

Financial rewards help students aim higher

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Let's say your pastor made the following announcement: "We don't look as good as we should from the highway, and that discourages passersby from visiting. Please help spruce up the church Saturday from eight until noon."

What would be your reaction to that announcement? Probably not that enthusiastic. Let's say he added, "I'll make you a deal: Afterwards, the church will barbecue some ribs and buy a bunch of pizzas for everybody who volunteers."

Would that change your reaction? I'll bet at least somewhat. People are encouraged by short-term, concrete rewards while pursuing much more important, long-term ends.

That's maybe part of the reason a program that financially rewards students for passing Advanced Placement courses in math, science and English — and pays their teachers, too — produced 43 percent of the state's passing grades even though it exists at only 39 high schools.

The Arkansas Advanced Initiative for Math and Science (AIMS) provides high school students a \$100 Visa gift card for each AP course they pass — AP courses being more rigorous versions that offer college credit. It's extra work, including three all-day Saturday sessions with an outside instructor funded by AIMS, but Tommie Sue Anthony, the initiative's president, told me some students have earned as much as \$500 for passing five AP classes.

Meanwhile, AP teachers are provided additional training and support, and they have their own incentives. They earn \$100 gift cards for each student who passes and can earn bonuses of up to \$3,000 depending on how their numbers of qualifying scores increase from year to year. Anthony said teachers have told her the incentive encouraged them to invite more students to take the course rather than keep the class sizes small.

The results? In 2011-12, the 39 participating high schools produced 3,036 qualifying scores. The state's other 232 high schools produced 4,023 qualifying scores.

More numbers? More than half of the qualifying scores in AP science came from the AIMS schools. Fifty-five percent of all qualifying scores in math, science and English among Afri-

can-American and Hispanic students occurred at AIMS schools. The year before it became an AIMS school, Centerville High School in Clark County had produced one student with a qualifying AP score in those courses. Last year, its first as an AIMS school, it produced 33.

AIMS schools accounted for about 41 percent of all students — 9,794 out of 23,765 statewide — taking a math, science or English AP course. Less than a third of AIMS students passed the AP exam, but Anthony pointed out that simply taking an AP class prepares students for college work better than a typical high school course would.

Anthony said the program is succeeding because it offers rewards and recognition for outstanding work. It makes AP courses part of the entire school's culture instead of limiting it to the academic elite-types.

After hearing a presentation from her Monday, State Board of Education member Sam Ledbetter was ready to expand the program statewide, costs be damned. Unfortunately, AIMS is being funded by a \$13.2 million grant from Exxon Mobil that is due to run out at the end of this year. Anthony plans to ask the Legislature to keep it going when it meets in session starting in January. If she can't find the money somewhere, it all goes away.

AIMS costs about \$3.75 million a year to run. According to my (non-Advanced Placement) math, that works out to about \$1,235 per passing score, or about \$383 per AP student taking the course and at least being exposed to college-level work. That's a little steep, but the cost-per-student ratio would lower somewhat if the program were expanded due to economies of scale. Local civic clubs and homegrown businesses could pick up part of the tab.

Education reform involves a lot of throwing stuff at the wall and seeing what sticks. Much of it doesn't. AIMS is one reform that has proven to be effective. We know it works, and we know how much it costs. Arkansas' school reforms have attracted a lot of positive attention, but the one area where the state continues to lag is the one that matters most — student achievement. The AIMS program helps students achieve.

I'll make you a deal: Free pizza and barbecue for whoever figures out how to keep it going.

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