

## Program Pays Students for Good Grades, Parents to Get Involved

By Deborah Feyerick

Tired of watching kids fail in school, an education activist came up with a plan. Paulette Wiley called a meeting with the parents and told them she'd pay them \$25 just for showing up." Ten dollars isn't dignified, \$30, that's too much," says Wiley. "But \$25, that sounded real good. Real good."

At the first meeting in May, parents introduced themselves and explained why they had come. Wiley says she was struck by the level of pain of the parents. "One father stood up and talked about how he wanted more for his children, how he was second-generation special education and how his children were coming through special education, and how he wanted to break the cycle," recalls Wiley. By the time introductions were finished, most people in the room were crying and realized they were not alone.

As strange as it may sound, schools across the country, in New York, Texas and Arizona, have taken this approach. They're paying students to take tests and make good grades. Wiley, who lives in Des Moines, Iowa, decided to take a different approach. "Our parents are disconnected. They're disconnected from a system that doesn't respect them," says Wiley. "They're disconnected from a system they don't have a positive relationship with, so we've got to reconnect our parents." Wiley's program, the Education Brain Trust, runs daylong seminars that show parents how to work with teachers, help with homework and support their kids. The parents are required to sign a commitment letter agreeing to have at least four positive experiences in their child's classroom, including attending parent-teacher conferences and supervising an hour of homework a night. "I'm talking about you sitting down reading with your child; I'm talking about you showing your child how important homework hour is to you. That's what we ask them for and that's a lot." La Conda Obie, whose daughters are in fifth- and tenth-grades, went to the seminar to learn her rights as a parent: "I get a stipend, but at the same time I get knowledge as well."

Critics say paying parents, and students for that matter, cheapens the learning process. Alfie Kohn, author of "Punished by Rewards" says the challenge is to change the learning environment -- not paying people to work within the one that's broken. "When are educators going to work with children and their parents to create the kind of learning environments that will be naturally engaging to kids instead of just giving them prizes?" says Kohn.

Superintendent Nancy Sebring says if improving the learning environment means paying parents every time they show up to a seminar -- she supports it. "From my experience, the lack of parental involvement has not been from parents not caring," says Sebring. "They may be working two jobs; they may not have transportation to and from school; they may not speak English." Sebring says when she was approached about paying parents, she never hesitated. "I thought that it was an excellent idea. Poverty disrupts learning, it is not an excuse not to learn," Sebring explains. "So any way you can fill the void by providing parents with necessary resources, even a small amount of money can go a long way to a family." So far, three hundred parents have attended Wiley's program, which is paid for by a \$20,000 county grant and co-sponsored by the ASK Family Resource Center. Now that she knows what the classes are about, La Conda Obie says she'd attend even if she weren't paid. She sees it as an investment in her children's future. What kind of future does she want for her daughters? "Just put her best foot forward and get her education," says Obie.

Using the reading above, personal experience, and/or the experience of others to support your position, write an organized well-developed paper in which you discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the issues raised in Feyerick's essay.