

Three Cautions when Rewarding Student Behavior

This article does not suggest that celebrations or recognition for academic or behavioral progress should not be acknowledged.

Rewards are defined as If, then propositions that are specified BEFORE the behavioral event.

- If you (everyone) get your work done you can have a pizza party this Friday.
- If everyone behaves in the media center, you can have some free time at the end of the day.
- If everyone scores at least an 80 on the test, we'll have free-choice centers the next day.

In most cases, rewards do not connect to new learning, practicing acquired skills, or enrichment activities.

1. I would suggest that you have data that shows that a student won't behave properly before you consider rewards. There is no evidence that ALL students need to be rewarded for doing the expected behavior. When rewards are set up whole class and announced at the beginning of the year, or even prior to a new event, the message that is sent is that the activity or learning is not important enough to be done without a bribe or additional reward.
2. Rewards that are the same for ALL students, are not valued the same by all students.
 - a. One teacher told me last week that she had a student that wasn't motivated by stickers like the others in the class. He would play with them, lick them, and even put one on his nose. My question to the teacher was, "Why would you continue to offer the child a reward that was not important to him?"
 - b. Another teacher said that her student would work if he could then be a line leader, etc. I suggested to her that she focus on the student feeling important and being a leader. That way he can focus on matching his Quality World Pictures of being important, being a leader, being helpful, etc.
3. The reward can become more important than the desired behavior. These are just two simple examples from last week.
 - a. Several students told us that they did their Accelerated Reading (AR) assignments because they wanted to go to the pool party at the end of the year. There was no concern for becoming a better reader, just that the party would be fun.
 - b. Many middle and high school teachers stated that there are a significant number of students that focus only on the grade they receive and don't care much about what they are learning, why they are learning it, or how they will be able to use their knowledge.