# An iBook in Every Backpack

## *UWM alumna Christine Faltz conceived and now directs the Central City Cyberschool*

*by Laura L. Hunt*

It was one of those outrageous ideas layered with obstacles: an inner city school where students would have access to technology all the time, woven into every kind of learning they did. A school where the children each had their own laptops to use even when they weren't at school. A school where the computers were all wireless, where chalkboards were replaced by touch-sensitive "smart" boards," and where the students did most of the computer maintenance.

Yeah, right.

Former teacher and UWM alumna Christine Faltz not only conceived such a school, but – with some help from former Milwaukee Housing Authority Director (and fellow alum) Ricardo Diaz, officials at Johnson Controls, and former Milwaukee Public Schools Superintendent Howard Fuller – she was largely responsible for turning it into reality.

Faltz was involved in everything from planning the school building to formulating the curriculum to picking out the colorful décor. Diaz was instrumental in bringing the school to Milwaukee's Parklawn neighborhood. Faltz and Diaz were both honored with School of Education Alumni Achievement Awards last year.

The Milwaukee Central City Cyberschool ($C^3$) opened Sept. 5 next to the Parklawn YMCA with 400 students in grades 1-8.

The mission of the cyberschool, a charter school sponsored by the City of Milwaukee, is to serve children whose families otherwise would not have access to technology. The technology, Faltz explains, is a means to an end. The primary goal of $C^3$ is to turn out students who have mastered academics in a computerized environment, giving them the same advantages as students whose families own computers.

"You don't develop the skills for a new workforce from borrowed equipment. The idea of having the technology '24/7' is the only way I could see children really absorbing it," she says. "The lab experience, where a school has a separate room that houses all their computers, doesn't work because they can't integrate it into all of their subjects."

How she found the money and navigated the

*Chalk one up for the optimist. Former high school teacher and UWM alumna Christine Faltz, executive director of the school, dreamed up the concept and then made it happen – with a lot of help from her friends.*

public school bureaucracy is motivating to even the most jaded school administrator. But what is really inspiring about the cyberschool is what it aims to accomplish. Can children who have never used a computer before learn to swap pencils and notebooks for hardware and software?

Critics were many, says Faltz. Skeptics wondered publicly if children could be trusted to act responsibly with such expensive equipment after school hours. But she now has evidence to prove that their fears were unfounded. So far this school year – and during the last school year, when the concept was piloted at the Parklawn YMCA with two classrooms – not a single student has abused the equipment or lost the privilege of taking it home.

"They know that any infractions will result in their losing the computer, and they aren't going to risk that," she adds. "Last year, we found that it was so important to them, they took really good care of their iBooks."

Children don't even leave them at home by mistake, she says, because their wireless laptops have given them something ordinary lessons could not: They have transformed learning into a desirable endeavor.

Faltz, who earned her doctorate in 1996 from the School of Education, started her career as a math instructor, teaching at two Milwaukee high schools. "I spent a lot of time in the classroom in the last 20 years watching students disengage," she says. "You can tell when you've lost them – there's a certain glazed look on their faces."

Later, when Faltz was director of pre-college programs at Marquette University, she became friends with Howard Fuller, education reformer and former MPS superintendent who now serves as Distinguished Professor of Education and director of the Institute for the Transformation of Learning at Marquette. She remembers getting together with Fuller and other colleagues and analyzing various school reform ideas.

"After a while, we decided that it was time to put these ideas we'd been tossing around to work in our own school." She approached the City of Milwaukee to begin an application process for chartering a public school.

## FIRST HURDLE: A BUILDING

As Faltz stood at the dedication of C[3] last month, she remembered the night she landed a $4 million deal without even asking for it, an example of the enthusiastic response she got whenever she explained the school to community leaders.

She had arranged a meeting with representatives from Johnson Controls, seeking a cost estimate for key-card access for the proposed school building. "But once I told them what I was working on, they said, 'We think we can do a lot more for you.' "

Johnson Controls pledged access to financial support to help build the school in exchange for the contract to provide the building's heating and air conditioning systems. The school could then pay back the money by leasing-to-own the mechanical systems.

"In the end, we didn't spend a dime," she says, proudly. "And it was a business deal, not a gift."

