Incentives offered to students

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Two out of every five children who start high school in Louisiana never finish.

With odds like that, some educators are ready to try anything - even bribery - to get their students to stay in school.

A program in place at a local school since last spring is testing the effect of cash incentives on student performance in school.

Willie J. Phillips, principal of Scotlandville Middle School, said the "It's Worth It" program there is working.

"It is working well. It is a great incentive for the students," Phillips said. "We actually pay you to do your best."

The program fits in with the school slogan - "Scotlandville Middle School is Worth Going To," Phillips said. Every student at the school is involved in the program.

Students receive a certain amount of points for A's, B's and C's on their report cards. They can get bonuses if they have all A's, Phillips said.

Students also can earn points by achieving things that teachers used to take for granted - coming to class, being on time, taking their books and materials to class, completing assigned work, behaving in class, paying attention in class and treating others with respect.

"The whole idea is to motivate students to learn and to give them credit for the grades they earn," Phillips said.

At the end of a grading period, the students' points are tabulated, and they are given a check, Phillips said. The next day, tellers are set up in the gym and the students can go there to cash their checks, he said.

The program also helps students get a glimpse of the "real world" of working for a living, Phillips said.

"If you work hard on the job, they will pay you for it," he said.

Phillips said educators sometimes are fighting a losing battle when they try to keep students interested in school.

"There are so many things happening now that attract students' attention," he said. "If this keeps them in school, it's worth it."

Students can make as much as $12 per grading period, Phillips said. The money has been donated by a private citizen.

Counselor Rhonda Chambers administers questionnaires to the students when they get their checks, polling them on how they did and if they plan to work harder. Chambers said the program is part of a psychological study on rewards and how they affect student performance.

The final results of the psychological study won't be in until January 1991, but Chambers said she is pleased with the results she has seen.

"It's wonderful. I really can't say enough about it," she said. "Just by talking to students and teachers, the feedback I'm getting is it seems to be working. It's really fascinating to the students. They like it, it's a big deal to them. They look at school more like a job now."

Chambers said parent participation seems to be up this year as well, and she thinks that is another effect of the program.

But the best effect is a hard-working student body.

"That's the purpose," Chambers said. "They're students, and they work hard for seven hours a day. And we pay them. If they work harder, they get a bigger check. It really is a job, and that's how we want them to look at it."