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* From Gold Stars to Genuine Growth:

THE ART OF KEEPING KIDS MOTIVATED TO LEARN

By Kate Larson

Remember those glorious days in the '90s when earning a free personal pan pizza from Pizza Hut felt like winning the lottery? If you participated in the "BOOK IT!" program, you know exactly what I'm talking about. Twenty books later, you weren't just stuffed with cheesy goodness — you were hooked on reading. And research shows that the program actually increased students' love for reading rather than diminishing it. Who knew that the path to lifelong literacy could be paved with pepperoni?

This '90s nostalgia brings us to an ongoing debate in education: should we use incentives in the classroom? It's like asking whether pineapple belongs on pizza; everyone has an opinion. Some educators strongly advocate for elaborate classroom economies and prize boxes, while others prefer to focus on positive feedback and community building in the classroom. However, it's not about whether you use incentives, it's about how you use them. Here are a few guidelines to support your students' love for learning.

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AMPLIFY ACHIEVEMENTS

Use incentives to shine a spotlight on those moments when students overcome obstacles, show kindness, or push through challenges. These are the victories that won't show up on report cards but matter infinitely more.

What to look for:

- Staying focused on work without reminders
- Helping classmates learn a new concept or solve a problem
- Managing big emotions during frustrating tasks
- Following directions or making good choices
- Showing persistence despite challenges
- Demonstrating kindness in small, everyday moments

Educator Darri Stephens poses a key question when she asks: “How might you call out the expected, the typical, and the everyday?” These small moments are the ones that transform your classroom into a well-oiled machine of positivity. You're not creating artificial motivation — you're amplifying the natural goodness that's already there. A simple “I noticed how you took a deep breath and tried again when that problem got tough,” paired with a small token, can make that student feel seen and valued.

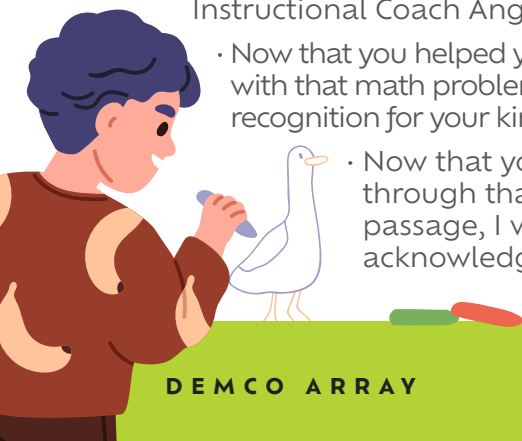
AVOID CREATING WINNERS AND LOSERS

Here's where things get complex. The moment you tie incentives to meeting specific standards, you've essentially created a “rich get richer” system. Excelling students will collect rewards like trophies, while struggling learners watch from the sidelines, feeling even more defeated.

TRY “NOW-THAT” INSTEAD OF “IF-THEN”

Instead of the traditional “if-then” approach (“if you get an A, then you get a reward”), try the “now-that” method recommended by Instructional Coach Angela Watson:

- Now that you helped your classmate with that math problem, here's recognition for your kindness.
- Now that you persevered through that difficult passage, I want to acknowledge your effort.



- Now that you showed respect during our class discussion, you've earned this appreciation.

Why this works:

- Every student can show kindness, persistence, or creativity
- You're recognizing effort and character, not just achievement
- Students aren't competing against each other for limited rewards
- Struggling learners have equal opportunities for recognition

Watson used beads in her classroom, which students could trade for rewards at the week's end. She loved the system because it kept her focused on the positive things kids were doing. This approach celebrates choices students can make, not outcomes they can't always control.

FLIP THE SCRIPT ON HARD DAYS

Sometimes the best incentive isn't about achievement at all — it's about turning a terrible day around. Your students might not remember every lesson you taught, but they'll absolutely remember how you made them feel on their worst days. Dr. Laura Phillips from the Child Mind Institute reminds us that “kids respond really well to social reinforcers like praise, hugs, high-fives, and those kinds of things. Then they start to achieve because it feels good for them.” It's like emotional first aid — a small act of recognition can bandage a wounded spirit and get a student back on track.



Quick morale boosters:

- Notice their level of effort, even if the outcome isn't perfect
- Admire a creative choice they made in their work
- Thank them for sticking with it despite feeling frustrated
- Give a high-five for attempting something challenging
- Acknowledge their patience during a difficult moment

Reward inputs, not outcomes

A better approach to student motivation

Instead of rewarding:

- High test scores
- Perfect attendance
- Grade improvements
- Finished assignments

Try rewarding:

- Reading a certain number of books
- Participating in class discussions
- Helping classmates understand concepts
- Trying different problem-solving strategies
- Asking thoughtful questions

Why this works:

- Students have complete control over these behaviors
- It builds confidence through manageable goals
- Focus shifts from performance to the learning process
- It reduces anxiety about outcomes beyond their control

REWARD THE PROCESS

It seems counterintuitive, but rewarding an outcome (like a test score) is largely ineffective, while rewarding an input (like reading a book) can be powerful. A 2011 study found that paying students for good grades had zero impact on achievement, but paying them to read books significantly increased their reading volume — without damaging their intrinsic motivation. The key? When you incentivize behaviors students can fully manage, you're setting them up for success and building their confidence along the way.

SPOTLIGHT WHAT MATTERS MOST

The most compelling aspect of thoughtful incentives is how they help reinforce your classroom values. When you catch a student embodying kindness, teamwork, or responsibility, that's incredibly valuable. You're not just recognizing an individual, you're broadcasting to everyone what matters in your learning community.

Teacher Hannah Ogden discovered that her classroom reward system provided “some of the most rewarding moments in teaching.”

By offering recognition tickets for positive actions, she could highlight small successes and nudge students toward their better instincts. More importantly, it helped her connect with students in new ways and understand their needs better.

CREATE A CULTURE OF RECOGNITION

Incentives are about celebration and creating a classroom culture where effort is valued, kindness is noticed, and every student feels seen. When done right, they don't replace intrinsic motivation; they nurture it.

Whether bookmarks, stickers, or a personal pan pizza (by the way, [BOOK IT!](#)® is back!), the magic isn't in the reward itself — it's in the message it sends: “I see you. I value you. Keep being amazing.” 🌟