It wasn't the first time Faltz received a positive response when asking for money. Before joining forces with Johnson Controls, she was the beneficiary of perfect timing.

In May 1998, the Milwaukee Housing Authority was applying for funding through the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to renovate the Parklawn housing project on North 44th Street. Milwaukee officials were asking HUD for $35 million to upgrade heating systems, add front porches, relocate residential streets and decrease the density of the apartments at Parklawn, one of the oldest public housing projects in the nation.

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*Fellow alum Ricardo Diaz introduced the cyberschool proposal to the Milwaukee Housing Authority. "Everyone I spoke to was very excited about it," he recalls.*

Faltz and Fuller asked Diaz if a request for partial funding of the school could be included as part of the overall plan.

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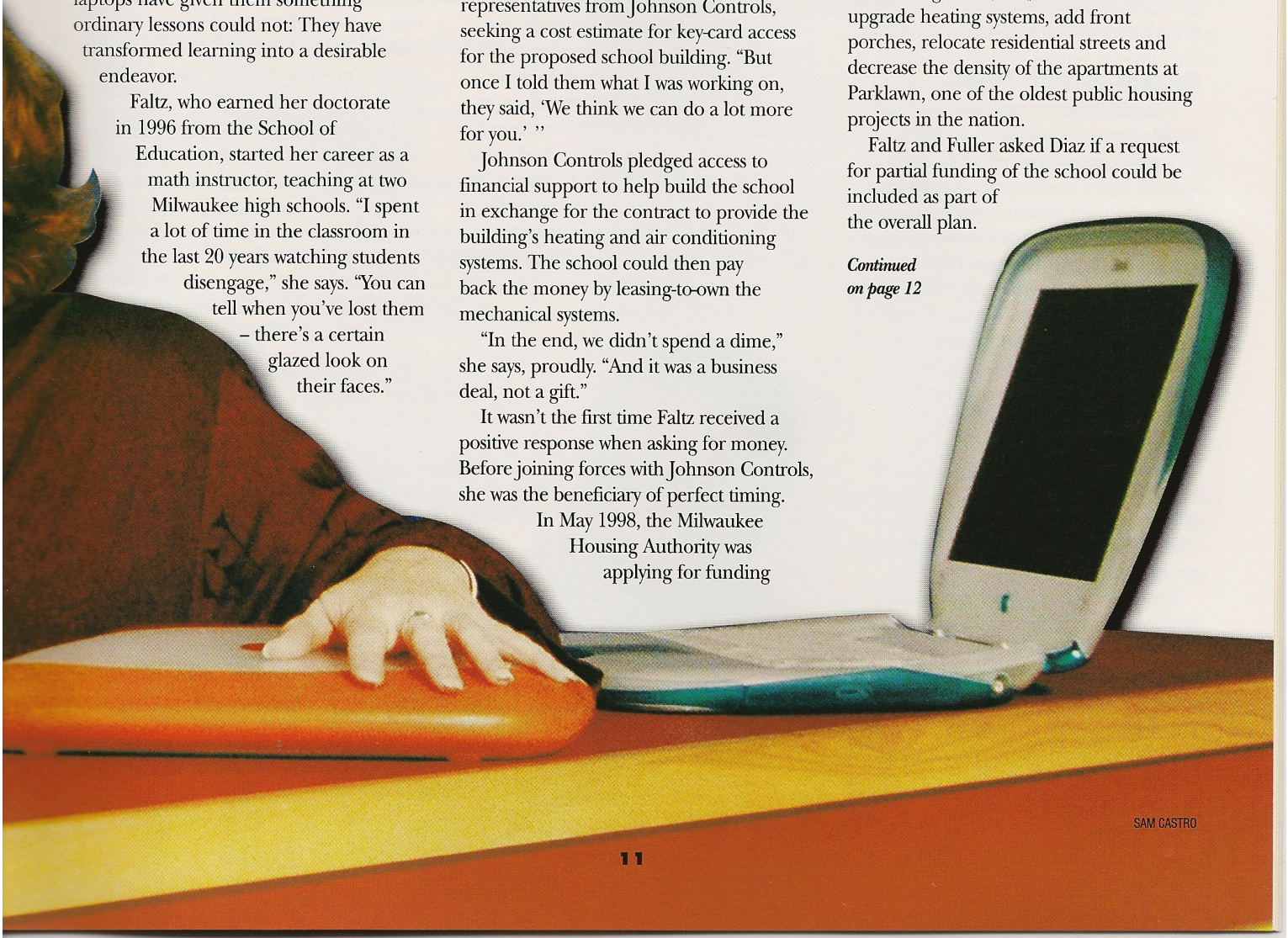

