6

Rewards in Elementary Schools

Parents may find themselves more involved than ever in their children's learning when a child enters elementary school, since working with teachers opens a door to a new level of activity. Parents and teachers can work together to plan and implement reward systems that are research-proven to help elementary-school children learn.

Home–School Collaboration

Children are more likely to thrive when parents and educators work together to increase students' achievement. Schools and community organizations have begun to recognize this and seek to engage parents actively in their children's educations. A foundation in Bridgeport, Connecticut recently began teaching parents "Civic Engagement 101," which focused on explaining how teacher evaluations work and what they convey about their children's teachers. In addition, the course outlines strategies for parents to get teachers and schools to consider what individual parents believe is best for their children in the classroom.[1]

In only two years, an initiative in Detroit aimed at promoting parent involvement to help the long-troubled school district met notable success. Contracting with Detroit Public Schools, the Detroit Parent Network increased parent involvement in schools by 37 percent in its first year. The initiative offers parenting workshops and information about food, health care, schools, and education.[2]

Findings from studies using a wide range of methods and designs confirm the value of parent involvement in their children's school activities.

A synthesis (meta-analysis) of 52 studies conducted in urban schools found students whose parents were involved in their children's education showed notably greater levels of achievement than students whose parents were not.[3] In one study, home-schooled and schooled children who reported the highest level of parental involvement in their educations also showed the highest levels of achievement.[4] Children of parents who set high expectations for them also performed well in school.

A useful list of ways parents can work with elementary schools appears on the website of the U.S. Department of Education. It includes tips shown in the table on the following page.

Parents in Classrooms

Parents becoming directly involved in their children's classrooms often create readily apparent benefits. One review of 14 studies that included more than 1,000 families found children made marked gains in reading and writing when their parents helped in classrooms, some even teaching specific skills.[5] In other research, benefits from parental involvement in the classroom appeared to depend on the parents' enthusiasm.[6]

Parents seem increasingly to understand this and deliberately participate in their children's education because of it. The 28th (2012) survey by Harris Interactive of teachers, students, and parents shows parent engagement levels are among the highest they have ever been.[7] Forty-eight percent of students report their parents visit school once a month, a number almost three times greater than when the survey was first taken (16 percent). Two-thirds of students say they talk about school with their parents every day, more than four times as many as did in 1988 when the survey was first taken. And teachers with greater levels of parent involvement in their classes report much higher job satisfaction.

Of course, parents can become too involved in their children's education. Learners' intellectual development suffers when parents' attention undermines their self-confidence. In one 18-month longitudinal study, Eva Pomerantz and Missa Murry Eaton found some mothers became overly intrusive because they worried excessively about their children's achievement or because children exhibited high levels of uncertainty.[8]

Intrusive mothers were more likely to monitor their children's progress or offer to do things for their children when the children did not ask for such help. These mothers considered their intrusive actions essential for their children's success. Unfortunately, despite these parents' good

Ways Parents Can Work with Elementary Schools

- Visit a classroom in the school.
- Get a copy of the school's parent involvement plan.
- Volunteer to be a room parent, organize a winter coat drive, help out on test day, or be a reading coach.
- Ask the principal for the school's report card.
- Find out the best time to contact educators by telephone.
- Ask for the teacher's e-mail address.
- Find out about websites where teachers may list class notes and homework assignments.
- Participate in parent-teacher conferences.
- Be prepared to listen, talk, and take notes.
- Write out questions before meeting with the teacher.
- Ask for specific information about the child's work and progress.
- Review what the teacher suggested and follow up by talking with the child.
- Check back with the teacher regularly to see how things are going as the year progresses.
- Know that counselors can help if there are problems at home, such as divorce or illness.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, "Parent Power: Build the Bridge to Success," http://www2.ed.gov/parents/academic/help/parentpower/booklet.pdf, last visited March 10, 2013. See the source for original phrasing of these points.

intentions, intrusiveness did not spark greater levels of achievement. Finding a balance between offering assistance and encouragement and allowing independence may take time and calls for parents' and educators' wisdom.

Planning Classroom Reward Systems

When planning classroom reward systems, educators have to consider and balance multiple perspectives including compliance with federal, local school district, and individual school guidelines and the wishes of principals, parents, and students. As in other decision-making,[9] teachers consider the learner's abilities as they identify tasks to accomplish and the problems associated with each task. Teachers specify learning goals and the best methods for achieving each one.[10]

Teachers design lesson activities and imagine the consequences of using each one before implementing it, keeping in mind the specific children in their classes. Such planning allows teachers to align rewards with curricular goals. Research has found the lack of sufficient planning is a major cause of disciplinary problems and other disruptions of classroom learning, which may be attributable to lessons too difficult, too easy, or otherwise unrewarding.[11]

Teachers are expected to clarify matters that are confusing, evaluate each activity, and consider how well lessons from one day best fit with lessons from other days. Repeating lessons can be as boring for teachers as it is for students but as noted earlier, some forms of repetition are beneficial. Nevertheless, too much repetition of material already learned may try learners' patience. Even very small rewards can help young learners cope with this challenge and can readily be adapted to differences in what individual learners already know and how fast they can learn new material.

