Vote on the new question at www.ucsdguardian.org.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 2006

Rock the Vote Needs a Little Less Rock, a Little More

I generally have a hard time feeling sorry for music executives.

Even though their nonprofit baby Rock the Vote is \$700,000 in debt, I still don't feel sorry for them. They had it coming.

In 1990, when Rock the Vote founder Jeff Ayeroff created the organization to encourage youth voting with the help of the music industry's visibility, his intentions were about as pure as Paris Hilton. In actuality, Ayeroff was more concerned with deluding the youth into listening to music of artists he was trying to promote rather than



The American Utopia

Natasha Naraghi
nnaraghi@ucsd.edu

increasing political awareness. For the record, Ayeroff is also the co-chief of Virgin Records, although not such a virgin when it comes to promoting the special interests of the music industry.

But Ayeroff is not entirely to blame for the organization's misdirected priorities, since other music executives from Sony BMG Music Entertainment and Warner Music Group make up a number of the board members who manage the nonprofit. Gather that many profit-thirsty people in a room together and they're bound to lose sight of the organization's ideals at some point. So before Justin Timberlake cries them a river over the sorry state of their artist-promoting political machine, and we all get duped again, let us pause to look around a bit.

It seemed like a nice idea when artists like Sean "P. Diddy" Combs, Good Charlotte, Alanis Morissette, Joss Stone, Robbie Williams, the Foo Fighters, Korn and many more used their celebrity status to get young voters between the ages of 18 and 24 to head to the polls and cast their votes. Unfortunately, Rock the Vote compromised many of its goals as a nonprofit to aid record executives trying to give certain artists more publicity.

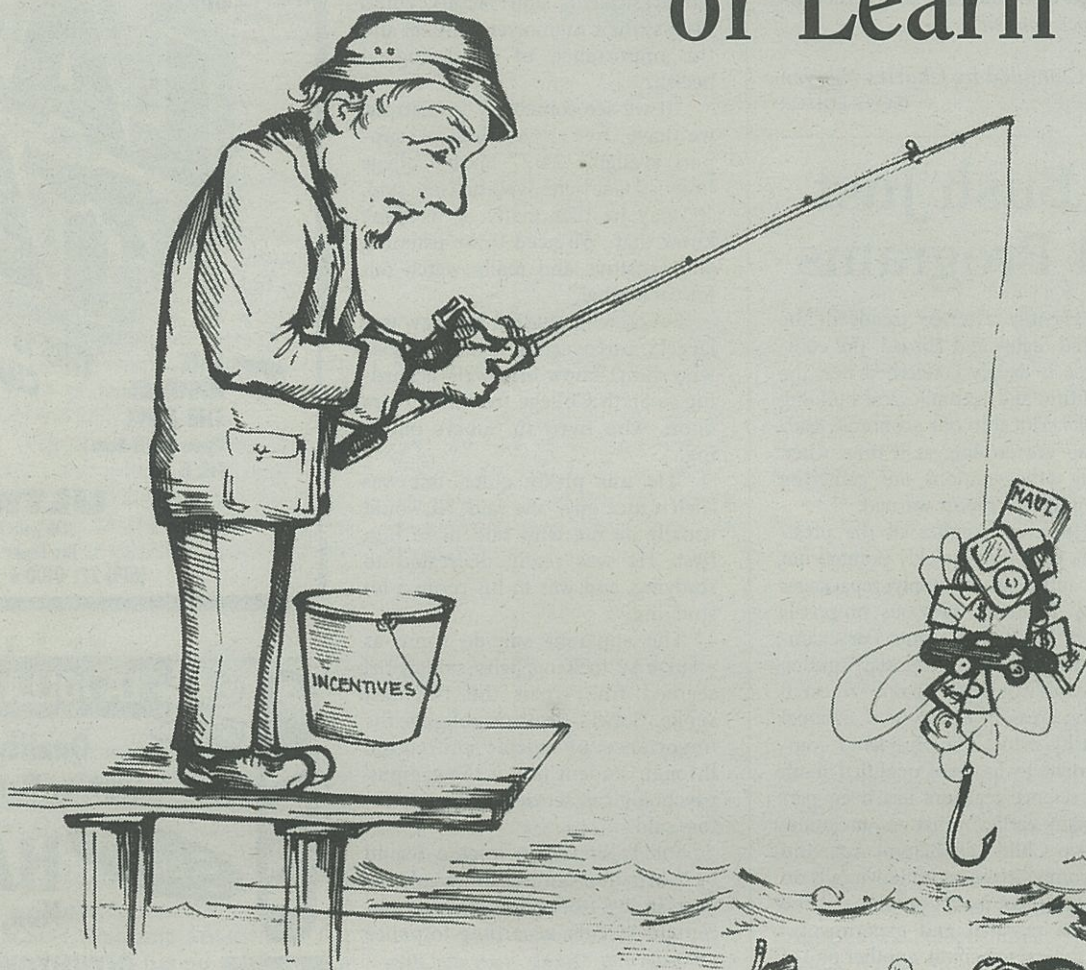
Frighteningly, former president of the organization, Jehmu Greene, even admits this.

"Board members wanted to," said Greene in a February *Los Angeles Times* article. "But sometimes it was way too expensive, or would send the wrong message, like having a rock band play when we're trying to register kids into hip-hop."

