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Schools Plan to Pay Cash for Marks

By [JENNIFER MEDINA](#)

New York City students could earn as much as \$500 a year for doing well on standardized tests and showing up for class in a new program to begin this fall, city officials announced yesterday. And the Harvard economist who created the program is joining the inner circle of Schools Chancellor [Joel I. Klein](#), according to an official briefed on the hiring.

The economist, Roland G. Fryer, who has published several studies on racial inequality in public schools, met this month with school principals around the city to push his program, which uses money raised privately.

Both Mr. Klein and Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) have been eager to hear Professor Fryer's thoughts on how to reverse the persistent lagging of poor and minority students, who make up most of the city's public school enrollment. But educators have been skeptical, saying students have to love learning for its own sake, not for cash prizes.

Now Professor Fryer will be the Department of Education's "chief equality officer," a member of the chancellor's senior staff. The title is meant to reflect his primary focus — to improve the performance of black and Hispanic students.

The school incentive program is part of the mayor's wider antipoverty initiative, which also includes other cash payments, all raised privately, to influence behavior and reduce poverty. Details of the various incentive programs were announced yesterday by Linda Gibbs, the deputy mayor for health and human services, at a briefing at City Hall. The incentive programs are expected to attract more than 2,500 families in Harlem; Brownsville and East New York in Brooklyn; and the Morris Heights and East Tremont sections of the Bronx, she said.

Cash incentives for adults will include \$150 a month for keeping a full-time job and \$50 a month for having health insurance. Families will also receive as much as \$50 per month per child for high attendance rates in school, as well as \$25 for attending parent-teacher conferences.

The city has already raised much of the \$53 million it needs for the program, Ms. Gibbs said. The effort, which officials said was the broadest ever tried in this country to pay poor people to develop good

habits, is modeled in part on one in Mexico.

Although Professor Fryer helped devise some of the broader incentives like the payments for high attendance rates, his main proposals involve payments to children for doing well on tests.

Under his plan, fourth-grade students will receive up to \$25 for a perfect score on each of 10 standardized tests throughout the year. Seventh-grade students will be able to earn twice as much — \$50 per test, for a total of up to \$500. Fourth graders will receive \$5 just for taking the test, and seventh graders will get \$10.

Officials expect up to 40 schools to participate this fall, with a total of 9,000 students, in the pilot phase of the program, which will be monitored by Professor Fryer. After two years, they said, they will evaluate it for possible expansion.

Principals in the system's empowerment initiative — who have more autonomy to run their schools — can choose to join the program.

Similar, smaller programs for cash incentives to raise schoolchildren's performance have been put in place elsewhere in the country. In Chelsea, Mass., for instance, students can receive \$25 for perfect attendance. And in Dallas, some schools hand over \$2 for every book a child reads.

Despite the criticism of the program from some teachers and principals, some community leaders praised Professor Fryer's idea yesterday as an inventive way to encourage students to do well in school.

"I'm willing to say let's see what works," said Darwin Davis, the president of the Urban League. "We are in a capitalist society and people are motivated by money across race and across class, so why not?"

But Mr. Davis also cautioned that the amounts of money being offered were relatively paltry in New York.

"I wish \$50 could be enough for an insurance payment, but that's not going to be the case," he said, wondering aloud how many tests students would need to pass to buy the latest video game.

Sol Stern, a fellow at the conservative Manhattan Institute, called the idea a "insult to every hard-working parent."

Mr. Stern has said he would support paying teachers more to work in low-performing schools.

But he cautioned against giving too much credence to the notion that money would prod students. He said the mayor was being a "sucker for the market system."

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