It is easy for teachers to miss many of the ways they create incentives in their usual classroom routines. Young children like to show what they know to those who will listen sympathetically and sincerely. They may require rewards such as listening and gold stars that can be easily given and readily understood. Insightful, skillful teachers instinctively consider and act on their students' likely reactions to incentives. They notice what does and does not constitute a reward for a particular child or group of children.

Praise

Some critics of rewards – Alfie Kohn, for example – even criticize the use of praise in classrooms.[12] Their rationale is that the selective use of praise constitutes the assertion of "power" by an adult over children and that too much praise dilutes its value. As we've observed before, praise can be undeserved or poorly timed, resulting in an inflated sense of self-esteem. This kind of reward may in fact be overused today by many parents and

educators. But this misuse of rewards means teachers and parents need better advice on how to use praise more judiciously, not that they shouldn't use it at all.

Interviews with elementary students in grades 1 through 5 showed children are astute recipients of classroom rewards and value the rewards that best help them improve their learning.[13] Research shows offering students detailed feedback and emphasizing their effort raises the motivation of most students, especially those with learning disabilities.[14] Children who receive encouragement that outlines something they did well and something to improve on do better than students who are told vaguely that they are "good students" or are "smart."[15]

Children can be such astute observers that they see subtle cues about what answers parents and teachers expect, which leads them to appear skilled when they are merely imitating others or even guessing good answers from teachers' facial expressions as they drift closer to the desirable answer – all without understanding the reasoning behind the right answer. This is a tactic teachers need to recognize and try to counter.

Rewards Built Into Activities

Many rewards in elementary school classrooms arise from the learning process itself. Young children experience pleasure when discovering new information or developing a new skill. In an elementary school classroom this should be occurring with great frequency. Teachers should be on the lookout for small as well as big achievements, should congratulate young learners, and when appropriate, should point out how even small achievements will make further achievements easier.

Very young children experience pleasure when they are able to recognize and pronounce the names of simple objects, such as fruits or animals. Direct Instruction authority Siegfried Engelmann uses this principle in teaching reading.[16] When reading a short story the first time, the teacher covers the illustration for the words he or she reads, both to keep it a surprise and to prevent the child from guessing at the words by looking at the picture. After the child has sounded out the words phonetically, the teacher uncovers the picture, rewarding the child for decoding the words that describe it. In this instance, both pronouncing the correct sounds and viewing the corresponding picture reward the child for his or her accomplishment.

As children grow older and objects become more familiar, they may

enjoy finding objects hidden in larger pictures, then coloring pictures of familiar objects, and then being able to draw pictures themselves. Using art as a learning activity, described below, is an example of a learning activity with rewards "built in."

Stickers, Parties, and Prizes

Though disparaged by Alfie Kohn, stickers, prizes, and parties can be appropriately used in preschool and elementary classrooms. Without these tangible rewards or feedback from their teachers, students may be unsure if they performed a task successfully or of the value of the task they performed, or they may quickly forget it. Rewards convey valuable information to even the youngest learner and make learning specific knowledge and insights memorable, an essential step toward further learning.

Elementary school teachers do this, for example, when awarding small children construction paper "ice cream scoops" for each multiplication set they memorize or book they read outside of class. Nearly all children like ice cream, so the appearance of another scoop in their cone is immediately understood as a good thing whereas a longer row of stars or a higher grade may not convey that understanding as quickly or as clearly.[17] All the children can see whose "ice cream cone" is largest and most will readily compete for it to be theirs. This symbolic reward has the added advantage of having no sugar.

Other rewards may be as simple as a sticker attached to a paper or one that can be worn on a shirt or jacket, or designating a child "teacher's helper for the week." Parties and prizes celebrating individual or group successes, such as perfect attendance or completion of a multi-step project, amount to a combination of small rewards – surprise, entertainment, success in a competition, and recognition – that make an achievement especially memorable.

It is a testament to the success of such systems that receiving rewards is often the first thing reported by elementary students, often with great pride and excitement, when they see a parent after school. By making achievement memorable, these small rewards make a big difference.

