

Hey, teachers, whatcha buyin' this summer?

By RICH MCKAY
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Pogo-springed shoes. Three-cornered pencils. Erasable crayons and germ repellent.

Peddlers hawked wares designed for harried and perpetually foot-weary teachers attending the National Education Association's convention Saturday.

Buzzing with voices and movement, the scene at the Orange County Convention Center was like a crowded medieval bazaar on carpet as sales reps from across the country and the world vied for teachers' attention — and pocketbooks.

"This is what it's all about — showing your product to your audience," said John Richards, who flew from Sussex, England, to sell his newfangled pencils and reading aides.

His pencils, called Easyriter, have three edges to fit more naturally in the hand. And he says he has a leg up on much of his competition because, "I'm an escaped teacher."

And teachers such as Peggy Terry of Chicago did what many of the 9,000 educators attending the convention did — gobbled up free samples and

tried things out. She liked the free samples of Germ-X lotion as a line of self-defense against contagious kids.

She was all smiles when she took a few steps in a pair of 7-Coil shoes — footwear with a big spring in heels, from a Tampa-based company.

"I'm floating — it's like the ground isn't there," said Terry, who knows foot fatigue personally. She figures she's walked thousands of miles in front of her chalkboard in her 31 years as an elementary school teacher. But she wasn't certain about the \$179 sticker price.

Other items were directed at relatively deep-pocketed school boards or parent-teacher groups — such as laptop computers for whole classrooms and high-end software for future computer animators. One company from Saginaw, Mich., was selling membrane roof covers it called the school roof of the future.

Teachers lined up for free samples from Papa John's as it

was pitching ready-to-make pizza as possible fundraisers. They also lined up to test the Medi-Rub, an electric foot massager made in California. It sells for about \$200.

David Bidwell came down from Howell, N.J., to sell sheets of corrugated cardboard folded into three sides to serve as desk screens, for \$1.50 each.

He calls it the Desk Buddy, and the idea is to give children privacy while working on assignments so they can focus. They'd also serve to keep the children from peeking at each other's papers.

Bidwell says he's sold thousands of them — although anyone could make one with little difficulty.

Nearby, at the end of a row of vendors, an exhausted Nancy Wright, an elementary school music teacher from Gas City, Ind., sat on a book carrier she just bought and several bags of promotional items.

When asked what she liked about the convention, she piped up, "freebies."

And then, she added, the networking and camaraderie with fellow teachers.

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