SAM CASTRO

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Diaz, a 1977 School of Education graduate with a master's degree in rehabilitation counseling, suggested the Parklawn site because the neighborhood has a relatively high population of young children. Two preschool programs already existed there, but most school-aged children were being bused. "The kids around Parklawn attended 30 different MPS schools," he adds.

Now vice president of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Milwaukee, Diaz says he and Michael Morgan, then commissioner of the Department of City Development, included the cyberschool in their proposal and were able to secure $3.1 million specifically for the school.

"It was an excellent example of a number of good people coming together for a common purpose," said Morgan, who now is director of the nonprofit Spirit of Milwaukee Corporation. "We thought it was a terrific way to introduce our kids to cutting-edge technology and help them get a foothold in the new economy."

The computers and other technology were paid for out of the per-pupil allotment the school district budgets for each school.

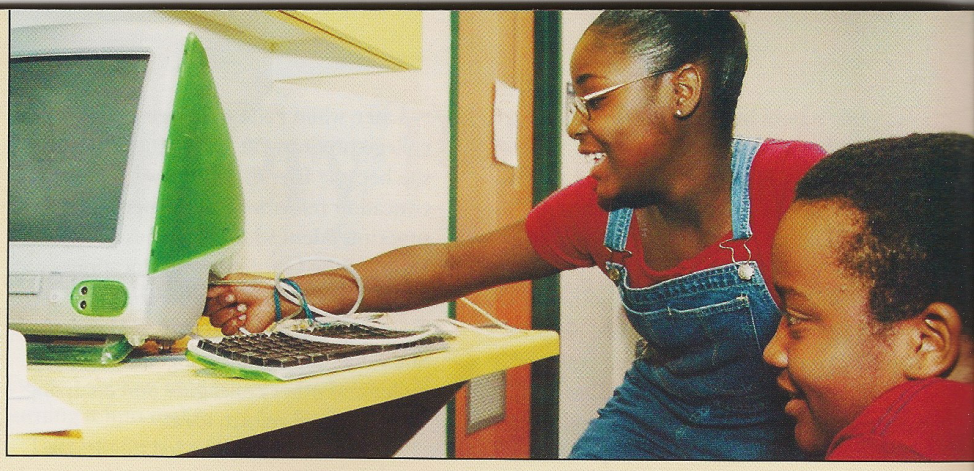
## SUCCEED OR SHUT DOWN

In a perfect world, says Faltz, all schools would operate like charter schools. "Charters are public schools," she says. "We serve all kids. The difference is, we have a guarantee to get results or we cease to exist."

Although many of the school's students this school year are from the Parklawn neighborhood, next year any child who lives in the city can apply to attend. Students are not assigned to the school. Applications will be decided by lottery, as they are in other MPS schools. The only preference is given to siblings of current students and to children of faculty.

And even though the building is cable-ready for voice, video and data, the learning is still book- and project-based, Faltz notes. "We believe in real books, too. Books aren't going to go away."

The similarities to traditional schools, however, end there. At C³, the grades are blended, with first- and second-graders together; third-, fourth- and fifth-graders together; and sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders together. "Teaching multi-age is more difficult, more work for the teachers," says Faltz, "but the technology allows the children to work at different levels and help each other. It keeps expectations high."



PHOTOS: SAM CASTRO

*Seventh-grader Katrina Gilmore sets up a desktop iMac in the computer troubleshooting lab.*

The laptops offer teachers benefits also. They can immediately see on their screen the work on the laptops of all the students. The technology improves delivery of instruction because the teacher can instantly see who is not paying attention, who is not understanding the material, and who is sailing through it.

