

# We Must Rethink Teacher Incentive Plans

I've heard that Albert Einstein said, "Stupidity is to do something over again the same way, and expect different results." I also have heard others repeat a version of this statement when describing what we do in education. Our school improvement initiatives are often some old, tired, and failed processes or programs that are dusted off, renamed, and launched, only to fail again.

In *Modern School Business Administration: A Planning Approach*, James Guthrie and his colleagues say school systems are plagued by "systemic inefficiencies" because "school systems are characterized by stability not adaptability." We are comfortable in our world, and we do not wish to disturb the status quo.

Well, I am about to deviate from the status quo by suggesting that providing incentives for teachers can improve their productivity—and that of their schools.

We all know that a successful incentive plan must offer rewards that each participant values, that the goals participants are expected to reach must be achievable, and that the participants must have the ability, resources, and motivation to achieve those goals. Take away any one of these parts and your incentive plan is dead in the water.

But if you structure your plan correctly, you can create an atmosphere of success for your faculty that improves each time one of them succeeds and reaches a goal. Trust me, I know this can work because it did for me.

## Getting Started

You must first establish rewards, and the only effective way to do this is to ask your teachers what is important, or has value, to them. I asked this question in a graduate class of 32 classroom teachers. Here is a sample of their responses:

- A "dress down" Friday;
- A substitute teacher to allow for extra teacher planning time;
- A free off-campus lunch;
- Tuition assistance for graduate courses;

- A preferred parking space;
- Having the principal teach a class in order to give the teacher extra planning time; and
- Permission to leave early or arrive late.

You will notice from this list that apart from the tuition assistance and the substitute teacher, there is no direct monetary cost to the school for any of these. Look at this list as an opportunity to provide inexpensive rewards for your teachers that could mean big "profits" for you and your school. Your investment in a teacher incentive plan will pay off if you can align their goals with yours.

Suppose you have a goal next year of reducing discipline referrals. You look through your data and find that teacher X had 40 referrals last year. Now, how can you motivate teacher X to reduce that number? Try this. Explain to her that you have a goal of reducing referrals, that you are asking each teacher

## HERE'S YOUR CHANCE TO SPEAK OUT

The author believes that teacher incentive plans work if handled properly, and that principals can create an effective system of free or inexpensive rewards for achieving goals. Do you believe incentives improve teaching performance? Do you feel incentives would hurt the morale of teachers who choose not to participate?

Let your colleagues know what you think about teacher incentives by going to the Principals' Office blog at <http://naesp.typepad.com> and clicking on "Speaking Out."

for assistance, and that you want to offer incentives for extra effort in achieving the goal. You ask her to tell you what she feels is a reasonable reward, and she tells you she'd like a free off-campus lunch. You agree and ask her if a 20 percent reduction in referrals is a reasonable goal. She agrees, and so you document the agreement and tell her that if by the end of the term on Dec. 1 she has fewer than 16 referrals, she gets a free lunch any day before the winter holiday break.

Think of what you have done. You have aligned your goal with hers. If she succeeds, you will have less work to do and she will have become a better classroom manager. Everyone benefits, and it cost only the price of her lunch and an hour of your time. Now think of every teacher in your school concentrating on improving their classroom management skills in order to reach the same goal and earn a reward of their choice.

Are you ready to try it? Use these steps as a template or modify them to fit your needs.

Create a plan for what you want to accomplish. Talk with your superintendent and get his or her approval.


Make your plan optional. People respond better when they have a sense of ownership.

Ask all participating faculty to list their preferred rewards, but do not tell them of your goals at this step.

Hold individual meetings with each participant. Tell them your goals and make sure they align with theirs.

Plan to start at the beginning of each term.

Remove obstacles to their success. You can't ask them for extra effort and then appear to be an impediment.

Finally, celebrate their success. No matter how small it is, make a big deal out of it! You will be amazed at how much of a morale boost this will give them. 

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