

become a reward for what we are trying to hinder?

5. Do we find increasing numbers of children who circumvent the rules, causing us to create new rules? Do we find ourselves increasing the level of punishment or reward each time we employ the program? Are parents complaining about how the program hurts or upsets their children? Do we find children using this program as a way to bully other children?

These are indicators that an extrinsic program is doing more harm than good.

Remember the “fruit” you are looking for is found in students who love to learn, learn at their potential, and look for ways to use their learning to serve their Savior.



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School Ministry, LEA, and Children’s Ministry commit to work together, to support each other’s ministry, and to collaboratively seek to meet the needs of children, workers, schools, and congregations in the process of Lutheran education. Through this partnership we agree to meet regularly, to hold each other accountable, and to focus our energies and projects on the needs of Lutheran education.

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Professionally Speaking

Topics for Terrific Teachers
in Lutheran Schools

Motivation, Incentives, and
Competition

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Motivation, Incentives, and Competition

I have to go back to my student teaching days to remember my first use of a teaching practice that involved competition/incentives. Due to my third graders' sluggishness to open their math books to the correct page, I boldly warned that the last person to find the page would get kissed by the student teacher. Imagine my anxiety when a young man in the back row loudly announced that he just couldn't find the page! Suffice it to say, no one got kissed, but I learned to think ahead to possible consequences of incentive programs.

Our society is competitive. We value winning and winners. We work on a system of rewards and punishments. A competitive spirit may be the best way to win a game, invent the next computer tool, or rehabilitate a criminal, but is it the best way to help children learn? Competition in the classroom may work to help them *perform*, but it rarely works to help them *learn*.

A big part of learning involves motivating children. We do children a disservice if we teach them to read, but in doing so, leave them with an aversion to reading. To be motivated, children need to understand why they are learning something, how they will use it, and to find the process personally enjoyable. The best motivation to practice is intrinsic motivation. Children who are intrinsically motivated will do so even if the teacher has not made an assignment. The children find their own personal reward for learning.

Extrinsic motivation comes from outside the student. It takes two forms: negative and positive. The familiar examples are time-outs and incentive programs that reward students for desirable behaviors. Extrinsic motivation is pervasive in our class-

rooms. Everything from discipline to reading incentive programs to grades are designed to motivate students. Extrinsic motivation is easy to use, familiar, and typically quite successful in the short run. It has its downside, however; extrinsic motivation is hard to sustain. Both rewards and punishments lose their effectiveness over time. Additionally, extrinsic motivation can harm a child's intrinsic motivation.

Research on reading incentive programs that reward children has shown that before a program is put into place children read more books on their own than when the program is concluded. In other words, students may have read more during the program but the long-term effects left them reading less. Extrinsic motivation has its place in our classrooms, especially in areas where intrinsic motivation is difficult to find. However, we should take care that it does not become an easy fix, that we do what we can to ameliorate the long term affects, and that we look for methods to foster intrinsic motivation whenever possible.

The Bible reports many examples of competition, motivation, and consequences. From competition between Jacob and Esau to the repentance-inspiring horrors inflicted upon the world in Revelation, the stories of God's people read as a list of competitive, incentive-based practices. God's Law, what He rightfully expects of us, is extrinsic motivation. God's Grace, what He does for us, is what, along with the faith nurtured by the Holy Spirit, intrinsically motivates us. Luther warns us to be leery of confusing the two or abusing the use of one at the expense of the other.

Discipline procedures in the classroom need to properly use both Law and Gospel. Rules and consequences are an appropriate part of discipline. Remember, however, that positive

consequences (e.g., extra recess, stickers, etc.) are still law. Children are simply being rewarded for what you expect of them instead of being punished for failing. Good discipline requires the grace found in forgiveness and mercy and a reminder that God stands ready to help you and your children make needed behavioral changes.

Learning also requires both Law and Gospel. Grades, conferences, and portfolio assessments are examples of good extrinsic motivation. These motivators inform students and parents about progress and motivate students to work hard. Intrinsic motivation requires teachers to show students the benefits of learning, make learning a positive experience, and take the time to discover the best way to teach each skill and each child.

How do we know when extrinsic motivation techniques are no longer helping? The Bible encourages us to evaluate by looking at the fruits. As a faculty, evaluate programs by asking the following questions:

1. Is there a way to do without extrinsic motivation in specific cases? What has been tried, and are there alternatives that would support intrinsic motivation?
2. Are short term and long-term effects positive? Do we have a way to measure?
3. What about children who fail in a competitive/incentive based program? Do we have alternatives for their learning? What are the consequences to their emotional health?
4. What about children who seem motivated to fail? Has negative attention