Ideas for Motivating the Underperforming Student

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Creating Reward Menus That Motivate: Tips for Teachers

Rewards are often central to effective school interventions. As possible incentives that students can earn for appropriate school performance or conduct, these reinforcers (or ‘rewards’) often serve as the motivational ‘engine’ that drives successful interventions.

Choosing rewards to use as incentives for a student intervention may seem simple and straightforward. A reinforcer, however, probably will not be successful unless it passes three important tests:

- **Acceptability Test.** Does the teacher approve of using the reinforcer with this child? Are parent(s) likely to approve the use of the reinforcer with their child?
- **Availability Test.** Is the reinforcer typically available in a school setting? If not, can it be obtained with little inconvenience and at a cost affordable to staff or parents?
- **Motivation Test.** Does the child find the reinforcer to be motivating?

Reward systems are usually most powerful when a student can select from a range of reward choices (‘reward menu’). Offering students a menu of possible rewards is effective because it both gives students a meaningful choice of reinforcers and reduces the likelihood that the child will eventually tire of any specific reward.

However, some children (e.g., those with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) may lose interest in specific reward choices more quickly than do their typical peers. Teachers will want to regularly update and refresh reward menus for such children to ensure these reinforcers retain their power to positively shape those students’ behaviors.

**Creating a ‘Reward Deck.’** A Reward Deck is an idea that can help teachers to quickly select and regularly update student reward menus. This strategy involves 5 steps:

1. The teacher reviews a list of reward choices typically available in school settings. (Instructors can use the comprehensive sampling of possible school rewards that appears in the next section: Jackpot! Ideas for Classroom Rewards.). From this larger list, the teacher selects only those rewards that she or he approves of using, believes would be acceptable to other members of the school community (e.g., administration, parents), and finds feasible and affordable.

2. The teacher writes out acceptable reward choices on index cards-- to create a master ‘Reward Deck’

3. Whenever the teacher wants to create a reward menu for a particular student, he or she first ‘screens’ reward choices that appear in the master Reward Deck and temporarily removes any that seem inappropriate for that specific case. (For
example, the teacher may screen out the reward ‘pizza party’ because it is too
expensive to offer to a student who has only minor difficulties with homework
completion.)

4. The teacher then sits with the child and presents each of the reward choices
remaining in the Reward Deck. For each reward option, the child indicates
whether he or she (a) likes the reward a lot, (b) likes the reward a little, or (c)
doesn’t care for the reward. The teacher sorts the reward options into three piles
that match these rating categories.

The teacher can then assemble that child’s Reward Menu using the student’s top
choices (“like a lot”). If the instructor needs additional choices to fill out the rest
of the menu, he or she can pull items from the student’s “like a little” category as
well.

5. (Optional but recommended) Periodically, the instructor can meet with the student
and repeat the above procedure to ‘refresh’ the Reward Menu quickly and easily.
## Troubleshooting Reward Programs: A Teacher’s Guide

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<th>Issue</th>
<th>Solution</th>
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<td>My reward program worked for a while but now it doesn’t seem to be very effective.</td>
<td>There are several possible reasons why a reward program might begin to lose its effectiveness. You may want to experiment with changing aspects of the program until you find what is effective:</td>
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<td>• <strong>The student has lost interest in the current rewards.</strong> Some students need to be given new reward choices more frequently than do typical children. Every so often, make a point to readminister the ‘reward deck’ or a reward inventory to the student to update his or her list of preferred rewards.</td>
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<td>• <strong>You have become inconsistent in administering the reward program.</strong> Classrooms are busy places—so it is natural for the person who runs a reward program occasionally to forget to assign a point or give a reward. If the program is administered too inconsistently, though, it can stop working. Remember: a reward program is like a contract: its power depends entirely on how reliably it is enforced.</td>
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<td>Reflect on your actions and decide whether you may have inadvertently begun to ‘drift’ from the program. Common problems that crop up include the adult being inconsistent in assigning points for positive behaviors or deducting points for negative behaviors, failing to record assigned points on a chart or graph, neglecting to give the student a chance to redeem points for rewards, and not having agreed-upon rewards available for the student.</td>
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<td>I can’t seem to find rewards that the student actually finds reinforcing.</td>
<td>Students vary a great deal in what kinds of activities, events, or opportunities they might find rewarding. No single reward choice appeals to every student. Here are some ideas to help you to figure out rewards that are likely to appeal even to picky students:</td>
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<td>• <strong>Ask the student to write down or tell you some activities that he or she likes to do.</strong> Use this list as a starting point to generate ideas for possible rewards.</td>
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<td>• <strong>Observe the activities the student picks out during free or unstructured time.</strong> Those...</td>
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activities that people typically do in their free time are those that they probably find appealing. If the student spends most of his or her free time ‘hanging out’ with other kids, for instance, you can probably think up socially oriented rewards for that student.

