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Learning and Earning: The Role of Incentives in Educational Achievement

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Abstract: Can external rewards develop intrinsic motivation? Based on the research projects conducted with adult basic education programs for recipients of public assistance, this roundtable will examine how incentives influence participation in educational activities and achievement of educational outcomes.

Do incentives influence educational outcomes for welfare recipients and other adults who have minimal formal education? For the past three years, the Center for Literacy Studies has conducted research as part of Tennessee's welfare-reform initiative. Several ongoing projects identify factors that influence the educational success of welfare recipients. Incentives for learning raises issues that can be particularly sensitive when applied to disadvantaged populations. This discussion examines how incentives influence participation in educational activities and achievement of educational outcomes.

Tennessee legislation enacted in 1996 created Families First, a program designed to help welfare recipients obtain and retain employment and move toward career advancement. In addition to cash grants, the program provides job training, childcare, transportation, assistance to find employment, and transitional benefits for adults who are preparing for work. Those participants who scored below the ninth grade on standardized achievement tests could choose basic-skills education for 20 hours a week and not have a time limitation for benefits. Those scoring above ninth grade could pursue a GED while working part time.

Using incentives as a way to improve performance or increase achievement is common across all levels of the educational spectrum. The Families First program recently initiated cash incentives, the *completion bonus*, for reaching education, training, and employment goals. Those Families First participants who were enrolled in adult basic education became entitled to a cash bonus when they advanced a literacy level (levels begin at the second, sixth, and ninth grades of literacy functioning), passed the GED or received a high school diploma, or completed a job-skills training class. The achievement is reported and, after a period of time, a check is mailed to the participant.

Little is known about the consequences of using incentives for performance. An earlier study (Ziegler & Ebert, 1999) compared the length of time Families First and voluntary adult basic education participants needed to achieve learning gains and pass the GED test. That study, completed before the initiation of the completion bonus, showed that the former tend to take a longer time than the latter to make progress in adult basic education. This study is currently being replicated to determine whether a completion bonus given by the state welfare office

affects the length of time it takes welfare recipients to achieve learning gains and pass the GED test.

The to-date findings (based on attendance, achievement data, and interviews with Families First participants and adult education program administrators) suggest that the initiative has produced mixed results. Imperfections in the way the cash bonus program has been implemented may explain these mixed results. The bonus may be an incentive for people to stay in the program, but it may not be an incentive for people to decrease the amount of time it takes for them to advance a level. Because of the time lapse between the accomplishment of the task and the receiving of the reward, the participants may not connect their accomplishments with the check they receive. An implication of this investigation may be the importance of selecting appropriate and effective processes for awarding monetary incentives to an economically disadvantaged adult population.

The issue of intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation has been a hotly debated topic in educational settings. In order to understand more about the ways that incentives influence participation and achievement in adult basic education, the Center for Literacy Studies conducted a review of the literature on motivation and incentives. Researchers who have studied incentive and reward programs report contradictory and inconsistent findings about the role of incentives in developing intrinsic motivation. Cameron and Pierce (1994) examined reward contingencies and found no reason to resist implementing incentive systems. Kohn (1999) claimed that people do inferior work when enticed with rewards. Others have said that the effectiveness of incentives depends on numerous factors and enumerate specific conditions that must be present for an incentive system to produce desired results.

Research has suggested that factors to consider in the design and administration of reward, incentive, and bonus programs include (a) building credibility of an incentive program by making it realistic, achievable, and sincere; (b) using positive recognition with a monetary incentive (rather than using a monetary incentive alone); (c) demonstrating a clear link between performance outcomes and the bonus; (d) administering rewards that reflect varying degrees of accomplishment; (e) recognizing individual differences and giving recipients a choice of rewards; (f) recognizing and minimizing bureaucratic organizational practices and processes that frustrate and detract from the motivational effectiveness of the reward; and (g) giving bonuses and rewards promptly and as soon as possible after the successful outcomes have been achieved.

These studies raise questions about how incentives influence participation, persistence, and performance in adult education. The following questions may lead to discussion among roundtable participants: (a) Will the promise of a monetary reward be effective if other variables are not in place, such as high-quality instruction? (b) Are adults who have been out of an educational setting for years motivated to participate in educational activities when promised an external reward? (c) Does the promise of an incentive influence performance, persistence, or achievement? (d) After adults have successful experiences in an educational setting, does the original promise of an extrinsic reward lessen in importance to the value of the educational experience itself? (e) Can external rewards develop intrinsic motivation? These questions about the use of incentives have implications for the theory and practice of adult education.

References

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