Grades

Another valuable but often-criticized form of reward is grades.[18] Students are eager to know "how I did" on a project or a test. The desire is entirely

natural and correct: Part of maturing is subjecting our accomplishments to the judgment of other people, and having papers, tests, artwork, and other activities graded is a consistent way of doing this. Whether grades in every case should be made public is a different matter. A case can be made that consistently low grades can de-motivate and shame young learners, reducing their motivation to do better.

It is often advantageous to let students know how tests and other activities will count on their grades and the numerical criteria for various grades. The lazy way to do this is to "grade on the curve"; that is, to give grades based on the percentages of students who attain various test scores, homework grades, and other indicators. The research does not give a strong indication of whether this method is better than a straight grading scale assigning letter grades for certain percentages of correct answers, but it is unconstructive, if not wrong, to give high grades for substandard work. Like praise lavished on students for mediocre accomplishment, grade inflation can mislead students into thinking they have achieved proficiency or mastery when they have not. This may create happy students and parents but it does not promote and may actually retard learning.

The movement away from grading students' work has been widespread due to concerns, similar to those expressed about praise, that they represent an improper or unnecessary expression of adult power or authority in classrooms. The foundation of this concern seems more ideological than pedagogical, and the influence of the movement on student achievement seems to be mostly negative.[19] While grading of all sorts is more prevalent in higher grades, it is appropriate in elementary schools, keeping in mind the caveats already expressed.

Art, Music, and Drama

Art, as mentioned previously, offers a rich arena for elementary student learning in which rewards are already built in. Because of the limits of their vocabulary and experience, younger students often have difficulty expressing their ideas. Art can encourage children to develop their communication skills.[20] Their drawings and pictures may help them translate their experience and knowledge into images and then into words.

Children benefit from opportunities to express their emotions with music. Singing, playing instruments, and responding to music provide valuable opportunities and incentives to express emotions. This is the basis for Kindermusik, a popular set of programs for young children that teaches

them rhythm, rhyming, balance, and other important musical and social abilities.[21] Children as young as newborns listen to age-appropriate sounds and songs and learn to tap thick dowels to a beat, dance and stretch with colorful scarves, sing nursery rhymes, and shake maracas.

Drama teaches children more skills than may seem obvious from the resulting presentation. Children can learn to plan, represent ideas in a script, and imagine other people's perspectives. They learn to develop their memories and, when acting out famous historical scenes or plays, join a tradition of communication and ideas. Since a single error by a director, stagehand, or actor can greatly diminish the power of a production, they can discover the importance of all members playing their parts well.

Art, music, and drama help children not only to express themselves but to appreciate the ways people communicate. They can learn much both by appreciation and direct participation.

Paying for Achievement

Surprising though it may seem, children as early as second-grade can be motivated to learn by the promise of money, whether real or "play," that can be used to purchase school supplies or other goods and services. The use of such reward systems is not new and it appears to be fairly extensive, at least in private schools.[22]

The rationale for offering money to elementary students is straightforward. Children from their earliest ages see money being used to pay for goods and services and naturally desire to imitate the behavior of adults and older children who have solved the riddle of exchanging a token for a desired item. Handling money, whether real or play, teaches math skills, the value of deferred gratification, and (at least in higher grades) economic lessons. To the degree that learning can be difficult – and we readily concede it not always is and shouldn't be presented this way to younger students – students understand intuitively the fairness of the transaction: They are paid for working hard. Finally, real money and to a lesser extent play money can be used to buy a variety of items that may be desired by students, making it more likely to motivate more students than, say, offering pencils or books.

A controlled study involving second-graders in Texas paid $2 for each grade-appropriate book they read outside of class – a simple assignment and a modest reward to accomplish it.[23] The students could earn up to $40, though the average earnings were $13. Eighty percent of the learners

offered this reward read at least one book for pay, and all those who participated improved their reading comprehension.

Rewards for Healthy Eating

A seemingly unending struggle for educators and parents is getting children to resist their craving for vitamin-empty sugars and starches, which often leads to sacrificing healthy foods and risks common obesity. Two economists, David Just and Joseph Price, reported[24] that a federal regulation impelled the nation's schools to serve an extra $5.4 million worth of fruits and vegetables each school day, of which $3.4 million went uneaten.

To identify promising solutions, Just and Price carried out a week-long experiment in 15 public elementary schools. They paid more than 9,000 students in several separate groups a nickel, a quarter, or a raffle ticket for a larger amount for eating each vegetable or fruit serving. On average, the rewards resulted in an 80 percent increase in these servings over baseline amounts.

After the week's experiment, however, students resumed their less healthy consumption patterns, and the two economists are investigating rewards over longer periods and the possibility of lasting changes in habits. Given students' poor dietary habits, continued payments even without habituation might be worthwhile. Presumably, moreover, monetary and other rewards for healthy eating at home might be similarly worthwhile. Given the consistency of reward effects illustrated in this book, more lasting effects might be expected.

