

Student incentive programs expected to pay dividends

Educators tout rewards as motivational tools, while critics say they lessen the value of work.

BY BILL ZLATOS
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Keith Key graduated in 1983 from Peabody High School as a star of the football, basketball and track teams. He returned recently in a charcoal gray suit to encourage students to become just like him — a millionaire.

And he promised prizes of \$250 each for sophomores, juniors and seniors who do well in school and serve their community.

"When I sat in this chair, I didn't know I would be a millionaire," the real-estate developer told about 340 students at a recent assembly in the school's auditorium. "If one person in this room becomes a millionaire, becomes successful, my time here is worthwhile."

Schools across the country are finding angels like Key to sponsor monetary awards to motivate students to do their best in the classroom. Nationally, schools in Washington, New York City, Baltimore and Fulton County, Ga., have employed similar methods.

School officials and students tout rewards as good motivational tools. Critics decry them as undermining the value of work. The final verdict is still out: Long-term studies are needed to determine if they really work.

"Most people every day are driven to do their best," said Peter A. Spevak, director of the Center for Applied Motivation, a Washington-based group that counsels adults and children with motivational problems. "When you do these immediate rewards, it undermines that basic drive that most people have in this culture to do your best."

Dale Barnhart, 15, a junior at Karns City High School in Butler County, is using \$250 from The Challenge Program to help pay for a school trip to Spain.

"It was in the back of my mind that it was possible (to win), but I would try to get the best grades anyway," said Barnhart, who won for having the highest grade-point average.

The Challenge Program, based in Johnstown, serves 72,000 students in Delaware, West Virginia and 15 counties in Western Pennsylvania. Among the participating high schools are Albert Gallatin Area, Greater Latrobe, Greensburg Salem, Karns, Ligonier Valley, Mt. Pleasant Area, Norwin, Peabody, Plum, Quaker Valley, Ringgold, West Mifflin and Seton LaSalle. The program also is available to 428 students at the Indiana County Technology Center in Indiana. Its partner is Zambias Services Inc. in Johnstown.

"This program is a nice bridge between business and industry and our students," said Erin Eisenman, a guidance counselor at the center.

Since its founding in 2003, The Challenge Program has grown from one to about 120 schools and given away \$625,250 to students with the best grades, attendance and community service, as well as those showing the most academic improvement. It is funded by foundations, corporate sponsors, individuals and state grants. It aims to pair every school with a business partner.

"Part of our mission is to introduce students to career opportunities in their areas," said Barbara Grandinetti, the program's executive director.

It has the support of Ed Conto, assistant principal at Karns City High. "We're a tough school," he said. "We expect our kids to toe the line. So the kids who do that, we feel, deserve a pat on the back."

Norwin School District Superintendent John Boylan said the

benefits of such methods are questioned "every year and in every generation."

Norwin High School has participated in The Challenge Program for a year and is monitoring its results. No plans exist to expand perks to students in lower grades.

"In a perfect world, all kids would go to school every day; all kids would study hard; every kid would get involved in the community. The fact of the matter is that this doesn't happen," Grandinetti said. "This is a business model. We're not paying them to do what they're supposed to do anyway. We're paying them for excellence."

Apangea Learning Inc., a downtown Pittsburgh-based private provider of tutoring, gives gift cards and company gear to outstanding students in districts that use its educational technology products. Among its clients are Big Beaver Falls, Cornell, East Allegheny, Pittsburgh and New Brighton, and the Northside Urban Pathways Charter School.

Key, president and CEO of KBK Enterprises in Columbus, Ohio, said such programs fill a gap in families that cannot afford to reward their children for doing good work. "I believe in the concept of providing incentives for students to perform at their best," he said.

Peabody winners such as junior Sidney Christian said Key's appearance this month and last year inspired them. He told the students that his company has done \$1.5 billion worth of work, including a \$60 million development in his native Garfield.

"It meant a lot because I'm living where he's building all the houses," said Christian, 16, of Garfield. She won \$250 for having perfect attendance.

Alexis Jackson, 15, a junior from Garfield, won the best grade-point average award.

"If he could do it, you know that you could, so you don't limit yourself to anything," she said.