- **Ask the student’s previous teachers, parent, or other significant adult what activities or rewards the student likes.** Other people who have known the student for a significant length of time may have useful insights into what rewards the student will find motivating.

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<th>My student argues with me every time I use the reward program.</th>
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<td>Sometimes students will verbally challenge you—insisting, for example, that you should award a point that you believe they did not earn. Here are a couple of suggestions to reduce or eliminate such arguing:</td>
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<td>• <strong>Build a negative consequence for “arguing” into the reward program.</strong> Explain to the student that you will impose a consequence whenever the student argues or verbally challenges your decisions about the reward program. You might choose, for example, to deduct a point from the student’s total whenever he or she argues or suspend the reward program for 15 minutes (so that the student cannot earn points) whenever the student argues with you.</td>
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<td>• <strong>Avoid becoming an active participant in the argument.</strong> It takes two to argue. As the adult, you can control student interactions by refusing to get pulled into arguments. If possible, keep your responses brief and your emotional state neutral.</td>
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<td>• <strong>Examine the quality of your own interactions with the student.</strong> Students are most likely to argue with adults when they feel that they have been treated unfairly or ignored. Analyze your interactions with the student to be sure that you are not expressing anger or annoyance and that you do not use sarcasm. Consider offering the student positive opportunities to share his or her feelings or opinions with you (e.g., writing a letter, participating in a class meeting). Be sure that you are enforcing the terms of the reward program fairly--in particular, giving the student appropriate credit for good behaviors.</td>
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<th>Other school staff or parents sometimes disagree with the rewards that I choose.</th>
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| A complicating factor in setting up reward programs is that other adults may disapprove of those rewards that you have selected. For instance, a principal may be unhappy with a teacher who rewards a student with gum for good behavior, because the school has a “no gum
chewing” policy.

- **Preview potentially controversial rewards with fellow staff, school administrators, and/or the student’s parents.** When in doubt, check with the school principal, other teaching staff and the student’s parent about the acceptability of a specific reward idea.

- **Try to use pro-social and pro-educational reward choices whenever possible.** No one objects to student rewards that build social or academic skills. If a student were motivated to play an educational math game on the computer as a reward, for example, this academic reward would usually be preferable to offering the student a food treat. In short, if you know that non-controversial rewards work for a student, use them.

- **Document past reward efforts.** While most students can be motivated using traditional, education-friendly rewards, you will occasionally come across students who will strive only for rewards that others might regard as less acceptable (e.g., candy, coupons to skip homework). Sometimes these ‘intervention-resistant’ students have special needs and simply do not respond to those more typical rewards that normally shape kids’ behavior. If you wish to make the case to other adults about the need to use controversial rewards with ‘intervention-resistant’ children, it may help to document that your previous attempts to use more typical rewards had been unsuccessful.

- **Educate staff about special-needs students.** You may also need to educate school staff about how a child’s special needs may cause him or her to react to rewards in a manner different from more typical students. A teacher may observe, for example, that a child with substantial cognitive deficits is motivated only by a chance to earn snacks—even though his more typical age-peers regularly select social activities as rewards. The target student’s intellectual deficits and relative emotional immaturity can help to explain why he is drawn to rewards more typical of a younger child.

