

Rethinking Perfect Attendance Awards

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Perfect attendance awards are a popular motivational tool used to encourage students to attend school. As schools begin planning their attendance strategies for this year, consider that these awards may not work!

Adverse Effects of Perfect Attendance Awards

Here is what research says about the pitfalls of perfect attendance awards:

- **They are exclusionary.** Some students are unable to participate, including those with chronic illness or other students whose life circumstances contribute to absences that are beyond their control (e.g., students in foster care with mandated court appointments or family visits, students experiencing homelessness with no access to transportation).
- **They encourage students to attend school when they are too ill.** This further exacerbates schoolwide illness and attendance decline.
- **They are not effective for most students,** especially in schools experiencing high rates of absenteeism.
- **Retrospective perfect attendance rewards, given for past attendance, can increase absenteeism.** This occurs because of a “demotivating effect” where a student believes when they attend more than their peers they have leeway for future absences.

Redefining What We Recognize as Success

It is crucial for students to recognize that [regular attendance](#) is key to developing the knowledge and skills necessary for future success. Equally important is helping students link this understanding to the behaviors and habits that will support their progress. In this sense, shifting our attention to what we celebrate, recognize and reward becomes paramount. Here are four tactical strategies to do that:

- **Celebrate real-time achievements** that reflect perseverance and resilience *such as good or improved attendance*. Give a high-five or tuck a personalized note in a backpack. Hop on the intercom and give a shout out or make a quick phone call home to share positive feedback.
- **Consider the efforts of caregivers** and spend time communicating gratitude for their partnership and communication in supporting their student’s academic journey.
- **Recognize and reward moments** when students ask for help, overcome challenges, and actively engage in their learning. Become bold leaders and share examples of experiencing struggles and overcoming adversity.



- **Focus on what we know drives success.** Strong peer connections enhance emotional well-being, while meaningful teacher-student relationships drive academic success. Consider opportunities to increase connections and relationship building, schoolwide. Then celebrate those connections!

Authentic, immediate recognition is more impactful than a distant award ceremony.

In all cases, it is most effective to spend time and efforts strategizing as a team and analyzing data. This approach helps identify the common barriers that are causing absenteeism, allowing the school to address these issues with targeted solutions.

We must reevaluate our approach to student motivation with Perfect Attendance awards, instead focusing on meaningful recognition of students' and families' efforts. This requires assessing our current strategies and exploring more effective ways to celebrate achievement.

To learn more about effective strategies attendance incentives, [check out this resource](#) from Attendance Works.

References

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