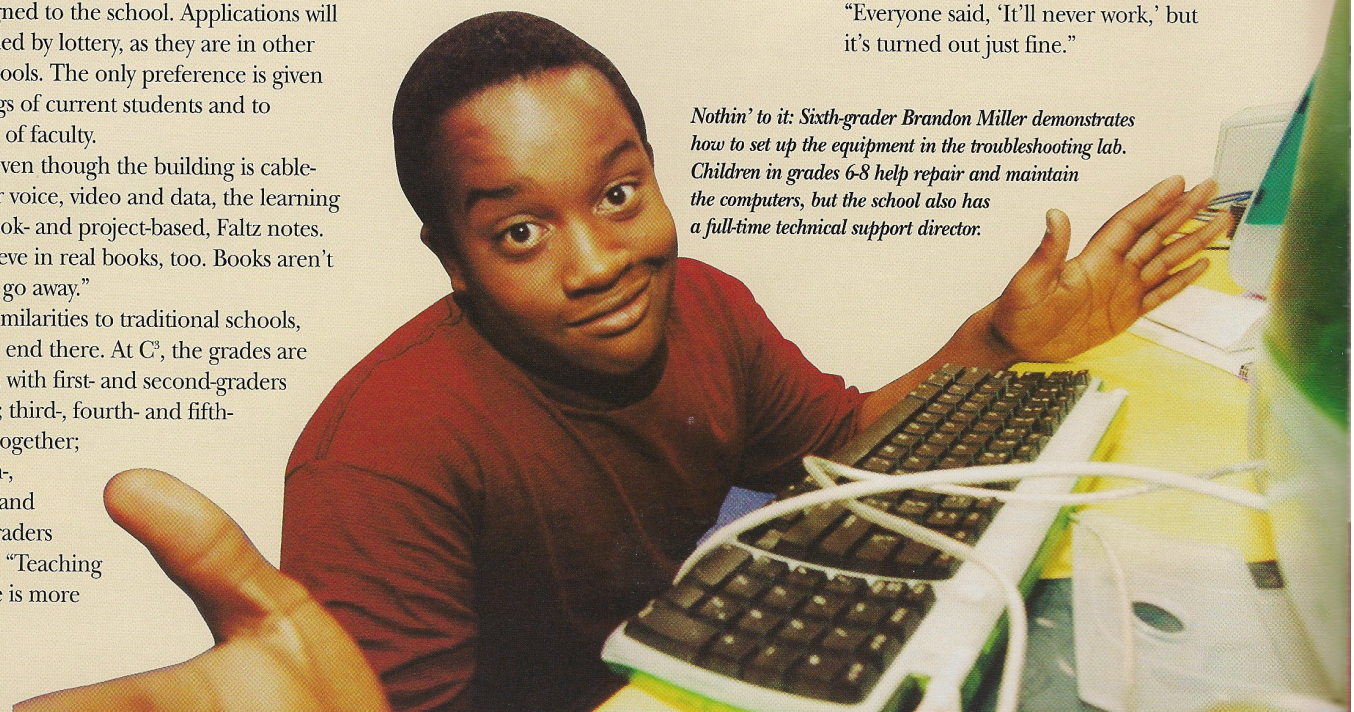
Forget chalk and erasers, toss out the transparencies and projectors. Each classroom has a "smart board" that responds to touch rather than to mouse clicks, and displays the teacher's computer screen on the board. Special tools allow the teacher to write on the smart board like a chalkboard. But it also allows the teacher to show more than one screen simultaneously, to instantly enhance the writing on the board with colors and shapes, and share with the class any screens on the computer, including material pulled off the Internet.

Faltz and her staff decided against wiring the new building for computers. Instead, antennae went up, relaying signals throughout the building. Also installed were wireless transmitters that broadcast the network so that computers with the right receiving card and protocol can operate. With Lucent cards and receivers, students can dispense with cords and outlets.

The iBooks were rolled out one classroom at a time, and the introduction came with a schoolwide rule: If students can't get their computer booted and running in the first two minutes of a class, they have to pull out paper and pencil.

The school employs a full-time technical support director who, among other duties, guides the middle-school-aged students in maintaining the equipment. Sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders take turns staffing the and troubleshooting lab.

Faltz, for her part, sees a bright future for both the school and its graduates. "Everyone said, 'It'll never work,' but it's turned out just fine."



*Nothin' to it: Sixth-grader Brandon Miller demonstrates how to set up the equipment in the troubleshooting lab. Children in grades 6-8 help repair and maintain the computers, but the school also has a full-time technical support director.*