

Paying for High Test Scores

Students in the United States frequently lag behind their peers on international tests, particularly in science and mathematics. For example, in 2015, the math literacy of U.S. high school students ranked 40th in the world as measured by Program for International Assessment, scoring significantly lower than students in other industrialized countries like Germany, Canada, and Singapore. Results on science tests weren't much better.¹ Furthermore, large achievement gaps in science and math within the United States persist between white students and students of color, and between students of higher and lower socioeconomic status.²

Recently, some economists and school administrators have argued that cash incentives—paying students and teachers for higher test scores in math and science—are an important part of the solution to those problems. For example, in 2007, an organization called The National Math and Science Initiative sponsored a program that paid participating students up to \$500 for top scores on Advanced Placement exams;³ the Initiative also offered large bonuses—as much as \$7,300—to teachers whose students scored exceptionally well on the exams.⁴ Cash incentive programs have in some cases been financed with public funds (as in Baltimore), and in others with large private donations from companies like Exxon-Mobil, and foundations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Proponents of cash incentives argue that they motivate students and teachers to higher levels of academic achievement, increase interest in important fields like math and science, and improve teaching methods. Opponents, on the other hand, argue that financial incentives crowd out intrinsic motivation, discouraging students from valuing learning for its own sake. Moreover, they claim that cash incentives encourage perverse practices by teachers (such as counselling lower performing students out of A.P. classes in an attempt to protect their bonuses), divert resources from more promising solutions (like extended instructional time and smaller class sizes), and fail actually to achieve the promising effects that their proponents claim. Finally, opponents worry that offering such incentives selectively devalues the courses in which cash incentives aren't offered.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is the purpose of high school education? How, if at all, might offering students incentives for good performance in certain courses promote this purpose? How, if at all, might offering students incentives for good performance in certain courses run contrary to this purpose?
2. Does incentivizing good performance in AP STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) courses decrease the value of Social Studies, Language, and Art courses? If so, is this problematic?
3. Is there a moral difference between schools offering students cash incentives for academic performance, and parents offering cash rewards to their children for high grades?

¹ <https://www.mecd.gob.es/inee/dam/jcr:54fd088e-f421-49c7-8ee2-852aff57682f/pisa2015-results-eng-vol1.pdf>

² https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/studies/pdf/school_composition_and_the_bw_achievement_gap_2015.pdf

³ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB121928822683759447>

⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/03/education/03incentive.html>

