

The Miami Herald

Posted on Tue, Jun. 09, 2009

Students + cash = packed tutoring

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Marquevia Bethel didn't go to Saturday school for the money.

But the \$420 she earned by attending the tutoring sessions certainly didn't hurt.

"I love the money!" said Marquevia, a freshman at Miami Central Senior High. "My mother wants me to spend it on school clothes, but I want to buy myself a laptop computer."

She added: "The education part was good, too."

Marquevia was one of nearly 3,500 Miami-Dade students who attended the Success Academy, a series of tutoring sessions offered on Saturdays and over the winter recess.

She and her classmates received a financial incentive for attending: \$10 per session for elementary school students, and \$30 per session for high schoolers.

The money was deposited into bank accounts set up for each student by the school district.

Their collective earnings: a whopping \$764,000, all donated by corporate sponsors.

"It's awesome," said Shavonne Griffin, a sixth-grader at Liberty City Elementary who earned \$140. "I'm going to buy clothes and shoes, definitely."

Superintendent Alberto Carvalho created the Success Academy this fall to help students at nine of the district's lowest-performing schools.

The district offered a total of 14 classes. Students who attended studied math, reading, writing and science in advance of the state tests.

On the high-school level, the financial incentive was designed for students who would otherwise be working, Carvalho said.

It was also meant to encourage students to attend as many sessions as possible.

Paying students to attend classes has been controversial, as was recently seen in New York City and Washington, D.C.

Both big-city school districts drew criticism for pay-incentive programs.

Carvalho knew that including a financial incentive component to the Success Academy would be

risky. But he believes it paid off.

Seven of the nine schools that participated in the program made double-digit gains on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Tests, according to data from the state Department of Education.

Those same schools had seen declining student achievement for the past four years.

"The financial incentive got their attention and got them there," Carvalho said. "But once they were there, we taught them reading, writing and arithmetic."

The kids also took a financial literacy class, he added.

Dr. Monica Dowling, a professor of clinical pediatrics at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, said the strategy makes sense.

"Rewarding the behavior that we want is always good," she said. "Positive reinforcement is one of the most effective strategies."

Dowling said rewarding children for attending extra classes can be positive -- so long as school officials are clear what the reward is for.

Overall, Carvalho called the classes "an extremely successful experiment."

"We were able to get the students to attend 14 days of additional schooling at record numbers," he said. "And for most of the schools, the increase [in students passing the FCATs] was very significant."

The Success Academy was a hit with students, too.

Ciera Anderson, a fifth-grader at Liberty City Elementary, said at first, she had to adjust to going to school on Saturday.

"Some mornings, I would wake up and think, 'Man, it's another Saturday,'" she said. "But once I got into it, I got excited and had fun."