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**I am going broke trying to buy rewards for students!**

It can be costly to provide motivating rewards for individual students, let alone a whole classroom! Some suggestions:

- **Use a raffle-ticket reward system.** One cost-saving idea for group rewards that can make your prizes go farther is to design an attractive paper raffle ticket, which has a space for the student’s name. Whenever the student earns a point for good behavior, have the
student write his or her name on the ticket and toss it into a fishbowl or other container. Hold regular drawings, awarding prizes to those students whose tickets are selected.

- **Give ‘Activity Coupons’**. Many of the most effective student rewards are activities that are readily obtainable in a school setting. Make a list of all of the rewarding opportunities that you or your fellow teachers and administrators can make available as prizes. For instance, one school may identify “Reading to kindergarten students during their Story Time” or “Delivering morning announcements” as potentially motivating activities. For each activity, create an ‘Activity Coupon’ that describes the activity and the number of points required to earn it. Students can redeem good-behavior points that they have collected for any Activity Coupon that they can afford.

- **Build a reward program around a ‘prize box’**. Like most of us, students find novelty itself to be a motivating experience. You can use a prize box to build some excitement into a reward program, without having to purchase big-ticket items. First, decorate a large sturdy box. Fill the box with inexpensive prizes that students might find motivating (e.g., small toys, stickers). (You can even supplement the contents of the prize box with fun promotional items such as key chains or pencils.) When students earn a pre-determined number of points, they can draw the prize of choice from the box.
Finding the Spark: More Ideas for Building Student Motivation

Teachers can feel overwhelmed when faced with students who are unmotivated to learn. The task becomes less daunting, though, when teachers realize that they can boost student motivation in five important ways: by (1) making positive changes to the learning environment, (2) fostering a sense of community in the classroom, (3) enhancing the interest of classroom activities, (4) responding to individual learning challenges, and (5) building in additional outcomes/pay-offs for learning. Here are some ideas:

Learning Environment
The setting in which we work can encourage us to give our best effort or discourage us from even trying to perform.

Ideas to motivate by influencing factors in the student’s environment:
- Reduce distractions in the classroom.
- Create a consistent room arrangement, with predictable materials and routines.
- Let students choose their seat location and study partners.
- Enlist students to come up with rules and guidelines for effective classroom learning.
- Create a memory-friendly classroom. Post assignments and due dates, written steps for multi-step tasks, etc.
- Use a mix of verbal and environmental cues to keep students focused and on-task.
- Hold class in different locations occasionally (“within-building field trip”). For example, think about ‘swapping’ classrooms with another teacher on a given day.
- Ask for student advice on how to make the classroom a more inviting and useful learning environment.

Classroom Community
We define ourselves in relation to others through social relationships. These connections are a central motivator for most people.

Ideas to motivate by fostering a sense of a learning community:
- Be as inviting a person as possible by actively listening to students and acknowledging their contributions.
- Greet students at the classroom door. ‘Check in’ briefly with students at the start and end of a work period.
- Ask students to complete a learning-preferences questionnaire.
- Assign ‘study buddies’ who help each other to get organized, start work projects, encourage one another, and provide peer feedback.
- Train students to be peer editors or evaluators of others’ assignments.
- Hold weekly 5-minute ‘micro-meetings’ with the group or class. Check in with the group about topics or issues important to them. Record important points brought up and get back to students if necessary.
- Keep ‘dialog journals’. Have students write daily or weekly comments in a journal to be kept in class. Respond to student comments with short comments of your own.
- Circulate through the classroom. Be interactive and visible to kids. Use words of praise and encouragement.

**Academic Activities**

*Motivated students are engaged in interesting activities that guarantee a high success rate and relate to real-world issues.*

