

Incentives are not forever ...

By Belinda Adams 6/2022

As I was cleaning up my room at year's end a few weeks ago, I saw an incentive chart that was taped to the front of my desk with a student's name on it. I said aloud, 'Hmmm, wonder when we stopped using that?' Because honestly, I could not remember.

I recall specifically why the star incentive chart was needed and when it began. I also recall that it was successful with the student. For the life of me, however, I couldn't remember when the student hadn't needed it anymore and it had been long forgotten and unused taped to the front of my desk.

Here's the point that many teachers fail to recognize. Incentives do not have to last forever.

Often, fellow teachers will speak to me about a student's annoying behaviors, such as constantly getting out of his seat or blurting out. Like in my classroom, annoying habits like that can soon become the bane of our existence, like rubbing on our arms all day with sandpaper.

This is when I begin talking to them about the Star Incentive Chart. It's a simple system. It has 10 boxes. Each box has Velcro on it. Students are explained the way they can earn a star on the chart and work with the teacher to determine how many stars are needed and what incentive the student is working towards.

Here's a real example. Last year, I had a student who absolutely refused to get started with his work when given work time. It seemed he could think of an indefinite number of ways to delay getting started, from peeling the tape off his name tag, tapping his pencil, humming, looking around the room to see which students he could draw in as his accomplice, and many more habits. When week 3 of the school year started to roll into week 4, I discovered that I was fairly annoyed with the constant re-directs and reminders to get started I was having to give this student all day long. In addition to my irritation with re-directs to get started, it was a pretty safe bet that 7 out of 10 times, he *still* didn't get started right away.

This is when I introduced him to the star chart. I realized, early on, that this student was really focused on his computer when given 5-10 minutes of free time to play games on an educational site. I talked with him and described the plan. Each time that he got started with this class work right away (without a re-direct), he would receive a star on his chart. When he earned 5 stars, he could have 5 minutes of free time on his computer before lunch time. It took a couple of days for him to earn the 5 stars because he didn't understand how easy it really would be to just get started with his work when asked. By the end of week 2, he was consistently earning 5 minutes in the morning and 5 minutes in the afternoon, earning 10 stars a day.

To build resilience, I upped the anti for week 3, telling him that he could have 10 minutes for every 10 stars. The challenge was on, and he responded quite well. Was he successful every morning? And every afternoon? Absolutely not! He was 6 years old. I needed to keep my expectations realistic; however, he was successful in earning those stars more often than he was not. It also became a bragging point for him because he was quite proud of himself for being successful in earning the stars.

However, that's when the picture gets fuzzy. Because I cannot remember when the star chart was no longer needed, and the student just began class work right away without that incentive. This is what generally happens to incentives. Especially this incentive because students learn right away that everyone can earn free time on their computers by completing their work in the necessary time period.

The issue for fellow educators becomes when I start talking about week 2 of the incentive and their eyes begin to glaze over. I know exactly what they are thinking: that's a lot of work and it's going to last forever. As every student is different and respond in a different time period, it's difficult for me to say, "This strategy always works by week 3." Some students need longer implementation to respond positively. Others may respond positively for a month or two; however, following a holiday break or long weekend, the incentive chart may need to be started again until the student gets back on track with following the expectation. Let's also be realistic and say that some habits are harder to stop than others.

Usually, my fellow educators never let me get to the finish line because they've already written off the Star Incentive Chart in their minds as it sounds like too much effort for an undefinable amount of time. I find this unfortunate, both for the educator and the student. The educator is missing out on an opportunity to teach a child a valuable life skill, such as beginning work right away, and lose the annoyance of the behavior, and the student is being allowed to continue a behavior that is not acceptable for any classroom and doesn't receive the guidance he needs to change the behavior.

There's another key issue I'd like to mention. Annoying/unacceptable behaviors are not changed with consequences or drawing attention to the unwanted behavior. This is another factor many educators do not consider. With frustration I've heard them say, "Nothing has worked. I've tried every consequence I can think of, and nothing is changing her behavior."

There's a reason for that. Students will respond quicker and more positively to being given an incentive to abandon the unwanted behavior. They learn there's a payoff for following classroom expectations. Who can't relate to that? Most adults respond to tasks that, when completed, will result in something positive, like a paycheck or needed relaxation time.

Let me say it again. Incentives do not last forever. At the onset, it may seem like the student is never going to respond. As I said, some behaviors take longer than others. However, I have used this chart for the past 3 years with excellent results. In fact, there are times I have 3 incentive charts going at the same time with 3 different students. Each of them has a different target behavior and are working on an incentive that appeals to them.

Give it some thought and think about how you can utilize the Star Incentive Chart in your classroom. For more information, questions, or a digital copy of the Star Incentive Chart, send me an email at educatoronamission@gmail.com.