Registering the wrong voters, however, was just one of several drawbacks of the organization's ties to the music industry. The article specifically mentioned Ayeroff's request for Rock the Vote to share in paying the cost of flying Green Day back to its Asian tour, in exchange for the group's performance at a Rock the Vote event. While in this case Rock the Vote refused to pay the \$120,000, deals like this, which frequently occur in the music industry, shed light on Rock the Vote's less-recognized purpose.

"It's normal to have tension between entertainment goals and political effectiveness," Ayeroff said.

Should Students Want to Learn or Learn to Want?



By Megan Durham
STAFF WRITER

It's no secret that public schools could use more money. More money means more teachers and smaller class sizes, better programs and higher-quality education materials. So it's not surprising that schools are looking into the funding incentives under the No Child Left Behind Act, including a part that gives more money to schools with higher average daily attendance. But how does a district convince students to come to school?

Well, how about paying them?

The practice is actually more common than some might think. The *New York Times* reports that such programs have been recently implemented at schools of all levels in Massachusetts, Kentucky, Illinois, Texas, Georgia and even here in California. These programs offer everything from money, iPods, vacations, groceries, mortgage payments and even cars as incentives to attend classes. Of course, funding isn't the only motive for these schools. As education officials argued in the *Christian Science Monitor*, schools can't function if students don't go to class. But, while it follows that better attendance means students will do better in their classes and learn more, district money could be better used elsewhere.

First of all, there is no reason to reward children for something they should be doing anyway. By law, students have to attend school until they are 16. If we are going to reward them for following the law, why shouldn't we hand out \$5 bills to drivers following the speed limit, or give money to underage students who aren't drinking on a Friday night? Such a program sends the message that school is optional, and that coming to school is unusual and virtuous enough to deserve a reward. Many officials agree that it seems unethical to pay students to go to school, and that it could be setting a dangerous precedent.

"It's against our grain to suggest that you have to cajole, seduce or trick students in order to get them to learn," said Jeff Bostic, director of the school psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital to the *New York Times*. "And where does it end? Are we going to need to give out a Porsche Boxster?"

There's also little evidence that such programs actually increase attendance. In fact, at Chelsea High School in Massachusetts, attendance rates actually went down after the school implemented an incentive policy. Chelsea offered \$25 a quarter for students with perfect attendance but in doing so they also softened the punishment for students who didn't show up to class. Students were no longer

getting lower grades for poor attendance, and the monetary incentives were not enough to entice students into the classroom. In a Chicago district that also offered incentives, district spokesman Joi Mecks said in the *New York Times* that attendance hadn't changed in the year since it implemented the prizes, although it was "too soon to evaluate the program."

Not only is there little evidence that they work, there have also been occasions where programs like these have backfired. Besides the obvious scenario of sick children coming to school when they probably shouldn't and becoming

There is no reason to reward children for something they should be doing anyway. Such a program sends the message that school is optional, and that coming to school is unusual and virtuous enough to deserve a reward.

ing a health risk to themselves and others, in low-income neighborhoods the monetary incentives themselves can cause problems. Michael Grady, a professor of educational studies at St. Louis University, is a consultant for a charter school in Missouri composed of students kicked out of other schools. It gave students a \$50 check for every week that they had perfect attendance. Student attendance rose, but there were increased instances of students buying drugs and some kids were even beaten by parents, who were dependent on the cash, for missing a day of school.

Also, especially in the elementary schools that are implementing the program, sometimes attendance depends more on parents than on the actual child. Richard Ryan, a professor of

Paying kids to attend school doesn't address the real problem of dull curriculum and students' apathetic parents

JENNIFER HSU/GUARDIAN
psychology at the University of Rochester in New York, suggests that once a day is missed, the financial incentives actually become "counterproductive."

Some students need to occasionally care for their siblings or work to support their families. A car could break down or there could be a death in the family and, at least at Chelsea, these would be considered absences. Once a student misses one day, his perfect record is ruined and the incentive no longer applies. Why not miss more days of school?

And even if students are coming to class more often because of the incentives, that's not necessarily a good thing. Attendance by itself isn't a guarantee of better academics. The incentives don't do anything to improve the classroom experience, especially if the students are only at school because they want to earn money or prizes.

In fact, having more students come to class only helps to swell already large classrooms, placing more pressure on the teachers who are already overworked and underpaid. The California Educator reports that California is facing a huge shortage of teachers, with as many as 300,000 needed over the next decade. It doesn't help that one in five teachers leaves the profession within the first three years on the job and that, to fill the gap, the state has been hiring many more uncredentialed instructors. Part of the problem is that the average salary for teachers in California, a state with extremely high costs of living, is only \$45,400 a year, which is on average \$7,894 less than that of other college graduates of the same age and education level.

So perhaps, instead of spending their money on attendance incentives, school districts should try to improve their standards of academics by starting with the classroom. A better, more exciting curriculum would make kids want to come to school, especially if they felt that their classes were actually relevant to their lives. Paying teachers higher salaries would also be a good idea. Any of these actions would lead to a better classroom experience and perhaps to better test scores, another way of earning funding under the NCLBA.

Perhaps it's just that the program smacks of bribery and raises ethical questions. Or maybe it's the fact that it seems like the money could be put to use in other areas, such as teacher salaries, rather than in an unproven and possibly counterproductive incentive program. But paying students money to come to school in order to raise more money seems to be about as harebrained an idea as they come.