Ideas to motivate through selection and development of learning activities:
- Use humor.
- Keep miscellaneous work supplies on hand (e.g., paper, pencils, etc.) for students to borrow.
- Set a timer (e.g., for 60 seconds) and challenge students to finish routine tasks or transition between activities before timer runs out.
- Set up academic ‘culminating event’ fieldtrips. On these fieldtrips, have students use skills learned in class (e.g., drafting questions in social studies to be used in an interview with a member of city government).
- Invite interesting guest speakers into the classroom to speak on academic topics. Prepare index cards with review questions and answers based on material covered in class. Have guest speaker ‘quiz’ teams; award points to teams based on their mastery of material.
- Offer students meaningful choice in setting up their assignments (e.g., selection of work materials, type of activity).
- Select fun, imaginative activities for reviewing academic material. In order to get students to assemble material for a research paper, for example, you might send them to the library on a fact-finding ‘scavenger hunt.’
- Encourage active student participation.
- Use motivating ‘real-world’ examples for review, quiz, or test items.
- Keep instructions and assignments short. Have students repeat instructions back.
- Celebrate student achievement.
- Celebrate mistakes as opportunities for learning.
- Prior to assignments, have students set their own short-term work or learning goals. Periodically, have students rate their own progress toward their self-selected goals.
- Structure work period so that more difficult activities are in the middle, with easier tasks at the start and end.
- Liven potentially dull student review activities by conducting them as class-wide or small-group drills. Use a game format to maintain interest.
- Use novel, interesting materials for instruction.
- Allow students to set their own pace for completing work.
- Select activities that make a community contribution. Students may, for instance, work on writing skills by publishing a monthly newsletter for the 7th grade.

**Learning Challenges**

*Every learner presents a unique profile of strengths and weaknesses. We unlock motivation when we acknowledge and address unique learning profiles.*

Ideas to motivate by accommodating challenges to learning:
Avoid ‘stigmatizing’ as low performers those students who require remedial academic support.
Lead students through the first part of an assignment as a group before having them complete it independently.
If an assignment requires use of new or difficult terms or concepts, first pre-teach or preview this material.
Make the classroom a ‘safe’ setting in which in which students can identify and work on their own skill deficits.
Give students credit and recognition for effort on assignments as well as for mastery of content.
Be honest in telling students how challenging a topic or activity is likely to be to master. Never downplay the difficulty of an assignment!
Use a ‘think-aloud’ approach when introducing a skill or strategy.
Select academic activities that guarantee a high degree of student success.
Allow students to take a brief break when tired or frustrated.
Help students to get organized and started on an activity.
Have students keep a schedule of work assignments and due dates.
Encourage students to use memory aids such as notes and lists.
Assist students in breaking large, multi-step tasks into smaller subtasks. Have students write those subtasks down as a personal ‘to-do’ list.
Teach students to use a notebook organizer.
Give reminders of upcoming transitions between activities.
Help students to highlight key information to be remembered.
Provide frequent review of key concepts.
Periodically remind students of timeline of upcoming assignments.

Outcomes/Payoffs for Learning

Learning is a motivating activity when the learner can count on short- or long-term payoffs for mastering the material being taught.
Ideas to motivate by arranging or emphasizing payoffs to the student for successful learning:

- Reward student effort along with quality of completed work. (One way to do this is to use frequent encouragement for good effort along with praise for finished work.)
- Build in short-term rewards (e.g., increased free time, pencils, positive note home) for student effort, work completion.
- Create high-visibility location for displaying student work (e.g., bulletin board, web site). Encourage students to select their own best work to be posted.
- Have students monitor their own progress in accuracy/work completion. For example, have students create graphs charting homework assignments turned in. Tie student-monitored performance to reward programs.

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Reducing Problem Behaviors Through Good Academic Management: 10 Strategies

Students who are confrontational or non-compliant frequently have poor academic skills, a low sense of self-efficacy as learners, and a very negative attitude toward school (Sprick, et al., 2002). Misbehavior often stems from academic deficits. Educators who work with these behaviorally challenging learners, however, often make the mistake of overlooking simple academic strategies that have been shown to shape student behavior in powerful and positive ways (Penno et al., 2000). Here are ten research-based ideas on academic management that no teacher of difficult-to-manage students should be without!

1. **Be sure that assigned work is not too easy and not too difficult.** It is surprising how often classroom behavior problems occur simply because students find the assigned work too difficult or too easy (Gettinger & Seibert, 2002). When assignments are too simple, the student may become bored and distracted. When work is too hard, the student is likely to feel frustrated and upset because he or she cannot complete the assignment. As a significant mismatch between the assignment and the student’s abilities can trigger misbehavior, teachers should inventory each student’s academic skills and adjust assignments as needed to ensure that the student is appropriately challenged but not overwhelmed by the work.

