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Local Businesses Offer \$60 Million Pay Gesture To MidDel Schools

*The Goal: To reward teachers for their honorable service
amid the state's education-finance crisis*

How to solve Oklahoma's statewide teacher shortage? An Oklahoma City marketing firm has found a way to help, by bringing together local merchants to thank teachers and staff with gifts of appreciation. The program, called *Rewards of Honor*, has proven a popular success in its pilot rollout benefitting the city's MidDel school district.

In addition to attesting that the district's teachers matter, it functions as a pay raise.

The novel appreciation program offers each full-time MidDel educator and staff member more than \$30,000 per year in goods and services — nearly the starting salary of many Oklahoma teachers. Gifts range from "feel-good" items that a teacher might not ordinarily be able to afford, to necessities, including a year of free oil changes, food and drink items, fashion & beauty services, entertainment, medical services, fitness facilities, pet pampering and more. Both the school district and the businesses have been impressed by recipients' gracious response.

If every beneficiary were somehow able to use all the gifts available to each person daily, the total retail-value reward to MidDel participants would be \$60 million worth of income-tax-free compensation.

The *Rewards of Honor* program is the work of Steven Faulkner, an advertising veteran with over 30 years' experience in cause-based marketing, aided by his wife Candace and the participating businesses.

Faulkner's model draws on a combination of motivating factors:

- a) Generosity as a business principle – sometimes called "the Golden Rule of Business"
- b) the power of a virtuous cause that resonates with the public
- c) the psychological Law of Reciprocity – that good actions create a deep-rooted urge to repay with ever greater good actions

What makes the concept unique is that the gifts are totally free — there are no discounts, no purchase required, and no strings attached. The district's teachers and staff simply attend a scheduled orientation session and receive an ID badge that they present.

"The key is that the businesses ask for nothing in return," said Faulkner. "Since word of mouth is the most powerful form of marketing, and because school district employees and their families represent roughly 10% of the state's adult 25-54 population, that's a *massive* army of advocates who influence everyone they know, on behalf of the participating companies."

Gifts for educators are funded from the companies' marketing budgets. The teachers' reciprocal advocacy has lifted their business by as much as 30%. As a steady stream of recipients have regularly championed these businesses with friends, family, and across Facebook and other social media, some retailers have experienced hundreds of new visits per week.

The first company to join was Midwest City AutoSpa, offering a year of free oil changes to all MidDel educators. Its owner, Andrew Giorgi, said, "My mom was a teacher for 30 years. I know what teachers go through. So, I wanted to find a way to make a difference with my business. It was the right thing to do, but I didn't expect the impact it would make."

The schools themselves also benefit.

Dr. Rick Cobb, superintendent of MidDel Schools says, "*Rewards of Honor* has lifted morale like nothing else we've seen, and has enabled us to recruit teachers from other states. We couldn't be more thrilled."

The concept of a marketing firm altruistically partnering with school districts is nearly unheard of, but last fall Faulkner convinced Dr. Pam Deering, former MidDel superintendent to give it a try. Since then, Dr. Deering has been named executive director at the Oklahoma Association of School Administrators, and she continues to champion *Rewards of Honor*, supporting Faulkner's plan to expand statewide.

"We approached this with caution and skepticism at first, because we thought, 'What's the catch for getting something free with nothing asked for in return?'" Dr. Deering said. "But Steve showed us that this truly was what it claimed to be ... and the results certainly speak for themselves."

Since then, the *Rewards of Honor* program has received The Journal Record's *Innovator of the Year Award*.

Anticipating expansion, Faulkner observed, "Widening to the entire metro area will put the total value of offers at over a billion dollars per year. As it frees up some of the household budget to be used on other things, it is, in effect, a potentially significant pay raise. When we add Tulsa and then go statewide, at this rate the potential value of gifts would lift Oklahoma educators' composite compensation so far above other states' pay scales, we'll be the ones attracting talent from other states."

What's in it for Faulkner? Currently it has been a labor of love, set up and operated out of his own pocket, an outgrowth of his marketing and community experience. To sustain and help expand the program, he is seeking a corporate sponsor or co-sponsors. Faulkner sees the

situation as similar to companies' and foundations' support of educational radio and television, sports activities, and other non-profit organizations — but more powerful.

"An 'engineered cause' such as this amounts to a new type of advertising medium," Faulkner said, "It's a different type of conversation, based on appreciation, honor, and love, and as such it's exceptionally efficient and powerful. Yet, it transforms naturally to practical benefits. Effectively a pay raise for the educators, their gratitude comes back as a tangible return to the merchant."

Faulkner believes that by giving Oklahoma this edge in education, the *Rewards of Honor* concept will set off a chain reaction of prosperity. "We already have the best people in America and the lowest cost of living. When our schools rival the nation's best, that key will unlock the floodgates of economic development. People do everything possible for their kids. Superior schools will give the state the ultimate competitive advantage. Everyone will want to move here. It will trigger the next land run."

Meanwhile, maybe a sampling of Reward recipient sentiments will help trigger that growth:

"Awesome! A huge thank you for looking out for the educators. . . . We teachers thank you!! . . . This makes me feel so loved!"

For more information:

Currently available gifts and interviews: www.RewardsOfHonor.com

Educator reactions: www.facebook.com/rewardsofhonor

The Journal Record's Innovator of the Year Award (full text accompanies this release):

journalrecord.com/20XX/08/12/innovator-profile-the-transformation-agency/

Photos: www.RewardsOfHonor.com/

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