

A Is for iPod ... or Pizza ... or Cash

Is offering rewards for good grades or perfect attendance a good way to boost performance, or a gimmick that sends the wrong message?

By Lisa Guernsey

Would you study harder and do better on a test if you knew there was a new iPod or \$50 waiting for you if you did? That's the question at the center of a debate over offering students rewards for doing well in school.

Psychologists have long warned that such programs don't help students do better, and they may even lead to cheating. But economists believe offering rewards might be a valuable incentive, especially for struggling students.

Whichever side is right, programs that pay students or reward them with prizes like iPods are proliferating, especially in high-poverty areas. And now, efforts are under way to study these programs scientifically so educators can figure out if they work and how well. In some places, students can bring home hundreds of dollars for, say, taking an Advanced Placement course and doing well on the exam.



In New York City and Dallas, high school students are paid for doing well on A.P. tests. Another experiment was started last fall in 14 public schools in Washington, D.C., that are distributing checks for good grades, attendance, and behavior. A New Jersey school district offers rewards including free pizza for good grades and model behavior.

Chicago started a privately funded pilot program last fall offering cash for good grades to as many as 5,000 ninth- graders at 20 high schools. Students can earn \$50 for an A, \$35 for a B, and even a C brings \$20. That means a straight-A student could earn up to \$4,000 by the end of sophomore year, with students getting half the money immediately, and the other half when they graduate.

"The majority of our students don't come from families with a lot of economic wealth," Arne Duncan, Chicago's school superintendent, told the *Chicago Tribune* last fall.

Duncan, who is now the U.S. Secretary of Education, said, "I'm always trying to level the playing field. This is the kind of incentive that middle-class families have had for decades."

Other student reward programs are about stuff more than money. At 80 tutoring centers in eight states run by Score! Educational Centers, a national for-profit company, students are encouraged to rack up points for good work and redeem them for prizes like jump ropes, yoga mats, or chess sets.

Last year, Riverside High School in Durham, N.C., began awarding iPods to sophomores who earned top scores on a statewide writing test. Monroe Wolf, now 16, was one of four students who earned the prize.

"It was a nice bonus," Wolf says. "But I was going to do my best either way."

In the cash programs being studied, economists are comparing the academic performance of groups of students who are paid and students who are not. Results from the first year of the A.P. program in New York showed that test scores hadn't improved but that more students were taking the tests.

In Dallas, where teachers are also paid for students' high A.P. scores, students who are rewarded score higher on the S.A.T. and enroll in college at a higher rate than those who are not, according to Kirabo Jackson, an assistant professor of economics at Cornell who has studied the program.

Still, many psychologists warn that programs need to be studied for several years before the real impact is known: It's possible that rewards may work in the short term, but have damaging effects in the long term.

Incentive or Bribe?

"If we're using gimmicks like rewards to try to improve achievement without regard to how they affect kids' desire to learn, we kill the goose that laid the golden egg," says Alfie Kohn, author of *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes*.

Edward L. Deci, a psychologist at the University of Rochester, is concerned about the effect of cash rewards on students with learning disabilities: When they get a smaller reward and see other students receive checks for \$500, they may feel unfairly punished and even less excited to go to school.

"There are suggestions of students making in the thousands of dollars," he says. "The stress of that, for kids from homes with no money, I frankly think it's unconscionable."

But economists argue that schools should try anything, including rewards, to boost student performance. While students may be simply attracted by financial incentives at first, couldn't that evolve into a love of learning?

"They may work a little harder and may find that they aren't so bad at it," says Jackson of Cornell. "And they may learn study methods that last over time."

Psychologist Barry Schwartz acknowledges that rewards might help failing students. But he thinks it's a "cheap fix" that doesn't address why those students have lost interest.

"This is not a way to make education better," Schwartz says. "This is a way to put a finger in the dike."