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Cash for grades catching on in schools

By Lisa Guernsey

For decades, psychologists have warned against giving children prizes or money for their performance in school. “Extrinsic” rewards they say – a stuffed animal for a four-year old who learns her alphabet, cash for a good report card in middle or high school – can undermine the joy of learning for its own sake and may even lead to cheating.

But many economists and business people disagree, and their views often prevail in the educational marketplace. Reward programs that pay students are under way in many cities. In some places, students can bring home hundreds of dollars for, say, taking an Advanced Placement course and scoring well on the exam.

Whether such efforts work or backfire “continues to be a raging debate,” said Barbara Marinak, an assistant professor of education at Pennsylvania State University, who opposes using prizes as incentives. Among parents, the issue often stirs intense discussion. And in public education, a new focus on school reform has led researchers on both sides of the debate to intensify efforts to gather data that may provide insights on when and if rewards work.

“We have to get beyond our biases,” said Roland Fryer, an economist at Harvard University who is designing and testing several reward programs. “Fortunately, the scientific method allows us to get to most of those biases and let the data do the talking.”

What is clear is that reward programs are proliferating, especially in high-poverty areas. In New York and Dallas, high school students are paid for doing well on Advanced Placement tests by various non-profit groups.

In the cash programs being studied, economists compare the academic performance of groups of students who are paid and students who are not. Results from the first year of the AP program in New York showed that test scores were flat but that more students were taking the tests, said Edward Rodriguez, the program’s executive director.

In Dallas, where teachers are also paid for students’ high AP scores, students who are rewarded score higher on the SAT and enroll in college at a higher rate than those who

are not, according to Kirabo Jackson, an assistant professor of economics at Cornell University who has written about the program for the journal *Education Next*.

Still, some psychologists warn that early data can be deceiving. Research suggests that rewards may work in the short term but have damaging effects in the long term.

One of the first such studies was published in 1971 by Edward Deci, a psychologist at the University of Rochester, who reported that once the incentives stopped coming, students showed less interest in the task at hand than those who received no reward.

This kind of psychological research was popularized by Alfie Kohn, whose 1993 book *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise and Other Bribes* is still often cited by educators and parents. Mr. Kohn says he sees "social amnesia" in the renewed interest in incentive programs.

"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."

Prof. Marinak and Linda Gambrell, a professor of education at Clemson University, published a study last year in the journal *Literacy Research and Instruction* that showed rewarding third-graders with tokens such as toys and candy diminished the time they spent reading. "A number of the kids who received tokens didn't even return to reading at all," Prof. Marinak said.

Why does motivation seem to fall away? Some researchers theorize that even at an early age, children can sense that someone is trying to control their behaviour. Their reaction is to resist. "One of the central questions is to consider how children think about this," said Mark Lepper, a psychologist at Stanford University whose 1973 study of 50 preschool-age children came to a conclusion similar to Prof. Deci's. "Are they saying, 'Oh, I see, they are just bribing me'?"