



National Post

News

Does paying students for good grades really work?



This week, Toronto District School Board education director Chris Spence suggested via Twitter that the board's new anti-poverty task force consider a pay for performance program. Fotolia

Kenyon Wallace and Vincent McDermott, National Post · Saturday, Nov. 20, 2010

As arguments between teenage girls and their fathers go, this one is unusual.

Fifteen-year-old Samantha Ivory, a Grade 10 student at Cass Technical High School in Detroit, Mich., thinks she should be paid to go to school and get good grades.

She already does well but says cash rewards for good attendance and better test scores — currently the subject of a new statewide “pay-for-performance” bill — would improve her motivation and that of her peers to stay in school. Besides, she could use the money for college.

“If students get paid, dropout rates will be lower. It would make others do better in school by giving them a reward,” Samantha said from the east-side Detroit home she shares with her parents and four siblings.

But for Samuel Ivory, Samantha’s father, the idea of his daughter making money for doing what every North American child should be doing anyway doesn’t sit well.

“It’s kinda like a Catch-22,” he said. “When I went to school, it was something I had a desire to do, school work, and ... I knew school was going to benefit me later on in life. If the school has the money, they should use it to fix up the schools or get another teacher in there.”

Judging from the public outcry, it’s a sentiment shared by many north of the border, where this week Toronto District School Board education director Chris Spence suggested via Twitter that the board’s new anti-poverty task force consider a similar program.

“Should we pay kids in our more disadvantaged communities to do well in school? Perhaps, as part of a poverty reduction scheme?” he wrote.

The proposal initiated a flurry of media coverage, lit up talk-radio phone lines, and even rattled the higher echelons of government

when Ontario Education Minister Leona Dombrowsky told the legislature her government doesn't support the idea.

"The problem we're trying to solve is we have more of our marginalized students who are not performing well in school," said Mr. Spence in an interview with the National Post. "Let's think about this a little differently: what might help these kids ensure that they do their homework, ensure that they come to school and be more engaged in their school? Let's think outside the box for a moment ... Maybe some kind of incentive system is going to help them."

While Mr. Spence's idea might have offended some Canadian sensibilities, school boards across the United States have been experimenting with the idea for years, offering students anything from cars, DVD players, iPods and trips to Disneyland for perfect attendance records and improved test scores.

In Chicago, students with perfect attendance are rewarded with trips to the circus. One high school won a concert by Kanye West for showing the greatest attendance improvement.

A few years ago, a student at Oldham County High School in Buckner, Ky., was reportedly given a yellow Ford Mustang for good attendance and behaviour.

One school in Washington, D.C., paid a student more than \$1,000 for the same thing.

The incentives look good on paper, but they have had varying degrees of success.

In 2004, Chelsea High School in Chelsea, Mass., introduced a cash incentive program to students to combat poor attendance. The school promised to deposit \$25 into the bank account of every student who had perfect attendance during each school term. A student would get an extra \$25 bonus by achieving perfect attendance for an entire year, meaning one could potentially walk away with \$400.

About 80% of students at Chelsea High School live below the poverty line.

"Some students thought it was patronizing. They actually took offence to the money," said superintendent Thomas Kingston. "Those students who were already doing all right anyways, thought, 'Hey! This is OK. I can pick up some change on my way out'."

After four years, officials saw no improvement and cancelled the program.

"We thought that maybe the money might make a difference, but it doesn't."

The experience at Stone Creek Elementary School in Rossville, Ga., however, was markedly different.

Principal Mike Culberson didn't pay students, but offered prizes ranging from ice cream to Xbox video game consoles. It worked.

Between 2003 and 2004 the number of students missing more than 15 days during the year dropped to 4.7%, down from 15%. Mr. Culberson says test scores improved as a result.

"We tell kids, 'We can't force you to come to school, but we can encourage you with these rewards to want to come to school'," he said. "If we don't show them something they want, they won't work hard to get it."

Researchers at Harvard University recently completed a two-year study in which they paid \$6.3-million to 38,000 students in 261 schools across four cities to see if monetary incentives had any impact on performance.

What they found was intriguing. When students were rewarded for better attendance, behaviour and for reading more books — elements characterized as educational "inputs" by the researchers — academic performance improved. But when a \$50 incentive was offered simply for better exam or test scores — educational "outputs" — students did not perform better.

Researchers suggested this was because students, as much as they wanted to get better grades and therefore more money, didn't know what it would take to improve their performance.

"In order to improve the output, you have to make the assumption that children already know how to learn. They don't," said Thelma Morris-Lindsey, executive director of the Dallas, Tex.-based foundation Earning by Learning, which commissioned the Harvard study.

For the past 15 years, Earning by Learning has been encouraging elementary and high school students to read by paying them between \$1 and \$2 for every book read, up to a maximum of 20 books in a school year. Using a combination of private and corporate donations, the program has helped more than 75,000 students read nearly 730,000 books. After finishing each book, students take a comprehension test that they must pass with a score of 80% or higher in order to get paid.

