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The Monthly Newsletter of the National Association of Elementary School Principals

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A Twist to Pay for Performance: Cash for Students

The Washington, D.C., school district has become the latest system to implement a pilot program that will pay students for such accomplishments as good test scores and behavior, as well as other academic indicators such as homework completion and grades. The district will mirror a similar strategy New York City put into place in its public schools that distributes money for students who take and excel in standardized tests.

D.C. schools chancellor Michelle A. Rhee recently announced details of the

Capital Gains program, which will offer cash incentives to students at 14 middle schools, effective October 2008. About 2,700 middle schoolers will be eligible for up to \$100 a month in cash awards, which will be deposited electronically into student back accounts opened specifically for the program.

New York City's program began last school year, and has paid fourth-grade students up to \$25 for

a perfect score on each of 10 standardized tests throughout the year. Seventh-grade students have been eligible to earn twice as much per test. In addition, fourth graders earn \$5 by simply taking the test, while seventh graders have earned \$10 per test taken.

This initiative is part of a larger anti-poverty plan developed by

New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, which also pays families as much as \$25 for attending parent-teacher conferences and \$50 for obtaining a library card.

Although the New York



Cash incentive programs in Washington, D.C., and New York City are experiments to determine whether giving money to students in exchange for good school performance is an effective motivator. © Alexander Kalina

City program, which distributed \$1.1 million to the 5,889 participating students last school year, is fully funded by private monies, the District of Columbia will pay for nearly half the \$2.7 million set aside for its program. The remaining funds will come from private grant monies.

Can It Work?

Roland G. Fryer, an economics professor with Harvard University's

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American Inequity Lab, developed the programs in both cities and plans to publish reports of his findings once the pilot phases end. A recent survey of New York City's program found that 96 percent of schools report students excited about rewards; 91 percent of schools report increased focus on exams; and 59 percent of schools report improved classroom performance.

Requests for comment from principals in New York and Washington, D.C., went unanswered, but principals elsewhere in the country offered their thoughts on the idea of paying students.

"This seems like an expensive way to motivate kids, but I bet it works—at least in the short term," said Utah principal Kathleen Petersen.

"Perhaps money is a necessary motivator in some schools, but I think we're setting poor precedents if students expect money for good attendance, turning in homework and/or earning high grades," said Janet E. Materi, principal of Arp Elementary School in Wyoming, where three-fourths of the school's student population live in poverty.

"Although I'm not opposed to money being used as a motivator—in some cases, money may do exactly what is needed—I am of the belief that the best motivators are intrinsic," added Delaware principal Julie Pecorella.

Could Money Be Better Spent Elsewhere?

Since the District of Columbia Public Schools is, in part, spending taxpayer money to fund its incentive program, it begs the question whether that money could otherwise be better invested to help students. Materi suggests that the money could go toward tutors to work with students not meeting proficiency.

"How about before- and aftercare so parents can work and kids can be safe and under guidance that could help them with homework?" considers Pecorella. "Another thought is

job-training opportunities to parents so kids don't have to be responsible for bringing in money to help the family."

Alternative Ways to Motivate Students

There was an overall consensus on what principals and teachers could and should do to help students excel: build relationships. "Kids need to know and believe that someone cares and understands their problems and that there is someone who

can help them solve the problems," Pecorella said.

"I believe that no significant learning or commitment to doing well will ever be evident without significant relationships being established first," said Kansas principal Ed Albert. "Design a culture of relationship-building and you will see success follow. This can be done in a short period of time, but one day, one team, and one relationship at a time."

—Vanessa St. Gerard

Would You Pay Your Students?

What do you think about the idea of paying students for good grades and test scores, as well as for solid attendance records—can it work? If you had the option of implementing such a program in your school, would you?

Let us know your thoughts about the projects described in this article by going to NAESP's blog, the Principals' Office (<http://naesp.typepad.com>), and responding to the entry under the "Students" category.

NAESP's NDP Program Celebrates 25 Years

On Oct. 16 and 17, 62 elementary and middle school principals will be honored by NAESP and the U.S. Department of Education during this year's National Distinguished Principals (NDP) program.

NAESP's annual NDP program was established in 1984 to recognize elementary and middle school principals who set high standards for instruction, student achievement, and character of the students, families, and staff in their learning communities. This year marks the 25th anniversary for the NDP program.

The program promotes educational excellence for pre-K-8 schooling and calls attention to the fundamental importance of the school principal. Recognition for the exceptional leadership of the men and women who are responsible for the day-by-day operations of pre-K-8 schools celebrates their accomplishments and reinforces their leadership in helping children develop a lifelong love of learning.

Make sure to view *Principal* magazine's annual salute to the NDPs in the upcoming November/December issue. To the 62 principals who were selected this year, hats off to you!