

BUILDING BRIGHT FUTURES

Carrots for the classroom



KENT SIEVERS/THE WORLD-HERALD

Doing his best to avoid peeking, kindergartner Julio Aragon pulls a ticket during a drawing at the second-quarter recognition assembly at Mockingbird Elementary in Ralston. Pupils win one ticket for each week's perfect attendance, and tickets are drawn each quarter for prizes.

Attendance prizes show promise at metro-area schools

BY MICHAELA SAUNDERS
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When Debashish Koirala gets to school on time — and doesn't leave during the day for an appointment — he gets a stamp on his assignment notebook.

That might not sound like much, but these aren't any old stamps. These stamps could earn the 8-year-old a video game or a bike.

"We can win prizes," said the third-grader at Ralston's Mockingbird Elementary.

Mockingbird, not far from 90th and Q Streets, is one of 15 schools in the Ralston, Millard and Omaha school districts that started an attendance incentive program last fall through Building Bright Futures, an education-focused philanthropy.

The group and an outside grant are paying for supplies and prizes for the students and schools, everything from a popcorn machine to playground equipment.

While first-semester attendance figures are still being compiled, anecdotal evidence and numbers from some individual schools suggest that results are mixed so far.

At Mockingbird, for example, about 70 percent of the students attended school daily a year ago. Now it's 90 percent. But too many students — a few dozen out of 350 — are still tardy in the morning, said Principal

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Mockingbird first-grader London Crocker holds out hope for a prize as tickets are drawn. The incentive program has improved attendance, but tardiness is still a problem.

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Attendance: Some schools' programs focus on the parents

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Kathy Boeve.

Building Bright Futures chose school attendance and truancy as one of its first focus areas when it launched its efforts in 2007. The ultimate goal: Increase the number of high school graduates. In all, more than 5,700 students are involved in the attendance program, and more schools are likely to be added.

In Douglas and Sarpy Counties, 6,615 school-age children miss school daily.

It may seem like a no-brainer: A student can't learn if she doesn't show up for class. But for some families, getting students to school — let alone getting them there on time — is a major obstacle.

A family might live too close to school for a free bus ride but too far to walk in the cold. The family car could break down, or an illness could keep Mom at home with a sibling instead of carting kids to school.

Some kids, of course, just don't want to go to class, and their parents don't make them.

Several schools, including Mockingbird and Spring Lake Magnet Center in OPS, are focusing partly on the parents.

At Spring Lake, in south Omaha, parents of students with perfect attendance were entered into a drawing for one of 10 \$100 HyVee gift cards. Students earn rewards, too.

Principal Susan Aguilera-Robles said the incentives are working for students.

"They'll tell parents not to make appointments during the day," Aguilera-Robles said. "They know they can't miss school."

Thirty-one of the school's 753 students have perfect attendance so far. Next month, those students are going to the IMAX theater at the Henry Doorly Zoo and will eat lunch at the zoo's TreeTops restaurant.

At the end of the 2008-09 school year, about 20 students had perfect attendance.

School officials in the three districts say the best part is that they could design a program to meet the needs of their students.

"Last spring, I was a little leery," said Mockingbird's Boeve. Because elementary students aren't in control of when they arrive at school, she wanted to be sure students weren't punished.

"They worked with us," Boeve said of foundation staff. "I'm so impressed. They didn't come in and say 'Here's our program.'"



KENT SIEVERS/THE WORLD-HERALD

His quarterly perfect attendance certificate in hand, Mockingbird third-grader Brandon Jankowski picks up his prize, a remote-control car. Brandon's ticket was picked in a drawing.

Mockingbird's popcorn parties and certificates wouldn't cut it for high school kids. Building Bright Futures' Kim Hawekotte said that building-by-building approach is just what her group wanted.

Such flexibility and the promise of ongoing support for the incentives — from food to iPods — makes the program different from past local efforts.

At Horizon High School in the Millard district, the 90 students work toward weekly rewards, said Principal Angie Mercier. The school, near 204th and Q Streets, houses the district's alternative education program.

On Fridays, students who met the weekly goal of no absences and no more than one tardy get to do something different: a trip to a pizza buffet and open campus lunch privileges.

"Our kids need that quick turnaround," Mercier said. "You can't go half the semester and think they'll keep at it."

The whole school gets something special, such as a trip to Dave & Buster's to play games, if daily at-

tendance averages 85 percent for the month. Students with perfect attendance at the end of a trimester are entered into a drawing for an iPod or a Nintendo DS game system.

Attendance at the middle school alternative center has increased from 92 percent to 94 percent under the program. At Horizon, it has remained at 85 percent. The district's rate overall is 96 percent.

Mercier said she expects improvement to take time. Attendance, she said, is a major obstacle for most of her students.

At Mockingbird, students who receive five stamps in a week get a ticket to enter into a quarterly prize drawing. Perfect attendance earns nine tickets.

Students like Debashish and his classmate Kyra Costanzo, 8, are excited about earning giant plastic bongo-style drums for their playground.

Kyra's mom, Jessica Costanzo, said her daughter has missed only one day this school year. The program helps Kyra and her brother get up in the morning and get to school on time.

"It gives them a reason to push forward," Costanzo said. "Days they would try to pretend they're sick, they're more likely to get up and go."

Kyra's teacher, Jessica Powell, said it's working for her whole class: "This has made them want to be here."

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