocOA** Organizing Assistant (pronounced "Doc Away") originally introduced as **DAVID*** Organizing Assistant is now taking off in public schools in Cambridge. Last fall, Fletcher-Maynard Academy implemented the binder system for fifth through eighth grades, and Cambridgeport School provided binders for students in grades 3 and 4. Pilot implementation is scheduled at the Maria L. Baldwin School and the Kennedy-Longfellow School this spring.

Schwartz, chief executive officer of Framingham-based Productive Education LLC, is working out contracts to provide the binders for the schools.

Annlee Foster, who teaches language arts at Fletcher-Maynard and oversees the David program at the school, said the system is an improvement over Fletcher-Maynard's previously ad hoc binder policy in a variety of ways. Each fifth- through eighth-grade student purchased a David binder with a complete set of folders and a pencil case for \$19.95 at the beginning of this school year, sparing their parents from the mad dash for school supplies in the fall, she said.

"The three-ring binders the kids used to use were heavy and overloaded," she added, noting



Ashley Correia, a seventh-grader at Fletcher-Maynard Academy, works with Tutoring Plus volunteer Jill Oliver using the David binder, which helps her organize assignments. (ZARA TZANEV FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE)

that the David system, held together by three book rings threaded through a series of hole-punched folders, is not only much lighter but also standardized in appearance, eliminating disparities among students using deluxe canvas binders and those using the less expensive plastic variety.

The system has also changed the learning dynamic in the classroom, with teachers "paying more attention to how kids organize," Foster said. "The whole color-coding has had a huge impact. If the yellow folder is for science, teachers can tell immediately if a student is not working on science during class."

Seventh-grade Fletcher-Maynard student Ashley Correia, who had decorated her folders with red and blue stars, said she likes the new system for the way it simplifies her search for papers.

"I always use it at the beginning and end of class and I can find a lot of my papers easier," she said, demonstrating a search for her social studies homework by flipping to her green folder and to the cover sheet on top, which listed her homework assignments in a neatly lettered chart.

Besides providing students at Fletcher-Maynard with a simple system for arranging their schoolwork, the David system is also

used as a hands-on demonstration of the eighth-grade MCAS design and engineering curriculum.

Ellen McLaughlin, who brought the David binder system to Fletcher-Maynard through the school's Tutoring Plus program last February, was introduced to the binder when she was running a robotics class affiliated with MIT. The binders, originally intended only to help organize students, became a robotics project when Schwartz, whose background is in computer science and business, presented it to students as a machine they could build.

"We presented the organizing binder as a toy," said McLaughlin. "How do you design a toy? You need to experience it, tear it apart, and put it back together."

The five Tutoring Plus students who initially tested the organizing binder's folders and filing system immediately wanted to implement it in their regular school routine, McLaughlin said. In so doing, they aroused the interest of their peers and of Fletcher-Maynard principal Robin Harris.

"We really had a need for our students being organized," said Harris, who first noticed the program when she dropped in on a Tutoring Plus session and witnessed her students' animated discussions about which filing system

worked best for them.

"Over and over and over again, our teachers have said the major reason preventing our kids from being a little more successful was that they were unorganized," she said, adding that she sees the binder as one method for improving student performance.

"A large number of our kids have special needs, or are kids of color or qualify for the reduced [price] lunch program . . . a lot of choices in life will be made for them," Harris said.

"Our goal is to close the achievement gap and produce kids who are academically sound — kids who have the ability to make choices, who know what it means to be a student, be organized, be focused, and be a citizen in the community."

"Organizing skills are probably the most important skills we can give to a young child," Schwartz added.

To Schwartz, the binder system's main purpose is to help students with their homework; its usefulness in teaching to state-aligned MCAS standards has been a serendipitous bonus.

"We've positioned this as a thinking machine: You assemble the machine and when you walk away, you actually have something you can use in daily life."

*Note: DAVID is now named DocOA to more clearly express what the product is and to broaden its appeal to teachers as well as students. All DocOA systems are complete binder systems including rings and covers. When purchased in case programs for 30-60 students, as part of our DIY or ORG360 programs, DocOA 1(One) Subject kits start at \$7.95/student, 5(Five) Subject kits are \$24.95/student. BinderBuddies® are pocket only kits. Provide your own 3-ring (use a 1.5"-D). 5 subject BB's are \$19.95/student.