FROM EDMONTON, ALBERTA:

We look forward to every issue. . . . May God bless your labors in behalf of His Kingdom.

Rev. Tom Miersma

We received, by the way, after our last issue, what is probably the ultimate compliment: "Your magazine is too short." Needless to say, we appreciate very much the words of encouragement, and remind our readers that you all have a standing invitation to respond to particular articles.

CURRENT ISSUES

Positive Incentive Programs

Brian Dykstra

"Whatever happened to good, old American craftsmanship?" is a cry which is heard quite often as the United States no longer appears to be at the leading edge in industry in the world market. In searching for an answer to this question, many people have placed the public education system under examination. Providing incentives is the latest solution to the problem in both the marketplace and the classroom. If one desires someone to produce good work or to be a good employee or student, one must simply make it socially or economically rewarding.

Paula Skreslet, an English teacher at the College of Idaho, which is a liberal-arts school affiliated with the United Presbyterian Church, does not like what she sees at the public school attended by her children. She wrote an article called "The Prizes of First Grade" in the November 30, 1987 issue of *Newsweek*. She writes:

> In the first 10 days of the school year my triplets brought home the following from their first-grade classes: one candy bar, one peanut-butter-and-chocolate-chip cookie, two bags of popcorn, two "Very Important Person" badges, three "Constitutional Knowledge" stickers, one "I Know the Alphabet" award, two drawing prizes, 31

> Nature Trail tickets, nine Lincoln play dollars, several music awards, some library awards, "Neater Eater" awards, playground-behavior awards and innumerable Scratch N Sniff stickers, stamps, stars, and smile faces.

Just how far reaching this program is becomes evident later when she writes:

> The children can redeem trail tickets and play dollars for group prizes, like a free recess. Thanks to the involvement of local merchants, students can also earn a free order of french fries or free admission to the roller-skating rink.

Skreslet also describes a system in Cleveland in which students are given $40 for an A, $20 for a B, and $10 for a C. The money which the students earn will be credited toward a scholarship fund.

Skreslet hits the bull's eye when she says:

> What I think we're seeing in Cleveland and at the Lincoln School is the well-meant but distorted application of a current business principle – the vogue that stresses "excellence" and its corollary, "competitiveness." We've convinced ourselves that the way to safeguard America's position in commerce and science is to appeal to young people's hunger for the rewards the marketplace can provide. Thomas J. Peters, in his influential book, "In Search of Excellence," writes: "Get the incentives right and productivity will follow. If we give people big, straightforward monetary incentives to do right and work smart, the productivity problem will go away."

Skreslet finds this positive incentive program troubling for several reasons. She is troubled that "well-behaved, attentive children are being bombarded with rewards for doing what schools routinely expect." She also finds it uncomfortable philosophically that "good behavior must be reinforced so systematically – that without tangible incentives, first graders won't return their library books when due. Or that they won't learn the alphabet without stickers, stars, and candy bars." She does not like what this system says about students either. "It also says that students are so materialistic, so unmotivated and lazy that they will not learn without a bribe. I find that an insulting idea."

Skreslet also sees problems for some unfortunate youngsters who "mess up" and for those improperly motivated.

But I can't forget about the little boy who didn't remember to return his book and kept the whole class from getting its library star, or the girl who talked in line so the class didn't get a playground award. The winners will also suffer if they don't discover for themselves that they can gain the pleasure of health and strength from exercise, the joy of music from songs, the power of mathematics from counting and all of human wisdom from reading.

Perhaps the most significant criticism of this system, however, is, "If children are taught to behave decently because they will profit from it, I wonder what principle will guide them as adults when they see how easy it is to profit from wrong behavior."

Doing right often results in no *social* or *economic* reward. What tangible reward is there for the husband who cannot advance in the company because climbing to the next rung on the corporate ladder involves working Sundays, or the young person who refuses to go along with the crowd because he feels a given activity does not suit the Christian life? What is the social reward for the youngster who admonishes Mr. Popularity to follow the path of righteousness? Having our comfort in the cross and our hope in citizenship in God's Kingdom through His grace are, of course, intangibles, and we surely depend upon our Father to plant this most vital of lessons within the hearts of our children since we cannot put a love for God in those little hearts ourselves. Could such lessons be learned through material incentives?

Or is this simply a case of a good idea that is overdone? Are such rewards useful for encouraging good behavior since it is outside of our power to affect the heart? Could we benefit from something like this if the system is held under close check?

The Good Ol' Days

Statewide competency tests and proficiency examinations evidently are not modern innovations. It seems that Kansas Education Commissioner Merle Bolton, while searching for earlier examples of such tests, discovered that students in Kansas, in 1901, were required to pass an examination in order to receive their 8th grade diploma.

But. . . the examination must have been easy, since students