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June 23, 2007

Section: COLUMNISTS

### Education in N.Y.C. tutors kids, parents in bottom-line academics

GINA VERGEL  
*Home News Tribune*

By GINA VERGEL

Should children get paid for attending school, getting good grades, or obtaining a library card?

A program designed to end poverty in New York City aims to find out.

The two-year pilot program, called Opportunity New York City, will give "healthy lifestyle payments" to some of the city's poorest residents. The program, which will begin this fall, is being privately financed by funds raised by Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

Bloomberg opted to use private funding because he did not want to spend government money on something that is "highly experimental."

More than \$43 million has been raised toward the \$53 million goal, Deputy Mayor Linda Gibbs told the Associated Press.

Bloomberg traveled South of the Border this spring to learn about the program, which has proved successful in changing behavior among the Mexico's poor. The South American country of Brazil also has a similar program.

Students aren't the only ones to reap rewards under the program. Parents will get cash incentives when their kids do well and adult-program participants who keep doctor's visits and hold a job will also earn some dough.

The program will involve about 14,000 city residents.

The theory behind the program is that poor people are trapped in a never-ending cycle of repeated setbacks that keep them from climbing out of poverty.

"Struggling families are so focused on surviving, that it is often difficult for them to plan for the future," Bloomberg said in a statement posted on the city's Web site.

The mayor said he believes paying people in such circumstances to make good decisions could help break those patterns.

Critics, however, have raised questions about cash reward programs.

**Margy Waller**, co-founder of Inclusion, a research and policy group in Washington and a former domestic-policy adviser in the Clinton administration, told the AP it would be more effective to focus on labor issues, such as making sure wage laws are enforced and improving benefits for working people.

She may have a point.

But she can't deny that a poor family can earn some much needed funds by participating in the program, and, of course, following its guidelines to reap its rewards.

The average amount that a family or adult can earn through the rewards each year is about \$3,000 to \$6,000; a family of three living in poverty earns about \$17,000 a year.

They say money makes the world go around. And if anyone knows money, it's Mayor Bloomberg, who can call himself a billionaire. It's nice to see him use his fundraising chops for a program that aims to help the poor.

Only time will tell if the program will truly help a poor family climb out of poverty. But if it does well, will a similar program some day find its way to the Garden State? We'll see.

In the meantime, the program might get more fannies in some of those empty city school seats. After all, what kid doesn't want some extra play money?

Offering \$300 to elementary school students who pass standardized tests and \$600 for high schoolers who pass a Regents exam might just change some kids' lives.

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