2. **Offer frequent opportunities for choice.** Teachers who allow students a degree of choice in structuring their learning activities typically have fewer behavior problems in their classrooms than teachers who do not (Kern et al., 2002). Providing choices gives students a sense of autonomy and voice in their learning. It should also be remembered that no teacher could possibly anticipate each student’s idiosyncratic learning needs in every situation. If students are offered choice in structuring their academic activities, however, they will frequently select those options that make their learning easier and more manageable. In sum, students who exercise academic choice are more likely to be active, motivated managers of their own learning and less likely to simply act out due to frustration or boredom.

As an example of choice at the group level, an instructor may let the entire class vote on which of two lessons they would prefer to have presented that day. Choice can be incorporated into individual assignments too. In independent seatwork, for example, a student might be allowed to choose which of several short assignments to do first, the books or other research materials to be used, the response format (e.g., writing a short essay, preparing an oral report), etc. One efficient way to promote choice in the classroom is for the teacher to create a master menu of options that students can select from in various learning situations. An instructor, for example, may teach the class that during any independent assignment, students will always have a chance to (1) choose from at least 2 assignment options, (2) sit where they want in the classroom, and (3) select a peer-buddy to check their work. Student choice then becomes integrated seamlessly into the classroom routine.
3. **Select high-interest or functional learning activities.** Kids are more motivated to learn when their instructional activities are linked to a topic of high interest (Kern et al., 2002). A teacher who discovers that her math group of 7th-graders loves NASCAR racing, for example, may be able to create engaging math problems based on car-racing statistics. Students may also be energized to participate in academic activities if they believe that these activities will give them functional skills that they value (Miller et al., 2003). One instructor assigned to work with a special-education classroom of high school boys with serious behavior problems related that she had great difficulty managing the class—until she realized that each of them wanted to learn to drive. So the teacher brought in copies of the state driver’s education manual and that became the instructional text. The students were much better behaved because they were now motivated learners working toward the pragmatic real-world goal of learning to drive (R. Sarsfield, personal communication).

4. **Instruct students at a brisk pace.** A myth of remedial education is that special-needs students must be taught at a slower, less demanding pace than their general-education peers (Heward, 2003). In fact, a slow pace of instruction can actually cause significant behavior problems, because students become bored and distracted. Teacher-led instruction should be delivered at a sufficiently brisk pace to hold student attention. An important additional benefit of a brisk instructional pace is that students cover more academic material more quickly, accelerating their learning (Heward, 2003).

5. **Structure lessons to require active student involvement.** Here is a powerful concept in behavior management: it is very difficult for students to be actively engaged in academics and to misbehave at the same time! When teachers require that students participate in lessons rather than sit as passive listeners, they increase the odds that these students will become caught up in the flow of the activity and not drift off into misbehavior (Heward, 2003). Students can be encouraged to be active learning participants in many ways. A teacher, for example, may call out questions and have the class give the answer in unison (‘choral responding’); pose a question, give the class ‘think time’, and then draw a name from a hat to select a student to give the answer; or direct students working independently on a practice problem to ‘think aloud’ as they work through the steps of the problem. Students who have lots of opportunities to actively respond and receive teacher feedback also demonstrate substantial learning gains (Heward, 1994).

6. **Incorporate cooperative-learning opportunities into instruction.** Traditional teacher lecture is frequently associated with high rates of student misbehavior. When misbehavior occurs in a large-group format, it also can have a large negative impact: one acting-out student who gets into a power-struggle with the lecturing instructor will interrupt learning for the entire class. There is evidence, though, that when students are given well-structured assignments and placed into work-pairs or cooperative learning groups, behavior problems typically diminish (Beyda et al., 2002). Furthermore, if a behavior problem should occur while cooperative groups are working together, the teacher is often able to approach and privately redirect the misbehaving student without disrupting learning in the other groups (Beyda et al., 2002).

