



September 10, 2007

*Parental Wisdom - Emails
Smart Smart Stupid*

Those who are too smart to engage in politics are punished by being governed by those who are dumber.

-Plato (427 BC - 347 BC)

My late Aunt Helen coined the phrase 'smart smart stupid' and often used it to explain that even very smart people can, at times, do some pretty dumb things. She was right.

Case in point, NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg, a former CEO and very effective mayor is making fantastic improvements in the city's economic development, reducing crime and creating affordable housing. As a result of his stellar record there has been a parade of city leaders who have come to study his administration.

But, as Aunt Helen would say, he is 'smart smart stupid' in his approach to engaging students and parents in education. City Hall announced the launch of a \$50 million, privately funded initiative, the first of its kind in the U.S. which will pay low-income families for, among other things, attending parent-teacher conferences (\$25), getting a library card (\$50) and graduating high school (\$200 to the student and \$200 to the parent). They get paid for getting a library card, but does anyone monitor if the card was ever used?

We're familiar with that 'bribery' thing that parents do with their kids. You've seen examples on the check out line at Target. "If you just be a good girl, I'll buy you candy." Kids get paid for grades, to go to sleep and even to go the bathroom. I overheard a parent offering their child a Nintendo Wii game for scoring a goal at a soccer game. When is bribery ever an effective long term strategy?

As a very successful business person, Mayor Bloomberg would already know that throwing money at a problem never helps to address the root cause. Rather than bribing parents, the Mayor would do more good by understanding why parents are not participating? And what about the parents who have always been there? If the real objective is to build a better relationship with parents, start with more frequent and effective communication, which means listening (twice) as much as talking. Continue with paper notes about classroom and school activities, but also supplement with email, and even the use of a conference bridge such as <http://www.freeconferencecall.com/> Not only is this service free, but the calls can be recorded and played back so a parent can listen in at their convenience.

At least Mayor Bloomberg is trying something, but external rewards just miss the point about the value of education.

For more ideas, please refer to [Parental Wisdom](#) Free Reports and print out Bridging the Gap 'Between Math and Home', a program I presented to the NY City Elementary Principal's Association.