

For some student workers, doing homework will pay off

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Whether they're flipping burgers or flipping through textbooks, young scholars employed at two McDonald's restaurants in Michigan will be paid just the same.

This fall, high school and college students who work for franchise owners Kathy and Jerry Olinik will be allowed to stay on the clock for an extra hour before or after their shifts as long as they spend the time doing schoolwork.

Managers will monitor to make sure the homework gets done.

Sarah Hocking works at one of the Oliniks' restaurants two or three days a week during the school year, for a total of about 10 hours.

The 17-year-old, who starts her senior year at Howell High School this fall, plans to take advantage of the program to get homework done -- probably math. She thinks a lot of other high school workers will do the same.

"I think it's a good idea," she said. "Some kids don't want to do homework, so maybe this will motivate them to get it done."

Kathy Olinik said about half of the couple's 125 employees would be eligible for the program. The couple hasn't determined the impact on the bottom line, but Kathy Olinik anticipates the program would cost about \$300 per week in wages.

About one out of four high school freshmen and three out of four high school seniors work during the school year, according to a survey of young people from 1997 to 2003 sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics. About 24% of working freshmen and 56% of working seniors average 21 or more hours per week.

Joel Yashinsky, a regional marketing director for McDonald's in Michigan, said the Oliniks' idea will be closely watched by company executives.

"I certainly applaud them for trying this new idea out," Yashinsky said. "I've worked for a lot of companies in my career, and this is certainly one of the neatest ideas I've heard of."

Yashinsky said this is the first time the company has seen an idea like this.

Dawn Beckwith, whose two high school-age daughters work for the Oliniks, said she would like to see other employers copy the program.

"It's been said children are raised by society," she said. "What a wonderful thing to add to their upbringing: a society that cares so much about homework that it's going to pay them to do it. That says a lot."

The Oliniks also hope other employers follow their lead.

But George Johnson, an economics professor at the University of Michigan, said he considers that unlikely.

"It is expensive for a firm to pay workers to do something that does not add to revenue," he said. "Any firms who don't participate will have lower costs and drive the 'good' firms out of business. ... It would be nice if we could expect private business firms to do more than simply provide goods and services. But unless we legally impose constraints on all firms ... it is naive to expect firms to do more than make profits."

The Oliniks say, for them, it's not about money.

"We do it because it's the right thing to do. It's just another benefit we can offer our employees. I think it'd be wonderful if other employers offered it as well," Jerry Olinik said. "Kids are our future. Anything we can do to support that is the responsible thing to do."

Jerry Olinik, 49, has been with McDonald's for 29 years. His 41-year-old wife joined the company in 1987. The two restaurants they own are in Livingston County.

The homework idea was hers -- 15 years ago.

Kathy Olinik piloted the program when she managed a McDonald's in Westland and found that staffing shifts from 4 p.m. to 9 p.m. was difficult.

"Economic times were very good, and the priority for parents was to have kids concentrate on school," Jerry Olinik said.

Kathy Olinik said she offered the program as a compromise.

"The kids loved it. The parents loved it," she said.

And as more students took part, they studied together and helped each other with their work, she said.

Nowadays, a student worker might cut back hours to concentrate on school, but it's no longer difficult to find young people willing to work. Still, Kathy Olinik said she wants to reintroduce the program as a "way of giving back to the community."

"Some kids need a little nudge," she said. "It helps the parent. It helps the child. It's a win-win all around."

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