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My Biggest Regret as a Teacher: Extrinsic Rewards

By [David Ginsburg](#) on December 1, 2013 11:45 AM



"You can't teach self-discipline if the students are always looking for more treats, raffle tickets, and goodies from the Treasure Box."

—Harry and Rosemary Wong, *The First Days of School*

I made lots of mistakes that had adverse effects on students. I yelled at them. I was impatient with them. I accused them of doing things they didn't do. Fortunately, I acknowledged these and other mistakes, and [apologized to students](#) for making them.

Yet my most regrettable transgression as a teacher was something I never apologized for. In fact, had I apologized for it, many students would have thought I was crazy, since they wanted me to commit this "sin" every day, all day.

What did I do that was so shameful to me, and so wonderful to students? I gave them rewards. Candy. Pizza. Sports videos. Whatever I could afford or get my friends to donate. And when I ran out of money and giveaways, I resorted to intangibles like free time and shooting hoops with me after school.

All students had to do to earn these rewards was comply with my commands in class. And I wasn't the only one bribing them. (The principal's friends must have had deeper pockets than mine did, since her rewards included amusement park passes and bicycles.)

But why is it wrong to give students rewards for good behavior? For one thing, it sets them up for future failure. That's because success is about delayed gratification, not instant gratification. And because successful people demonstrate self-regulation, self-discipline, and self-motivation.

But how can children develop these qualities if they're conditioned to doing something only when a reward is at stake? They can't, as evidenced by the dozens of students I've seen misbehave right after receiving a reward, and dozens of others who blew off activities when their teachers weren't offering rewards.

What's more, many teachers have an ulterior motive for rewarding "good" students: motivating--really manipulating--"bad" students. Why else would they try to get the whole class' attention when they reward a student? (Like when the teacher waves a candy bar for everyone to see while broadcasting, "I really like the way Kevin cleaned up after himself today.") Administrators do this too by mentioning reward recipients' names during morning announcements and by holding assemblies to give students prizes in front of their peers.

But does manipulation disguised as motivation work? Do misbehaving or low achieving students change their ways because their classmates are getting rewards and they aren't? Not from what I've seen, and a big reason for this is that many struggling students think they're incapable of

getting rewards and they aren't: not from what I've seen, and a big reason for this is that many struggling students think they're incapable of being successful. Slacking off, sabotaging classroom activities, and cutting class are self-preserving choices for these students. The prospect of a reward isn't going to entice them to try something they think they can't do. These kids need confidence, not candy.

And while rewards are a non-motivator for self-doubting students, they can be a de-motivator for self-confident students. This is especially true when teachers or principals draw attention to students' deeds publicly, as described above. Some students dread this because they're shy. Others are afraid classmates will resent or ridicule them. I was one of these students, and at times performed beneath my ability just to avoid recognition in front of my peers.

Unfortunately, many educators aren't thinking about students' feelings or futures when they dangle rewards. They're thinking about getting students to cooperate so they can get through the curriculum before the test. But the way to elicit students' cooperation is by empowering them, not by trying to control them. I know this because of the dramatic improvements in culture and student outcomes in my classroom after I stopped using rewards (and their cousin, **disciplinary rules** and punitive consequences). Improvements that were the result of giving students **voices** and **choices** in *their* classroom rather than bribing them to comply in *my* classroom. Improvements that were reflected in students feeling fulfilled because of what they were learning, not because of what they were earning.

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