   Even positive teacher practices can be more effective when used in cooperative-learning settings. When instructors teaching in lecture format take the time to give extended feedback and provide coaching to individuals, other students can become disengaged and off-task. If students are working in pairs or small groups, though, teacher feedback given to one group or individual does not interrupt learning for the other groups.
7. **Give frequent teacher feedback and encouragement.** Praise and other positive interactions between teacher and student serve an important instructional function, because these exchanges regularly remind the student of the classroom behavioral and academic expectations and give the student clear evidence that he or she is capable of achieving those expectations (Mayer, 2000).

Unfortunately, in most classrooms, educators tend to deliver many more reprimands than they do praise statements. This imbalance is understandable: after all, teachers are under pressure to devote most of their class time to deliver high-quality instruction and tend to interrupt that instruction only when forced to deal with disruptive behavior. A high rate of reprimands and low rate of praise, however, can have several negative effects. First, if teachers do not regularly praise and encourage students who act appropriately, those positive student behaviors may whither away through lack of recognition. Second, students will probably find a steady diet of reprimands to be punishing and might eventually respond by withdrawing from participation or even avoiding the class altogether. A goal for teachers should be to engage in at least 3 to 4 positive interactions with the student for each reprimand given (Sprick, et al., 2002). Positive interactions might include focused, specific praise, non-verbal exchanges (e.g., smile or ‘thumbs-up’ from across the room), or even an encouraging note written on the student’s homework assignment. These positive interactions are brief and can often be delivered in the midst of instruction.

8. **Provide correct models during independent work.** In virtually every classroom, students are expected to work independently on assignments. Independent seatwork can be a prime trigger, though, for serious student misbehavior (DuPaul & Stoner, 2002). One modest instructional adjustment that can significantly reduce problem behaviors is to supply students with several correctly completed models (work examples) to use as a reference (Miller et al., 2003). A math instructor teaching quadratic equations, for example, might provide 4 models in which all steps in solving the equation are solved. Students could refer to these models as needed when completing their own worksheets of similar algebra problems. Or an English/Language Arts teacher who assigns his class to compose a letter to their U.S. Senator might allow them to refer to three ‘model’ letters while they write.

9. **Be consistent in managing the academic setting.** Picture this (not-uncommon) scenario: A teacher complains that her students routinely yell out answers without following the classroom rule of first raising their hand to be recognized. She invites an observer into the classroom to offer her some ideas for reducing the number of call-outs. The observer quickly discovers that the teacher often ignores students who have raised their hand and instead accepts answers that are blurted out. Because she is inconsistent in enforcing her classroom rules, the teacher is actually contributing to student misbehavior!

As a group, students with challenging behaviors are more likely than their peers to become confused by inconsistent classroom routines. Teachers can hold down the level of problem behaviors by teaching clear expectations for academic behaviors and then consistently following through in enforcing those expectations (Sprick et al., 2002). Classrooms run more smoothly when students are first taught routines for common learning activities—such as participating in class discussion, turning in homework, breaking into cooperative learning groups, and handing out work materials—and then the teacher consistently enforces those same routines by praising students who follow them, reviewing those routines periodically, and reteaching them as needed.

10. **Target interventions to coincide closely with ‘point of performance’.** Skilled teachers employ many strategies to shape or manage challenging student behaviors. For instance, a teacher may give a
‘pre-correction’ (reminder about appropriate behaviors) to a student who is about to leave the room to attend a school assembly, award a ‘good behavior’ raffle-ticket to a student who displayed exemplary behavior in the hallway, or allow a student to collect a reward that she had earned for being on time to class for the whole week.

It is generally a good idea for teachers who work with a challenging students to target their behavioral and academic intervention strategies to coincide as closely as possible with that student’s ‘point of performance’ (the time that the student engages in the behavior that the teacher is attempting to influence) (DuPaul & Stoner, 2002). So a teacher is likely to be more successful in getting a student to take his crayons to afternoon art class if that teacher reminds the student just as the class is lining up for art than if she were to remind him at the start of the day. A student reward will have a greater impact if it is given near the time in which it was earned than if it is awarded after a two-week delay. Teacher interventions tend to gain in effectiveness as they are linked more closely in time to the students’ points of performance that they are meant to influence.

References


