**Motivation: The gas that fuels a child’s educational engine**

Short-term rewards are not a viable strategy for long-term reading growth

By: [Lindsey Hill](http://www.districtadministration.com/node/20288)

Do we know why third graders in America are not [reading at grade level](http://www.districtadministration.com/topic/language-arts%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)? More than 50 percent of children in affluent homes and 80 percent of children growing up in less affluent homes are not reading proficiently. Reading drops off significantly after age nine. Meanwhile, hundreds of millions of dollars are spent focusing on the act of reading, but little progress is being made when it comes to identifying the root of the problem.

What if the real issue is in the underlying motivation for children to be more engaged in their learning?

Motivation drives how all students approach school, including how they relate to teachers, the time and effort they devote to their studies, the amount of support they seek when struggling, and their performance on tests. Increased motivation is directly linked to a greater conceptual understanding.

This, in turn, can improve academic performance and satisfaction with school, as well as positively affect self-esteem, social adjustments and school completion rates. In short? Motivation is the gas that fuels a child’s educational engine.

How do we continue to engage our students as they grow? The older the students, the more likely they will be discouraged and disillusioned by their educational experiences. According to a 2004 analysis by the National Research Council, nearly 40 percent of high school students disengaged in school; they exerted little effort, were inattentive, and reported boredom. These were all directly tied to a decline in motivation.

We think we know what motivation is, but how does that manifest itself in the lives of our kids? What really drives our students to want to learn?

**Internal vs. external factors**

Great minds have battled back and forth over the years as to whether motivation is strictly driven by external factors or internal ones, but current thinking suggests we should approach learning more intrinsically and less extrinsically. Internal factors, with minimal external factors, encourage our children to be life-long learners.

Intrinsic motivation comes from a child’s internal desire to complete a task because it’s satisfying or pleasurable. Extrinsic motivation, however, drives a child to complete a task with the promise of outside rewards such as money or grades. Students continue to be motivated both by an internal drive for success as well as by external rewards. But, students who find internal motivation to engage in their learning tend to have the most lasting success.

Kids are motivated to read more when they are interested in what they are reading, when they have confidence in their reading abilities, and when they see their peers reading.

It makes sense, doesn’t it? Kids read because they are intrigued by what they are reading—not because someone offers them a trinket or other reward.

**External motivation**

What about external motivators? Can punishments or rewards help generate long-term reading gains?

Turns out, external rewards are actually doing more harm than good. Research demonstrates that using extrinsic motivators to engage students in learning can both lower achievement and negatively affect student motivation.

Getting a trinket or badge may keep a child reading for the short-term, but it’s not a viable strategy for long-term reading growth.

When students are motivated to complete a task only to avoid consequences or to earn a certain reward, they will rarely exert more than the minimum effort necessary to meet their goal.

When students are focused on comparing themselves with their classmates, rather than on mastering skills at their own rate, they are more easily discouraged, and their intrinsic motivation to learn may actually decrease.

For any concept as complex as literacy, there will be a variety of influences and factors that we can utilize to encourage students to read. The real challenge is to encourage children to fall completely in love with reading. Only then can we know we’ve created life-long learners.

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