

Columbus Dispatch

SCHOOL-REWARD EXPERIMENT

Learn, then earn

**Benefactor gives cash for
Coshocton kids who pass state
standardized tests**

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A phony \$100 bill hangs as inspiration in Debbie Brown's sixth-grade language-arts classroom at Washington Elementary School in Coshocton. Each student who passes four standardized tests can win as much as \$100.

COSHOCTON, Ohio -- These students have their eyes on the prize. The phony \$100 bills dangling from the ceiling of

teacher Debbie Brown's classroom aren't just for decoration. The play money represents the top amount her sixth-graders can each pocket if they pass four Ohio standardized tests in the spring. Brown's class is one of eight in the Coshocton school district participating in a pay-for-performance pilot program funded by a local benefactor.

The unusual experiment, in its third and final year, uses cash to study whether incentives improve student achievement, Superintendent Wade Lucas said.

Preliminary results are promising, Lucas said.

"Education has a tendency of saying, 'We've always done it this way before,' " the superintendent said. "We continue to kind of push the envelope a little bit."

When donor Bob Simpson read about a similar study in Forbes magazine and suggested the district try it, some initially questioned the concept. A panel of administrators, teachers and parents weighed the proposal's pros and cons, which included a \$100,000 donation from Simpson's family foundation.

"I think initial reactions were probably the same as mine," Lucas said. "They raised their eyebrows, like, 'What? Pay kids to pass tests?' "

"People who can see an immediate reward have more of an incentive," said Simpson, who owns a local manufacturing company. "Human nature is to better yourself. One way of doing that is to study a little bit harder."

He also realized that spending "public money on an unproven project like this would be impossible," he said.

Districts could potentially use donations or grants to fund similar programs, but using public money to reward students raises ethical questions that local school boards would need to address with their attorneys, said Rick Dickinson, a lawyer with the Ohio School Boards Association.

"Some people might have concerns about it," he said.

Education researcher William Bainbridge hadn't heard of the Coshocton experiment, but he said it sounds like a great idea.

"We already have a large number of middle-class and upperclass parents who do this kind of thing," said Bainbridge, distinguished research professor at the University of Dayton and president and chief executive officer of SchoolMatch, a Columbus-based education research company. "If we're

really looking at equity in schools, what's wrong with extending that to lower-income kids? "

There are 2,000 students in the Coshocton district, located about 60 miles northeast of Columbus. Of those, 47 percent are from low-income households, Lucas said.

The rules of the Coshocton study:

~ Third- through sixth-grade classes are eligible. Eight of 16 classes are chosen through a lottery system each fall. The students who aren't selected are the control group.

~ Students who pass the tests receive \$15 to \$20 per test, depending on their grade and the number of tests taken. Students who score at the advanced level get \$20 to \$25 each.

~ The rewards are paid in the form of Coshocton County Bucks to ensure that students, not their parents, spend the money locally.

Brown, a language-arts teacher, said the study has sparked a friendly competition in her classroom.

The program provides students a longer-term goal, she said. Some already have considered what they'd spend their reward money on.

Chris Peyatt would buy video games. Classmate Brayton Ross wants soccer stuff. And Courtney Clark would spend hers on clothes and shoes.

Alex Ash would use it to buy gifts for his grandmother.

Eric Bettinger, an associate professor of economics at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, is tracking the students' progress.

He hasn't released any preliminary results to avoid skewing the rest of the experiment.

Bettinger consulted Edward Miguel, an associate economics professor at the University of California-Berkeley who conducted a similar study in Kenya. Simpson contacted Miguel after learning of his success.

Miguel is one of three U.S. researchers who in 2001 and 2002 examined the effects of an incentive program offered by a nonprofit organization in Kenya. Girls in public schools who performed well were offered grants to help cover the cost of school fees.

The girls' performance on government tests significantly improved, Miguel said. Something else happened: boys' scores also improved. They apparently were inspired by their female classmates'

sense of competition.

"Small amounts of money can kind of motivate kids," Miguel said.

"We don't want to sully the grand mission of education. We want to further it."

Both Miguel and Simpson think the concept has national potential.

"It could be a lot bigger than just helping this small community here," Simpson said.

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