

## Opinion



## Our opinion on education incentives: Cash for grades? An odd idea whose time may have come.



Hotelier Leona Helmsley dies at 87  
 Mine official: 'Likely miners may not be found'  
 Evangelist Billy Graham hospitalized  
 Caymans brace as Hurricane Dean nears  
[More Editorial/Opinion](#)

Search USATODAY.com

search

Fri Aug 17, 12:22 AM ET

Prepare yourself to express moral outrage: When some students go back to school this year, they will get paid for improving their attendance, grades or test scores.

At first glance, even second glance, this seems like a terrible idea. Motives to learn should be pure and intrinsic. And if learning for the sake of learning doesn't click, the correlation between education and income ought to be sufficient motivation. Won't paying for grades inevitably lead to kids demanding money for, say, taking out the garbage?

Perhaps. But a careful look at the new pay plans suggests that in the right circumstances, they're not so crazy after all.

For one thing, the experiments are financed with private — not taxpayer — money. For another, the schools where these programs are about to unfold are located in minority neighborhoods where 90% of the kids live in poverty and test scores lag far behind, such as [New York's South Bronx](#).

Lots of middle- and upper-income parents reward their kids for getting good grades with cash or a trip to a favorite restaurant. Those same kids also can find around them ample evidence that education pays. Their older siblings, cousins or neighbors head off to college and land good jobs.

In the poorest neighborhoods, kids see more destructive role models, and their parents lack the financial means to reward effort in school. Seen that way, offering cash for improved test scores is an attempt to replicate incentives proven to work in wealthier areas.

For the students, the cash rewards represent something more than just money. At [Amphitheater High School in Tucson](#), where most of the students are poor and Hispanic, some students shed tears when they learned they had been selected to be part of a cash-for-grades experiment, says superintendent Vicki Balentine. It was the first time they had received a message that the outside world actually cared how they did.

At the moment, only a handful of places are trying cash-for-performance. The largest experiment, involving 70 schools in [New York City's](#) poorest neighborhoods, starts next month. Fourth-graders who score perfectly on state exams will get \$25; lower scores earn less. The cash rewards double for seventh-graders.

How the programs are structured will be as important as the monetary rewards.

For one thing, they should focus on more than just showing up. The Tucson experiment requires perfect attendance to win \$25 a week, but it also requires C-averages or better and no discipline referrals. Students making the honor roll at the end of the semester can earn \$100 bonuses.

Both the [New York](#) and Tucson programs have control groups of students not receiving cash rewards. Tracking both groups will show whether the experiments have short-term and long-term benefits.

And in neighborhoods where students can get rolled for lunch money, it's important to try to

## OPINION VIDEO



**Thomas L. Friedman** discusses his book "[The World is Flat](#)".

Charlie Rose



**Matt Groening and James L. Brooks** discuss why it took so long to create [The Simpsons Movie](#).

Charlie Rose

» All news video

## ELSEWHERE ON THE WEB

**CNN.com:** [Miners' families blast officials, saying, 'We have not lost hope'](#)

**ABC News:** [Fashion Icon Blogs at Home, Works at Gap](#)

**USATODAY.com:** [Gas leak sickens Va. Tech students](#)

## ALSO IN YAHOO! NEWS



**Popular World**



The most popular world news and

photos.

» All Most Popular

Add headlines to your personalized My Yahoo! page (About My Yahoo! and RSS)

Opinion - USATODAY.com

» More news feeds

NEWS ALERTS

Get an alert when there are new stories about:

- checkbox New York
checkbox Tucson
checkbox New York City
checkbox Amphitheater High School

Add Selected Alerts

» More alerts

ensure that the rewards stay safely with those who are earning them. New York and Tucson school officials have lined up banks willing to place direct deposits into accounts for the students. Bank officials will visit the schools to teach financial literacy.

Yes, it's sad that education has come to this. But with the right controls and safeguards, paying for grades, crazy as it may seem, is an idea that's worth trying.

Email Story IM Story Printable View

RECOMMEND THIS STORY

Recommend It:

Average (96 votes)



» Recommended Stories

Opinion

Market chaos needs taming USATODAY.com

Our view on airline passenger rights: How airlines mistreat fliers and get Congress to go along USATODAY.com

Opposing view: We're serving our customers USATODAY.com

Howls over hurricane insurance The Christian Science Monitor

Treating the trauma of war – fairly The Christian Science Monitor

Most Viewed - Opinion

Opposing view: We're serving our customers USATODAY.com

Howls over hurricane insurance The Christian Science Monitor

Exxon vs. Reason The Nation

Market chaos needs taming USATODAY.com

Treating the trauma of war – fairly The Christian Science Monitor

Opinion Video

Thomas L. Friedman discusses his book "The World is Flat". Charlie Rose - Fri Aug 17, 4:23 PM ET

Nancy Pelosi discusses impact of leaving Iraq Charlie Rose - Thu Jun 28, 5:21 PM ET

Matt Groening and James L. Brooks discuss why it took so long to create The Simpsons Movie. Charlie Rose - Tue Jul 31, 5:03 PM ET

Search:

Search input field

All News dropdown menu

Search button

Advanced

Yahoo! - My Yahoo! - Mail

Home | U.S | Business | World | Entertainment | Sports | Tech | Politics | Science | Health | Travel | Most Popular | Odd News | Opinion

Copyright © 2007 USA TODAY, a division of Gannett Co. Inc.

Copyright © 2007 Yahoo! Inc. All rights reserved.

Questions or Comments

Privacy Policy - Terms of Service - Copyright/IP Policy - Ad Feedback