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Inside ExploreLI

TOP STORIES

Cash, advice keep students on track

Incentive program has operated on Island for 15 years

BY JOHN HILDEBRAND
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Dozens of students at four Long Island high schools are getting regular paychecks and motivation in an unusual cash-for-performance project focused on helping teens pass their courses and push toward higher levels of academic achievement.

The cash incentives, part of the program known as Earn and Learn, come from donors. Essentially, students receive \$50 or more every two weeks in exchange for keeping their grades up and attending after-class seminars run by adult volunteers who offer advice, ranging from personal conduct to future careers.

Earn and Learn has operated on the Island for 15 years even as larger and better-funded incentive projects elsewhere have faded from existence. Launched in 2004 in the Farmingdale school district, the regional program has expanded to the Brentwood, Huntington and South Huntington systems.

Earn and Learn focuses on teens identified by guidance counselors, teachers and others as needing a little extra motivation to live up to their potential.

One former student helped by the project, Bernandie Jean, graduated in 2008 from Farmingdale High School, where she banked close to \$1,800 in incentive earnings while boosting her academic standing. Jean, now 28, is a postdoctoral cancer researcher at Stony Brook University and also serves as a volunteer mentor at Brentwood High School.

Jean credited Earn and Learn for much of her success, and not in the financial sense alone. More important, she said, were the twice-a-month counseling sessions where she gradually realized that switching to honors-track courses at Farmingdale would allow her more time with students likely to influence her



Brentwood High School student Neomi Washington, left, with Bernandie Jean, a volunteer mentor.

own behavior.

"You'd think by the time you're a senior, you've got it all figured out," Jean said. "But you still need somebody who can bring you back to earth."

Earn and Learn is the creation of Jefry Rosmarin, a Huntington-based commercial developer and philanthropist, who started the program in Farmingdale while he was building a shopping center there.

From the start, the project operated on a businesslike model.

Students, selected through interviews, signed contracts agreeing to show up for classes on time and to avoid cigarettes, alcohol and drugs. Teachers were asked to verify academic standing. Participants who failed to meet the project's minimum requirements were "fired."

In exchange, students received standard payments of \$5 per day or \$50 every two weeks, with at least 10 percent set aside in education savings accounts. Additional savings by students were matched by Earn and Learn, up to a maximum 40 percent.

Money, indisputably, served as

an initial draw for students — as it does to this day, said Rosmarin and other project organizers. But they emphasized that the program's heart lies in the twice-monthly seminars of 60 to 90 minutes each, where students take turns leading discussions on topics ranging from current events to personal behavior while also picking up practical advice from adults.

On a recent Monday afternoon at Brentwood High School, six students and three adults gathered. An 11th-grader, Kelvyn Hepburn, was seeking help.

"I don't know the reason I spend so much time playing video games," said the 16-year-old, a shy giant who gazed down at his desk. "I don't know what else to do with myself. I don't play all the time, but sometimes on weekends, I'll start playing, and before I know what's happening, it's 6 o'clock in the morning."

"So does anyone have a suggestion for Kelvyn?" asked one of the mentors, Peter Wolf, a real-estate broker and Rosmarin's associate.

Several other teens spoke up. Then Wolf said that perhaps

Hepburn should consider taking a job on Saturdays, and not just for the paycheck alone.

"More than not playing video games, he's connecting with other people," the mentor added.

Earn and Learn is relatively small, compared with some other recent experiments that used student cash incentives.

For example, in 2007 New York City started a privately funded program, known as Spark, that involved 58 schools and 5,000 students in high-poverty neighborhoods. Spark paid fourth-graders up to \$250 and eighth-graders up to \$500 for improving their scores on standardized tests.

Spark closed down after two years' operation, according to a spokesman for the city's Board of Education. Supporters of Earn and Learn said their program's continued survival appears to be linked to its one-on-one contact between teens and adults.

"When you have a program that connects with kids, that really makes a difference," said David Perkins, coordinator of student services in the South Huntington district.