Student-Initiated Rewards

Elementary students can be given some authority over classroom policies and activities. Lesson plans are rarely so tightly scripted that some of the preferences expressed by children cannot be incorporated into daily activities. Allowing them to choose from a range of serious options may strengthen their commitment to assigned tasks.[25]

Many children appreciate the opportunity to make and then see the consequences of choices that involve themselves as well as others. Participating in classroom management is an opportunity to learn listening, teamwork, and negotiating skills. The increase in social status that comes from being part of a team that decides the destination of a field trip, for example, can be large for a seven- or eight-year-old and thus creates a major incentive to focus on doing the job well.

This sort of flexibility resulted in a group of students in Washington state becoming instrumental in naming the state crustacean in 2009 when their fourth-grade teacher, Stephanie Buzbee, encouraged them to study differences among states.[26] One child discovered that Louisiana had a state crustacean but Washington did not. Her father, a state lawmaker, called Buzbee to talk about it. She told her students to research whether naming a state crustacean was a good idea and why. They did, and later took their research to the state legislature after preparing and practicing speeches to deliver to lawmakers.

Elementary teachers can include their students in discussions of classroom management and other matters without sliding into Rousseauian permissiveness, but erring in that direction seems all too common. For example, a sixth grade social studies teacher in Illinois announced on his blog in 2011 that "I now see the futility of teaching my students. I have found that telling my students what to do does not make them learn. ... So, I am giving it all up. I am done teaching my students. I will no longer give pencil and paper tests. I refuse to tell my students what projects to do." This teacher then declared his goal is to "become invisible and the students will take complete control over their learning."[27] A year after posting this statement, the teacher was named Illinois' "2012 Teacher of the Year."

A *New Yorker* cartoon from several decades ago showed a boy with raised hand asking, "Do we have to do what we want to do today?" It's a question that needs to be asked in too many classrooms. Children often recognize the value of structure and guidance even when the adults around them have been persuaded otherwise.

Conclusion

Well-designed and carefully implemented reward systems can improve student achievement in elementary schools. While young children are often intrinsically motivated, they benefit when their accomplishments, however small, are pointed out by parents and teachers and appropriately rewarded. Not all learning is easy or entertaining, and the presence of incentives and rewards can help young learners confront and overcome obstacles and distractions.

Parents are their children's most important and effective teachers. They should be using rewards at home before their children enter school and they should continue to use them through their children's entire K–12 careers. They should express their concerns to teachers and principals if it appears

rewards are not being correctly used in their children's classrooms, perhaps by using some of the dozen different ways they can work with their schools described by the U.S. Department of Education booklet summarized on page 79.

At least seven kinds of rewards are appropriate and effective in elementary schools: verbal praise, rewards built into lessons, small tokens (stickers, parties, and prizes), grades, arts incentives, money (real or play), and student-initiated rewards.

The use of these forms of incentives and rewards with children and adults is not due to some mass delusion about their effectiveness nor some insidious plot to condition people for lives as workers for some elite. The incentives are used because parents, teachers, and students themselves recognize that they work and appreciate them. Teachers should not be afraid to use them more often and parents should not hesitate to challenge teachers and administrators if such rewards seem to be absent from their children's schools.

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13. Theresa A. Thorkildsen, Susan Bobbit Nolen, and Janice Fournier, "What's Fair? Children's Critiques of Practices that Influence Motivation," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 86, no. 4 (December 1994): 475–86.

14. Dale H. Schunk, "Effects of Effort Attributional Feedback on Children's Perceived Self-Efficacy and Achievement," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 74, no. 4 (August 1982): 548–56; and Dale H. Schunk and Paula D. Cox, "Strategy Training and Attributional Feedback with Learning Disabled Students," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 78, no. 3 (June 1986): 201–9.

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16. As described by Shepard Barbash, *Clear Teaching* (Arlington, VA: Education Consumers Foundation, 2012).

17. For an example, see http://www.uniqueteachingresources.com/multiplication-sticker-charts.html, viewed March 19, 2013.

18. Alfie Kohn, *supra* note 12, pp. 200ff.

19. Jeanne S. Chall, *The Academic Achievement Challenge: What Really Works in the Classroom?* (New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 2000); E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1996); Victor Davis Hanson and John Heath, *Who Killed Homer? The Decline of Classical Education and the Recovery of Greek Wisdom* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1998).

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27. Josh Stumpenhorst, "I Resign from Teaching," http://stumpteacher.blogspot.com/2011/02/i-resign-from-teaching.html, viewed August 9, 2013.