

EDUCATION

Tutoring incentives offered to students at Eastside high school

Students will get \$6 an hour under the plan.

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Former Austin Mayor Bruce Todd thinks he has found a way to make learning more enticing for some Austin students: pay them cold, hard cash.

The plan calls for Eastside Memorial High School students to be paid \$6 an hour with private money to attend tutoring sessions. Eastside is the new name for the former Johnston High School campus, which was closed in June after five consecutive years of failing to meet state dropout and testing standards. The East Austin school, which reopened under the new name last week, serves many of the students who attended Johnston.

"When a school fails — and being that Johnston was the first ever closed in Texas — it calls for different and dramatic action," Todd said.

Called the Tutoring Incentive Program, Todd's brainchild is a partnership between the school district, Austin Community College and Kaplan Tutoring Services. It will be funded with money raised privately; approximately \$75,000 will be set aside to pay students, and \$300,000 will pay for the tutors, other programs and administrative costs, he said. ACC will serve as administrator of the payments to students.

The tutors, Todd said, will be recruited from local colleges and paid the market rate, about \$12 an hour. As with any job, the money the students earn from tutoring will be taxed, he said.

Though paying students to be tutored is new, this will not be the first time that students or teachers in Austin have participated in a program that pays them to learn. Several schools in recent years have paid students based on their performance on Advance Placement exams.

In Bexar County, a program pays students \$100 a month if they maintain a C average and 95 percent attendance rate.

Todd, whose son graduated from the Liberal Arts Academy at Johnston High School in 2000 and

attended Harvard University, said he realizes that many students must work — not just to support themselves, but often their families — and jobs could cut into time that could be spent studying or with tutors.

"These students ... deserve the same opportunities as the rest of us," Todd said. "I couldn't sit back and hear what happened over there and think those kids had less opportunity than my son had."

Before Eastside students get paid, they will be evaluated by their tutors based on attendance and active engagement in the program, Todd said.

Diane Schallert, a professor in the University of Texas' Department of Educational Psychology, said that whether the program will improve student performance will depend on the quality of tutors and design of the program.

Two leading behavior theories suggest that paying students to attend tutoring would increase the probability that they would show up for such a service, Schallert said.

"Whether they actually learn is all about what the tutors do with them once they get there," she said. "Is the tutoring engaging? Are they highly trained and motivated?"

The Austin district already offers tutoring at five struggling schools as part of a requirement under the federal No Child Left Behind law.

Austin pays more than \$1,000 per student for the service, however, and few eligible students — less than 2 percent in years past — take advantage of it.

Austin Superintendent Pat Forgione said Todd's program will operate independently from the district's other tutoring programs because it's unclear whether the Eastside students will be eligible now that the school has been repurposed.

"This is an example of a great citizen saying, 'We can do more, and we can do it with the school district and the community,'" Forgione said. "And we learned that in our district, sometimes you have to think outside the box."

Todd said that to start, teachers will select which students should participate in the program. He said he hopes that the hiring of tutors will take "weeks, not months." In the meantime, Todd said, he will continue to solicit money for the program from community members and area businesses.

Todd said a local law firm and Samsung have contributed.

Donations can be made to the ACC's Center for Public Policy and Political Studies, a nonprofit organization led by Todd.

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