Didn't you do well?

SHOULD WE REALLY BE GIVING STUDENTS PRIZES TO ACKNOWLEDGE ANYTHING FROM ATTENDANCE TO ATTAINMENT? ANGELA YOUNGMAN INVESTIGATES THE RISE OF THE REWARD CULTURE IN SCHOOLS...

Giving praise and some kind of reward for doing well has always been an integral part of the teaching process. Traditionally, rewards were a matter of merit points or commendations for good work. More recently these systems have been widened out to cover other activities such as extra curricular involvement, participation in projects, recognition of the effort put into a specific piece of work, obeying the rules, attendance, improving grades, even for healthy eating. In return, pupils are able to earn tangible rewards which may be in the form of vouchers, exclusive outings, special privileges such as skipping the queue at lunchtime or having extra time in the games room.
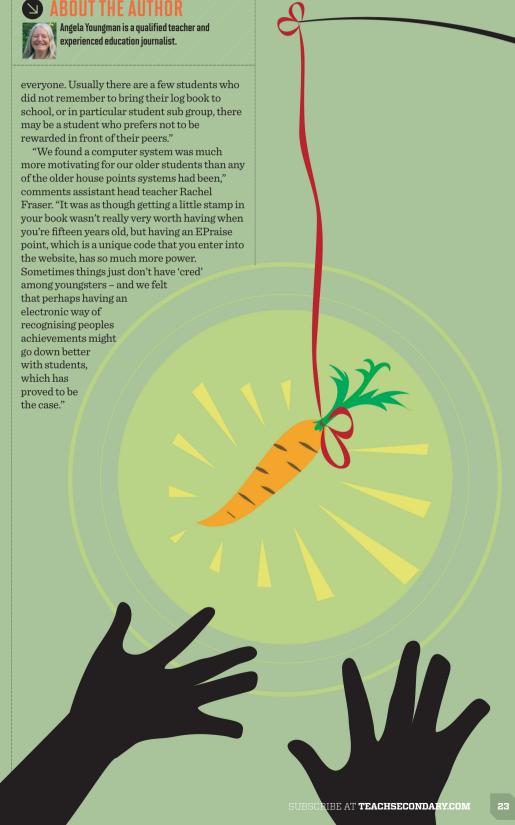
There is a range of different systems in existence. Many schools have their own individual version; others tap into organisations such as VivoPoints, EP Praise, Pupil Reward and Carrot points. Increasingly, reward systems are are computerised and linked to internet systems. This means that teachers can award points online and the customised pages belonging to pupils are immediately adjusted. The points can then be accessed to obtain items from a special online shop.

Cash rewards are now rarely given as these are regarded as being too controversial. They can make a pupil vulnerable to thieves or bullying; and it may be that the money is used to buy items for which the school does not approve. Vouchers (perhaps for the cinema or a leisure centre) and privileges are regarded as much better value, as they allow some form of control by the school.

The success of a reward system depends very much on its ease of use by staff and pupils and its credibility with pupils, as well as the ultimate rewards on offer.

Teachers need a simple system, which can be easily accessed and the awards provided. If he or she has to constantly record the level of awards, the whole business can become prohibitively time consuming. Individual log books can be lost or forgotten, and it can also be easy to overlook the average student – as Tim Ballard (now director of Reward Points) commented on looking back over his years as a secondary school teacher.

"Average kids are missed out when teachers use a traditional rewards system because it is logistically very difficult," he observes. "Try asking every child to take out their log book, then go around the classroom stamping or signing each one while you are delivering a lesson, managing behaviour and differentiating at the same time. With a large class in a lesson that is only 60 minutes long, or less, you may not get to

↘ **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Angela Youngman is a qualified teacher and experienced education journalist.

everyone. Usually there are a few students who did not remember to bring their log book to school, or in particular student sub group, there may be a student who prefers not to be rewarded in front of their peers."

"We found a computer system was much more motivating for our older students than any of the older house points systems had been," comments assistant head teacher Rachel Fraser. "It was as though getting a little stamp in your book wasn't really very worth having when you're fifteen years old, but having an EPraise point, which is a unique code that you enter into the website, has so much more power. Sometimes things just don't have 'cred' among youngsters – and we felt that perhaps having an electronic way of recognising peoples achievements might go down better with students, which has proved to be the case."

Careful monitoring of reward systems is essential to ensure that no one is left out. It can be all too easy to concentrate on high achievers and disengaged pupils. This is usually overcome by providing staff with a limited number of points that can be assigned each week, and having a clear list of reasons why a point is awarded. A common practice is to have a list of pre-set reasons for awarding points, with set values for each reason. This ensures that both staff and pupils are aware as to why a point is being awarded, and that delivery of the points system is uniform throughout the school.

Sue Rogers, head teacher of Rivermead school comments, " In order to ensure that the system is used by all of our staff, and that we do not neglect groups of learners within the school, we monitor its use and discuss patterns. This enables us to review our practice and create conditions in which all our young people can thrive and feel valued. It helps them by praising and providing positive reinforcement of good behaviour and effort."

High value rewards such as a special trip out to a bowling rink or outdoor events centre should require considerable effort on the part of students to achieve sufficient points. If such a reward is too easy to acquire, then it risks being devalued. Rewards in the shape of special privileges, vouchers for sports activities, or being able to save up points to exchange for equipment and gifts tend to be valued by students of all ages. Such schemes tend to get results. But is there a down side?

"The question is how students are motivated," points out Alfie Kohn, author of *Punished by Rewards*. "It's the type of motivation that matters, not the amount. Psychologists distinguish between intrinsic motivation, in which the learning itself is seen as meaningful, and extrinsic motivation, in which the learning becomes just a means to an end. That end could be money, grades, stickers or any other incentive. More than 75 studies have shown that extrinsic and intrinsic motivation aren't just different, they tend to be inversely related. Rewards cannot help kids become more effective or enthusiastic learners. Rewards can produce only one thing – temporary obedience."

Reward systems clearly have to be used with care. Properly administered, and with rewards that are

valued by the pupils, reward systems can reinforce good behaviour, attendance and work. They should always be regarded as just one part of the overall mix when looking at behavioural and motivational requirement, nonetheless, most educators tend to agree that there is still a place for praise and recognition of individual effort. The award system acts as a reinforcement of such praise.

"We take the view that 'catching our learners doing things right' not only motivates the young person being praised to repeat the behaviour, but also encourages others to do the same," observes Sue Rogers. "A formalised rewards system is one of many ways of ensuring that success is recognised publicly. Reward stickers act as concrete reinforcement of the praise, along with the small token that learners are able to 'purchase' with their accumulated stickers."

Of course, one part of what schools are doing is preparing young people to enter the world of work. And the harsh truth is that this is not a world in which praise for personal achievement, still less simply doing what is required of one by an employer, is always automatically forthcoming. Could it be that reward systems in school are setting students up for some kind of a fall? Not necessarily, advises Dr Robert Stratford of the University of Southampton Psychology department. "Reward systems in schools help pupils develop self regulation, albeit with temporary and sometimes artificial props which are carefully reduced in strength and eventually withdrawn," he points out. "Such self-regulation will generalise into the work setting. Schools need to develop employability. If 'artificial' rewards help this process, then their use is justified – but not if they convey a view that a job is only there to pay well."

"There is a research base in occupational psychology, which explores the work context to find what it is that people work for," he continues. "Pay does not rate highly above a certain level, but elements of autonomy and feedback are important. Both of these can be exemplified in school, providing the school's learning aims are clear, and consistent teacher behaviour provide good models and feedback."