

Study: Middle school students want recognition, not money



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Money can't buy happiness or, for that matter, attendance by middle school students at after-school tutoring sessions.

A new Vanderbilt University study found that middle school students who were mailed certificates of recognition were actually more motivated to participate in after-school tutoring programs than their peers who received money.

The finding adds to previous research that, in education, rewards can work better than sanctions mandated by the federal No Child Left Behind law. And, for teachers and students, the rewards are not necessarily about the money.

Matthew G. Springer, director of the [National Center for Performance Incentives](#) at Vanderbilt's [Peabody College of Education and Human Development](#), led the study, which set out to uncover if monetary and non-monetary rewards would improve participation in after-school tutoring programs. The study focused on Supplemental Education Services, the free after-school programs implemented to support low-income families in low-performing schools in the wake of No Child Left Behind, which took effect in 2002. While researchers have found that such programs raise student performance, they are generally poorly attended.



Matthew Springer

The study was based on 300 randomly selected students in grades 5-8 in a large urban school district in the South. One group received a reward of \$100, distributed via an online platform, for consistent attendance in the after-school program; one group got certificates of recognition; and one was mailed certificates of recognition of attendance signed by the district superintendent. A control group of students received no incentives.

Researchers were surprised that the middle school students who received certificates for attending the program were more motivated than the students who received money. In fact, the students who were paid to attend tutoring barely went more than students who received no incentive at all.

One reason for the certificates' effectiveness, Springer believes, is that they were sent home directly to the parents, who were likely to reinforce the child's extra effort.

"Oftentimes in school settings, parents are not hearing positive news," Springer said. "I think that the certificate of recognition just sent a strong signal: 'Way to go, keep it up!'"

In other studies, the promise of certificates and trophies presented in class or at a school assembly in front of their peers were less of an incentive, because of students' perception that their peers would look unfavorably on their extra effort.

The Vanderbilt study found that gender also played a role. Female students were significantly more responsive to the certificate of recognition than their male counterparts.

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Springer's findings reinforce expanding literature on merit pay, showing that the processes used by students to prepare for tests matter more than the outcome of the tests themselves. Pinning rewards on test scores doesn't help teachers if they don't

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- Matthew Springer

have the means to raise test scores, Springer says.

"Prior studies have demonstrated that paying students and teachers for higher test scores may not necessarily improve outcomes. Some attribute the lack of effects to teachers and students not knowing what they need to do to improve test scores," he said.

"A lot of public policies are informed by classical economic theory which does not take into

account cultural norms and social pressure," Springer said.

The study supports a national educational shift to rewards and away from punitive measures, many of which were mandated by No Child Left Behind.

"I think it's important from a national policy perspective that we shift the focus to rewarding and recognizing outstanding performance," Springer said, "as opposed to not sanctioning those who haven't met certain standards."

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