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**PAY TO LEARN**

## Pay to Learn Shortchanges Kids

Dozens of studies over 35 years have found that rewarding people for learning backfires.

*By Wendy Grolnick and Kathy Seal*

**A**s the new school year begins, some kids will be leaving class with more than just books and homework assignments. They could also be getting money. Programs that pay kids to learn are expanding rapidly across the country. In New York City, the school system gives fourth- and seventh-graders in 59 schools \$5 to \$50 for taking standardized tests. In Tucson, some students get \$100 a month if they show up at school every day and maintain at least a C- average. Another New York City program that offers up to \$1,000 for passing Advanced

Placement tests has paid out nearly

\$1 million to 1,161 students. A

Texas program also pays for top AP scores, and similar initiatives

are being rolled out in six more states. And beginning this fall,

14 middle schools in Washing-

ton will pay 3,000 students for attending class, arriving promptly,

turning in homework, getting high

grades and using good manners.

Not bad ideas, you might think—unless you look at the vast body of research on what motivates kids to learn. Over the last 35 years, dozens of studies have found that rewarding people for learning backfires. True enough, financial incentives can elicit an initial burst of effort. But when people get paid for an activity, they start to calculate its monetary worth and other motivations—its inherent value, fun, camaraderie or the satisfaction it provides—fade away. All children are born with an internal desire to learn and hone their skills. Humans are born helpless and dependent; our very survival depends on acquiring new skills. Curiosity and drive toward mastering the world is hard-wired into our brains. That's why all babies play with their toes and pop objects in their mouths. That's why acquiring competence feels so good. And that's why almost all children start kindergarten excited about learning to read or solve math problems.

What drains this excitement—research shows that intrinsic motivation declines steadily from third to ninth grade—is a curriculum that doesn't connect to children's goals and interests, and the increasing dependence on grades, competition or awards as motivators. Dozens of studies have shown how these extrinsic motivations ruin kids' interest and enjoyment in learning. For example, in an ingenious 1973 study, Stanford University psychology professor Mark R. Lepper and his colleagues gave three groups of preschoolers magic markers and construction paper. One group was offered a "good player award"—a certificate with a red ribbon and a gold star—for drawing a picture. A second group got the award but didn't know it was coming. The final group he simply let draw. One to two weeks later, he let the same children choose their activity. Those who'd received the expected award spent far less time drawing than those who'd never seen the fancy certificate or got it as a surprise. The promise of a reward, he concluded, had stifled that first group's pleasure in drawing. Play had become work.

Studies of college students have revealed the same effect. The University of Rochester's Edward Deci, for instance, gave two groups of undergraduates block-building puzzles to work on. One group got \$1 for each solved. The other got nothing. After awhile, Deci told the students the experiment was over and that they had a few minutes to relax, do more puzzles or read. Those who were playing for money were more likely to put the puzzles down.

Rewards also tend to elicit learning that's shallow and inflexible. University of Mississippi psychologists Kenneth McGraw and John McCullers tested how rewards affected problem solving. They paid one of two groups of students who solved nine similar problems that called for pouring a specific amount of water into a jar from bottles of varying sizes. Then they asked both groups to solve a different, 10th problem that

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demanded inventing a new type of solution. The students who hadn't been paid solved the final problem much faster.

Those who want to improve test scores and motivate students should stop throwing money at the problem so literally. School districts and foundations should invest instead in programs that tap into and build on kids' intrinsic motivation. One yearlong study by Washington University psychologist Richard deCharms showed just how to do that. In 1976, deCharms trained sixth-grade teachers to foster enjoyment of learning in their 600 students. He taught them to de-emphasize grades and time limits—lowering the pressure on kids—and distributed workbooks and other materials that promoted learning for its own sake.

The teachers were also encouraged to allow students to generate hypotheses, try new ways of doing things and work ahead. Teachers in the

same district taught a control group using their usual methods. That spring, tests showed that the trained teachers' students had an increased interest in learning and were half a year ahead, according to their Iowa Test of Basic Skills scores. Six years later, a follow-up study found that the "intrinsically motivated" group also graduated from high school at a higher rate. There are plenty of other amply researched ways to nurture and even ramp up children's desire to learn. They may not be as easy as cutting a check, but why not try them before resorting to a cash-for-performance solution that is bound to backfire?

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