Effectiveness of the Completion Bonus Program for Achievement in Adult Education

The Tennessee Department of Human Services (DHS) introduced the Completion Bonus Program for participants in Families First to encourage the completion of educational and employment outcomes that lead to self-sufficiency and career advancement. DHS contracted with the Center for Literacy Studies (CLS) to examine the effectiveness of the bonus program as an incentive for Families First participants to improve their performance.

In 1999, before the bonus program was introduced, CLS researchers had collected information on the achievements of participants from sixteen adult education programs located in the three grand regions of the state. After the bonus program was introduced, information on participants’ achievements was collected from these same programs. This study compares the achievements of Families First participants from before the bonus (pre-bonus group) and after the bonus (post-bonus group) to determine if the bonus is an effective incentive for increasing performance.

Only complete records with accurate test scores indicating that an individual advanced from one adult education level to another were used for this study. Researchers compared the records of 955 participants from before and after the implementation of the bonus program. Findings are summarized as follows:

- The average number of days to achieve a learning gain was the same for the pre and post-bonus groups indicating that the bonus may not be an incentive to achieve at a faster rate.
- Compared to the pre-bonus group, significantly more Families First participants in the post-bonus group made learning gains indicating that the bonus may be an incentive for participants to persist until they have achieved a learning gain.
- After the introduction of the bonus, substantially more Families First participants made learning gains compared to the traditional adult education students in the same programs who were not eligible for the bonus.
- After the introduction of the bonus, more than twice as many participants advanced from Level 1 to Level 2; more than four times as many participants advanced from Level 2 to Level 3; and more than twice as many participants passed the GED compared to the pre-bonus period.
- Most participants, administrators and teachers perceive that the bonus is a motivator to persist in achieving educational goals.

Implications for practice – This study showed that the bonus did not influence the number of days a participant took to make progress, it did report a significant increase in the number of people who advanced a level or passed the GED examination. The benefit of the incentive may not be to increase the rate at which participants make progress but to encourage participants to persist who might otherwise have dropped out. While the completion bonus is only one factor involved in making progress in adult education, it may prove to be an important motivational incentive for those who otherwise might not have persisted in achieving their goal.