Ms. Morris-Lindsey says the findings of the Harvard study show the importance of providing incentives during a student's learning process instead of simply rewarding good test scores.

“You have to provide incentives for the prerequisites,” she said. “You cannot alone incent a child for a good grade because children have to learn the process they have to go through to get that good grade. As children read, they comprehend more. As they comprehend more, you get a byproduct of good grades. You get a thinker.”

Encouraging students to improve their academic performance is a laudable practice, but many school boards are motivated to do so for slightly less altruistic reasons. Under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, schools are ranked partly for attendance records. And much of how states distribute federal money is determined by average daily attendance. For schools in poor districts, this can mean millions.

But some educators warn students are being sent the wrong message about learning if they are taught to view it as an economic transaction, an outcome one professor characterizes as the “hidden curriculum.”

“If students are in a math lesson and they’re paid to be there, what’s really going on here? Kids are being taught that it’s only worth learning something if you’re going to receive some sort of monetary compensation,” said Trevor Norris, a professor at the University of Toronto’s Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. He has studied the growing trend of schools providing students with commercial compensation, such as iPods and free lunches.

“The idea of directly tying learning to monetary compensation seems to run very deeply against the whole idea of learning. If in the end we end up promoting consumer values more than educational values, we should be concerned about that.”

The Toronto District School Board’s anti-poverty task force has identified 110 schools out of 600 that are negatively affected by poverty, and will hold public hearings early next year before making any decisions on the proposal.

“For some kids, maybe some kind of incentive system is going to help,” said Mr. Spence. “But I don’t know. I don’t know the answer.”

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TOSSED SALAD

Score: 2

[Report Abuse](#)

7:42 AM on November 20, 2010

rolls eyes

CANADIANDREAMER

Score: 4

[Report Abuse](#)

7:59 AM on November 20, 2010

Just to show all you right wingers that I am not always a "libtard" as so many of you put it; this is the craziest thing I have read all week. We give our kids a free education and they want to be paid for it? Whats with this xbox generation they want & want & want, it never ends. When they finish public school they will see how much a real education costs & how fortunate they were to have had it paid for. I can just see it now, little johnny tells his dad that unless he opens his wallet & coughs up a few twenties "Yo dog I ain't gonna goto school". If they want to get paid maybe they could help out more around the house or heaven forbid get a job.

[4 replies](#)

NICFISH

Score: -1

[Report Abuse](#)

8:03 AM on November 20, 2010

Extrinsic motivation is generally not a good idea for students when used often - it takes away from the desire to learn and be at school.

If the TDSB wants to do continue with this type of anti-poverty initiative, this money should be put into a scholarship for the student for when they graduate and intend to go onto post-secondary. That is incentive to get good grades and know that their good grades will be honored. It obviously doesn't fight the issue now, but programs such as the breakfast club and helping students get in contact with community groups already in the business of fighting poverty will be effective as well.

[4 replies](#)

MERGUEZ

Score: 3

[Report Abuse](#)

8:25 AM on November 20, 2010

If students are going to get paid they better be paying their taxes on that income. And I hope Revenue Canada regularly audits them and punishes them like they do everyone else. Good Luck, kids, and welcome to the real world.

 2 replies

LION15

Score: 2

Report Abuse

8:38 AM on November 20, 2010

Definitely a slippery slope going down this road. The quality of life these kids in low income areas have is probably miserable and money is in very short supply with their parents. I understand that their trying to get at the root of the education problem (drop outs and brutal grades) and some evidence suggests it can work for short-term goals (book reports, etc), but it begs the questions: which kids are the have's and which are the have-not's? No small distinction. One can see a slew of cheap parents (not necessarily have-not's) migrating their kids to these school's to help them out. I could see this working it the U.S., but not here.

AMTAN

Score: 0

Report Abuse

9:18 AM on November 20, 2010

I have to say that Western world often doesn't really understand what "being the best student" is about. Largely, it is about standings relative to the crowd. It is in human nature to think, if someone is failing, that "Maybe I'm doing something wrong and this field is not really for me. Let me try something else I'm good at". Things change with age, as people become to see pure material values in formal credentials (like CFA certification, even if the person certified is on the bottom of the pile), and since with age people begin to interact with more experienced (and better performing by default, regardless of talent) colleagues, but it is the way things work in high school.

In large part, US high school system used to be all about finding who you are. Unlike European-style high school that prized Latin and Greek for formal enrollment in classics studies in Oxford or one of the more obscure universities, US was far more liberal: "So, you hate Homer? Fine, how about repairing cars? You know, a good car mechanic can always make a living, and we don't need that many people who know Latin anyways". Not anymore. It's all about studying for the test all over again. I mean, I wouldn't really mind "studying for the test" - the problem is all the people are studying for the one and the same test (SAT) to gain admission to colleges to potentially do something completely different from the test content.

