



INCENTIVES 101

Incentives play a key role in motivating students to make any new desired behavior a lasting habit. After introducing the behaviors you want and need to become habits in your classroom, they should hopefully evolve over the course of a school year.

In this document you will find best practices for:

- Planning an arc of incentives
- Introducing and executing incentives
- Switching up incentives
- Transitioning from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation

Plan an arc of incentives

Incentivizing behaviors is one way to ensure that students attach success to a behavior in the form of a reward. Rewarding those behaviors establishes a base of success for students in the hopes that students will turn those behaviors into habits. The excitement and engagement of an incentive motivates students to work on that behavior until it becomes their norm.... For example, if you want your students to rotate quietly, you might offer an incentive for the group who rotates the quietest while you are practicing.

Just as you plan out the scope and sequence of your math curriculum throughout the school year, it is best practice to plan out an arc of your incentives throughout the school year. While some behaviors might be unanticipated, with a need to address in the moment, many habits students need to build are a known quantity. To invest students and engage them in growth and progress it is beneficial to have a long term plan for what behaviors you have to incentivize and how you want to incentivize them.

An arc of incentives should consider the stepping stones needed to build strong habits. Behaviors often build off one another, so mastering one behavior can lead to mastering the next. For example, a long term habit you likely want students to build is to take strong notes on a computer lesson. To help this behavior become a habit, it is first important to make sure that students travel with certain materials during rotations, so that later in the year they can build the habit of taking notes.

Take some time to think about what behaviors, if your students made them habits, would have the biggest positive impact on your classroom. Then think about how best to scaffold these so that students can find early success mastering a behavior and build off of that to master the next one. The ultimate goal is for each of these behaviors to become habits, not just mastered in a week and tossed to the side. Creating a flow of behaviors will help your students build these behaviors and maintain them as habits.

Examples

- *August incentive:* Rotating silently; *September incentive:* Rotating with notebook; *October incentive:* Taking notes while on computer
- *August incentive:* Working silently at your computer station; *September incentive:* Completing lessons; *October incentive:* Passing lessons



Introduce and execute incentives

This is where the fun of incentives begins! How do you want to introduce the idea of incentives to your students? Will you do this every Monday morning to get them excited for the week? Will it be a surprise reveal on Friday for those who have achieved their goal? Will you incentivize a behavior every day? Every week? This is all up to you! The most important part is that incentives are executed often enough that it keeps kids motivated, but not too often that they expect an incentive every 5 minutes. The expectations for the desired behavior and when the incentive will be received should be crystal clear so students know exactly what they are working for and why. Students should know when to expect an incentive, but also know they need to put work in to receive the incentive. It is also important to make sure that the behavior and incentive are referenced multiple times throughout the course of the week rather than just at the beginning and end of a week. Constantly talking about the behavior and incentive with your students will help remind students of the desired outcome behavior, as well as the incentive they are working towards.

Switch up incentives

Switching up incentives is the special seasoning of incentives. While there are certainly students who would be fine receiving the same homework pass every week of the school year, the majority of students will be more motivated if there are new incentives to look forward to. Similarly to how you want to build on behaviors, you might also build on your incentives. Changing it up helps keep students engaged and motivated all year long. As a best practice, incentives should be changed at least once a month.

There are **three key ways** to change up incentives to keep students engaged:

1. **Switch up the duration:** At the beginning students might need a daily incentive, and eventually the duration between prizes can be extended to weekly or monthly (depending on the age group).

Examples:

- A third grade teacher starts out the year having students move a magnet on the wall each day to show how many lessons they pass. Any student who moves his/her magnet, gets a mint/hershey kiss for completed lessons that day. Halfway through the year, she changes this to a weekly incentive. Students move their magnets throughout the week as they pass lessons and receive an incentive at the end of the week for their progress.
- At the beginning of the year, a middle school English language arts teacher has her students keep track of how many lessons they pass each week. At the end of the week, she gives them “cash” to the school store to go pick out a prize. Later on in the year, she changes this to a monthly checkbook system where students keep track of how many lessons they pass and how much “money” the teacher owes them. At this point, she allows students to visit the store once or twice a month.



2. **Switch up the prize:** One incentive might be super motivating at first, but switching up what incentive students are working towards keeps them excited and engaged.

Examples:

- A second grade teacher starts each week with a “prize bag drawing”. At the beginning of the year he puts in countless slips of paper with incentive ideas into a bag. At the beginning of each week, he picks a student to grab a slip of paper out of the bag to determine the incentive for the week. This slip of paper is posted in the front of the classroom the whole week for students to see.
- Each month, a middle school math teacher has each of her classes vote on their top three incentives. These live on her board. As students meet their goal each week, they get to move a magnet with their name on it under the prize they want to receive for their hard work. (These might start out as physical prizes they are receiving to more intrinsic prizes)

3. **Switch up the process** -- Adjusting how students earn incentives can engage students in a new way. Some incentives can be earned on an individual basis, while others could be a group effort. In addition, competitions between groups or even across classes/grades can build excitement and engagement in reaching for a goal. Working towards a common goal can be a new challenge for students, and can also start to build students’ intrinsic motivation as they try to achieve a goal with their classmates.

Examples:

- A Mini-March Madness competition – a teacher creates a bracket with two to three person teams. Teams with the most lessons each week advance to the next round. This encourages students to complete lessons to help their team, not just themselves, earn a prize.
- A teacher sets a class goal that if twenty of her twenty five students complete their homework every day in a week, there will be no homework the following week. Students start to think to themselves “Will I be the reason the rest of my class has to do homework next week?”
- While a class is practicing rotations in the beginning of the year, the teacher says “if we can rotate quietly and under thirty seconds right now, we will not have to practice the rest of the day”. This again encourages students to rotate in this way for their classmates, not just for themselves.

Extrinsic motivation vs. intrinsic motivation

Incentivizing students plays a big role in motivating and engaging them in the academic and behavioral goals you set for them. However, for students to be invested in working hard towards their long term academic and behavioral goals, their motivation cannot only come from the prospect of earning an external reward. It is important to push students to be motivated intrinsically in addition to extrinsically. While all students, and even adults, are motivated by extrinsic rewards, those who are motivated intrinsically are more likely to be successful in high school, college, and beyond, when a plethora of rewards no longer exists.

Teachers have a lot of power to inspire students to want to achieve a goal for themselves rather than for a tangible reward. While earning incentives is a way to get kids excited and feel successful, the goal is to eventually transition them into wanting to achieve these behaviors for how it makes them *feel*. The ultimate goal of incentivizing is to have students attach a positive feeling to being successful so that they want to replicate, not



simply to replicate receiving something (i.e. candy, a pizza party, no homework). One important part of this transformation of motivation is the conversations with students. It is important to build a common language around growth and progress that links effort and success to the behaviors needed in order to achieve a goal. Similarly, fostering a growth mindset in the classroom helps students think about how they feel when they work hard to achieve something instead of simply focusing on what they earn. to students about why they are working towards something, fostering a growth mindset in your classroom,

In addition to the language used in the classroom, another way to help transition motivation is to focus the excitement and celebration around the success of the goal when it is reached, and minimizing the hurrah around the presentation of the prize. Additionally, teachers can transition students from earning a tangible prize (such as candy or a homework pass) to earning experiences (extra recess, dance parties), to ultimately simply earning recognition (certificates, awards). This helps to ensure that students are building a habit of wanting to be and feel successful rather than to receive something in return for their hard work.

