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Paid to achieve: Do families need cash incentives?

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School districts are struggling with what has become known as "the achievement gap." African-American first-graders fall behind white counterparts and never catch up. Hispanic kids under-perform compared to white kids, too.

It isn't obvious to anyone how we, as a society, can improve reading skills, ratchet up standardized test scores and lower drop-out rates.

One possibility is that we need to pay teachers much better, give them better classroom resources and demand superior results. Washington D.C.'s new school chancellor, Michelle A. Rhee, wants to close the achievement gap in just that way.

New York City's school chancellor, Joel I. Klein, has something altogether different, more controversial, in mind. He hopes to close the gap by slipping serious cash into the wallets of poor and minority families. In fact, the Big Apple will launch a pilot program of bold cash incentives in 40 schools next September.

Beginning this fall, model NYC pupils in selected schools will earn \$500 a year for faithful attendance, sitting for tests and achieving good scores. Parents will be paid \$200 per month for holding down full-time jobs and having health insurance. They will get an additional \$50 per month for each child sent to school on a regular basis.

But should low-income parents get paid just for sending their children to school and showing up for meetings with their teachers? Should public school children receive money from their school districts just for taking tests and earning their marks?

I don't think so, but I am not the expert. In this case, the guy to listen to is, apparently, New York City's new "chief equality officer," Roland G. Fryer.

Fryer is a 30-year-old Harvard economics professor best known for research on "acting white." Fryer believes cash incentives could motivate lukewarm parents to make education a priority. How will cash incentives motivate students? Fryer has argued that some under-achievement by minority kids may be explained by the poor quality of their schools. But another factor, he believes, is that minority kids are punished by their peers for "acting white" -- attending to their studies and achieving. Whereas today kids don't take school seriously because they don't want to lose friends, the introduction of money into the picture will give them all a reason to study for tests and do homework.

Achievement spells bling, I guess. Or maybe money bathes the wounds of social isolation. Is Fryer right in thinking that moolah is what makes the denizens of 21st-century society tick? Could the devilishly simple NYC scheme actually close the public-school racial achievement gap?

I don't like the idea, but I can concede that money might work. After all, poor people need money, and money today is a better incentive than the abstract promise of economic well-being tomorrow. Maybe sending kids to public school has hidden costs that a few hundred dollars a month can help a family pay for -- things like baby-sitters, after-school programs and transportation.

Keen on testing the hypothesis that money talks, New York City is busy raising the \$53 million the cash

incentive plan is expected to cost. (Generous foundation support is already in hand.) Meanwhile, critics are calling the payment scheme an insult to the poor and a distraction from the real problem -- a badly managed school system.

Economic theory may predict success for the New York plan. But common sense predicts that many people will find the idea of substantial cash incentives morally repugnant. People of all races who got through public school despite challenges of poverty, family trauma, racism or disability will surely say, "No one paid me or my parents to keep me in school."

Indeed, I personally could say it: No one paid me or my parents. Something besides ka-ching was our incentive. We had our eyes on a richer prize.

In a few days I will be traveling south for an unusual high school reunion. The reunion will bring together African-Americans who were among the first to attend the formerly white-only Baker High School in Columbus, Ga. The school's only claim to fame is that Newt Gingrich went there. Newt's and my alma mater is now a boarded-up brick shamble with a leaky roof and a weedy lawn.

In most Southern towns, the "all deliberate speed" demanded by the Supreme Court in *Brown vs. Board of Education* proceeded at a snail's pace. It wasn't until 1965 that a federal court ordered an immediate end to legal segregation in Columbus. The case was *Lockett vs. Board of Education of Muscogee County*, one of many such cases litigated by a brilliant cadre of Yankee civil rights lawyers that included Derrick Bell and Jack Greenberg.

The philosopher Hannah Arendt was troubled by photographs of black children in Arkansas walking to school surrounded by national guardsmen. She wrote a famous article about it, "Reflections on Little Rock," published in 1959 in *Dissent* magazine. Last April Princeton University sponsored a symposium about Arendt's perplexing take on desegregation. Historians still puzzle over why Arendt not only lambasted the Supreme Court for its 1954 decision to end public-school segregation, but also questioned the morals of courageous black mothers who sent their children to newly desegregated schools.

A Jewish refugee of Nazi Europe, living in the United States, Arendt believed it was wrong for African-American mothers to place their offspring in harm's way at white schools, where they weren't welcome and their presence might have spawned deadly violence. (The desegregation of Baker did not lead to serious personal violence, although someone set the place on fire the year after I graduated -- legend has it, because the student body failed to select a black cheerleader. I was one of the first two blacks to attend a junior high school in Forest Park, Ga., and our arrival did not spawn mob violence -- just administrative hand-wringing and playground in suits of the sort kids still hurl about today.)

Arendt didn't "get" the virtue of the black families. Many blacks at the time believed segregation was akin to slavery, a profound injury and injustice that could only end with their help. Desegregation was risky, but it held a special promise. Black mothers like mine she was a high-school dropout and unwed mother from a poor family -- placed their children on the front lines of the civil rights movement; and the results were not all bad.

We won educational and economic opportunity. The group from Baker High that will gather in Columbus consists of lawyers, teachers, actors, civil servants, business people and clergy. With the help of desegregation and affirmative action programs that allowed us to prove ourselves, we found vocations that matched our aptitudes.

Columbus, Ga., schools have reverted to pervasive segregation by race. The same pattern is seen in school districts all over the country. Moreover, African-American youth are not doing well in majority black or minority black public schools. The high school dropout rate in Camden here in New Jersey is 70 percent. The numbers are not much better in Philadelphia or Washington, D.C., especially for African-Americans.

Black achievement took a nosedive after 1988, the year that was the "commercial take-off period for hip hop and rap music," says Ronald Ferguson, who directs the Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard. I cannot believe rap music singlehandedly destroyed African-Americans' educational values. The full story of the desperate situation that has led New York to experiment with cash incentives must include changes in family structure, shifts in societal mores, drug abuse, the rise of the illegal drug trade, the incarceration of African-American men, HIV/AIDS, school quality and changes in the overall labor market tied to technology and globalization.

No one had to pay Baby Boom ers' parents to do right by their children, even when what they had to do was emotionally costly, legally complicated and personally risky. For now, I put myself into the camp of the skeptics and the principled opponents of paying people to do what they ought to do anyway.

On the other hand, if it turns out that a \$2,500 yearly gift to families can turn around the achievement patterns of an entire cohort of schoolchildren, as Fryer suggests, this will be a case of the ends truly justifying the means.

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