Hello, US, and welcome to Europe of the 19th century - with its formal economy's management selected based on useless knowledge acquired in college just to get a shot (it is called MBA and more often than not preceded by a useless B.Comm), with real working people paying pennies simply because they don't get the said piece of paper, and with not-so-formal economy controlling entire industries. You failed an elites test - only in your case elites are MBA's indoctrinated with years of ultra-right ideology (it doesn't matter how they do it! The only thing that matters is business model and "the idea"! Employees are dispensable and Chinese are cheaper anyways!)

BRENDA79

Score: 5

Report Abuse

9:39 AM on November 20, 2010

And the idiocy continues.....

 1 reply

REAL ONTARIO

Score: 1

Report Abuse

10:22 AM on November 20, 2010

At Harvard, they "incent" or even "incentivize" their professors and students rather than provide incentives or encourage. Quick, more money please!

CLASH1980

Score: 1

Report Abuse

10:34 AM on November 20, 2010

<http://www.wimp.com/educationparadigms/>

HOPPY96

Score: 3

Report Abuse

10:49 AM on November 20, 2010

Instant gratification is the watch-word of the day, isn't it?. Someone should sit this precious teen down and help her to understand that her rewards for getting a good education come down the road with a more fulfilling life, career opportunities, etc.

 1 reply

CYBERCLARK

Score: -2

Report Abuse

11:39 AM on November 20, 2010

We believed in our kids. I see that as an essential first step.
We enrolled them into swim club. This promoted time management and scheduling.

We rewarded swim club success (or the lack of it) with cash. Swim finals came about the same time school started again. The cash prize always matched the bill for needed new clothing for school with, a little left over.

Come graduation day the kids went onto University and were a success there.

The competitive swim club drill (I think) gave them the competitive edge they needed to study and compete in the university arena.

MEDIAMINDFUL

Score: 1

Report Abuse

11:51 AM on November 20, 2010

quoting the article: "For some kids, maybe some kind of incentive system is going to help," said Mr. Spence. "But I don't know. I don't know the answer."

When will someone give Dr. Spence a failing grade? Incentive system -- great idea -- how about a school system where students want to show up because they know it's bettering their lives and the wellness of their communities?

WCF

Score: 2

Report Abuse

11:54 AM on November 20, 2010

My kids had a choice. Go to school and get good grades, or suffer the consequences of living on welfare. To reinforce it, I drove them down to Vancouver's East Hastings and showed them what it's like to be a NDP supporter. After seeing all the hookers and jukies, they were more than eager to study hard and avoid living like the NDP Supporters.

HARPIES

Score: 1

Report Abuse

12:52 PM on November 20, 2010

Paying students to stay in school? This must be an "outside-the-box" idea hatched by some of our bleeding hearts educators at OISE. I have a better idea. Why not send any student who fails to achieve, at least, a 70% in high school into the army for 5 years. Perhaps, this will smarten them up. What Canada needs desperately is a 'boot camp' for these lazy, low achievers. What say you ?

WOODIEo4

Score: 3

Report Abuse

1:00 PM on November 20, 2010

Instead of putting out cash for grades, make best use of that money by putting it into better resources and facilities for the students. The public educational "system" is always cash-strapped, and schools have to make do with old books, poor or dated technology, shabby classrooms and so on. Put that cash into making schools better places in which to learn - and that includes in the poverty stricken neighbourhoods.

As for this girl, perhaps she should pay rent or room and board?

THUNDERBOY

Score: 2

Report Abuse

1:17 PM on November 20, 2010

There's a very large amount of research on motivation that shows that 'external' motivation of the type discussed here generally doesn't work, and in some cases even depresses performance. A recent book by Joel Pink called "Drive" reviews the literature on this issue.

SASSYLASSIE

Score: 2

Report Abuse

1:19 PM on November 20, 2010

It's bad enough as a childless person I must pay school taxes to educate kids for free but now the ME generation thinks I should have to pay for their education and for them to attend. Gawd I'm sick of the progressive twits and their never ending attempt to brainwash and victimize our youth with their nonsensical dogma.

MEAT HELMET

Score: 0

Report Abuse

2:00 PM on November 20, 2010

What's left out of the argument is the fact that incentivizing more teens to earn a basic education is far from a guarantee they will go on to become model citizens, or even law-abiding ones. I live in Manitoba, where the educational philosophy is, "We will work with each student so they graduate." The students scraping the bottom of the barrel may "graduate," but guess what? Oftentimes they still go on to a life of joblessness and crime. High school grads are a dime a dozen as it is. Pumping out more of them among at-risk youth guarantees nothing.

CLAYBSTR

Score: 1

Report Abuse

2:15 PM on November 20, 2010

Any parent that falls for this logic is a fool.

Children get food shelter, love and clothing as payment for them to attend school and try their best.

Their responsibility is to attend school and obey their parents.

It is the parents' responsibility to see that their children are encouraged, loved, fed, clothed and sheltered. As well they have a role in educating their children as well. School is formalized to get the kids to a place where they can then fend for themselves.

COMMON SENSE ED

Score: 0

Report Abuse

2:58 PM on November 20, 2010

There is already an incentive to do well for needy students- it's call a bursary.

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