

# Measuring Quality of Year 3 CFS Implementation

## Elements of High Quality Incentive-Based Strategies

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Student motivation is a central tenet of the Connecting for Success (CFS) program: when students are motivated to engage in learning, they are more likely to improve their attendance, and ultimately their academic performance. To promote school connectedness, many of the CFS schools have adopted incentive-based strategies. The use and effectiveness of incentives to drive student motivation is a topic of ongoing debate, with many complexities that researchers and educators are still sorting out. Those opposed to using incentives are concerned that student incentives promote extrinsic motivation (the desire to do something for a tangible reward) and undermine intrinsic motivation (the desire to do something for personal satisfaction or accomplishment: for the love of learning). Yet there is growing evidence that reward programs can have positive effects on student motivation, particularly among struggling students who are disengaged from school who – by definition – have no intrinsic motivation. For these students, the power of incentives is that they can provide a pathway to see the value of the desired behavior/action, such as strong attendance. Researchers on student motivation have found that external rewards, when administered appropriately, can induce interest or participation in something that the person previously had no interest (or intrinsic motivation) to pursue.<sup>1</sup>

As more studies explore the effectiveness of incentives in education and the importance of motivation in a students' school experience, best practices have begun to emerge. Research shows that incentive strategies are *most* likely to be effective when they **address all four dimensions of motivation**:<sup>2</sup>

- **Competence:** The student believes he/she has the ability to complete the task.
- **Control/autonomy:** The student feels in control by seeing a direct link between his/her actions and an outcome, and retains autonomy by having some choice about whether or how to undertake the task.
- **Interest/value:** The student has some interest in the task or sees the value of completing it.
- **Relatedness:** Completing the task brings the student social rewards, such as a sense of belonging to a classroom or other desired social group or approval from a person of social importance to the student.

Additionally, research (which is supported by the current evaluation of CFS) shows that incentive-based strategies are most effective when there is a high level of support from the school administration, when staff incorporate student input when designing the incentives, and when staff maintain the integrity of the incentive system amid modifications to the design over time.

The following summary provides more detail on each of these dimensions, including definitions of the individual elements that make up each dimension.

### Control/Autonomy: Can I control it?

- **Within student control:** Incentive systems are most effective when they are designed to reward behaviors that a student sees as within their control. A student is more motivated to complete highly specific actions that feel within their control, such as completing homework or attending class, than to

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<sup>1</sup> Myers, D.G. (2010). *Psychology: Eighth Edition in Modules*. New York: Worth Publishers.

<sup>2</sup> Usher, A. & Kober, N. (2012). *Student Motivation: An Overlooked piece of School Reform. Summary*. Center on Education Policy.

attain more diffuse goals that might feel beyond their reach, such as earning high course marks or other performance-based tasks.<sup>3</sup>

- **Prompt rewards:** Students are better able to see link between their behavior/action and the reward when staff distribute these rewards promptly after the student has exhibited the behavior or completed the task. A high-quality incentive strategy, then, entails the regular assessment of student behavior/actions (at least quarterly) and reward-distribution shortly following assessment.

## Competence: Am I capable?

- **Support a growth and mastery mindset:** A growth mindset is the belief in one's ability to improve over time, as opposed to the belief that one's ability is fixed at birth. Supporting a growth mindset means rewarding growth and effort, and helping students to see how they might grow their skills to master a task. Research shows that, with a growth mindset, with a growth mindset, students authentically believe they can develop their abilities through dedication and hard work – and this belief helps to generate internal motivation.<sup>4</sup> Strategies supporting this mindset have a much stronger motivational effect than those designed to reward a predefined level of performance.
- **Clear guidelines:** Clearly communicated guidelines help to support students' belief that they can complete a task – a belief that increases motivation to continue the behaviors that will get them to task completion. Students should be clear about the expectations and consequences of their behavior – how their progress is assessed and the rewards they will earn as a result. Ideally, there are multiple opportunities throughout the school year for staff to inform students (and parents and teachers) about the details of the incentive program: all groups should have an opportunity to ask questions and check for understanding.
- **Tiered point system:** A tiered system is where students complete different tasks to earn different rewards (e.g. perfect attendance for one week earns a small prize, for one month earns a larger prize, and for the whole quarter earns an even greater prize). A tiered structure recognizes different levels of ability, allowing all students an opportunity to be rewarded for their efforts. Having defined tiers also promotes a growth mindset because it provides students with a clear path toward an ultimate goal, and the interim goals they need to achieve in order to get there.

## Interest/Value: Is it worth the effort?

- **Reinforced value:** Students need regular reinforcement to help them see the value of the target behaviors and actions. Staff implementing the incentive strategy should engage teachers and parents in the process, working with them to reinforce the target behaviors in the classroom and at home. These partnerships are important for cultivating an environment that develops and supports students' motivation for learning.

## Relatedness: What do others think?

- **Social rewards:** Social rewards, such as a sense of belonging or approval from a person of social importance to the student, are powerful motivators. It is a universal tendency to internalize the values and practices of those we hold in high esteem and to whom we want to be connected. When students feel that their teachers or other highly regarded school staff value and believe in them, they are more

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example: Gneezy, U., Meier, S., & Rey-Biel, P. (2011). When and why incentives (don't) work to modify behavior. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 25(4), 191-210.

<sup>4</sup> Dweck, C. (2010). Mind-Sets and Equitable Education. *Principal Leadership*, 10(5), 26-29.

likely to be intrinsically motivated and willing to engage in school.<sup>5</sup> Staff should go beyond material rewards to include social rewards in their suite of incentives.

## Additional Elements of High Quality Incentive-Based Strategies

- **School-level support:** Administration and other school staff understand the incentive strategy and actively support it. Administrator support is particularly important as it ensures that program staff can dedicate time and resources to setting up systems for assessing student behaviors and distributing rewards.
- **Student-driven design:** Staff should be mindful of their student population when selecting incentives, including student age and what motivates them. Direct input from students can help to ensure that incentives are designed with students in mind.
- **Maintain integrity:** In maintaining the integrity of any program model, adaptations are often necessary to ensure the program will be appropriate and effective for the target population. However, some adaptations may be risky or seen as unacceptable because they may reduce or eliminate the positive effects of the program.<sup>6</sup> Given that adaptations are necessary, they should be designed to keep the integrity of the system: staff must maintain trust and expectations with students (the rules in place, what students need to do to earn the reward), and ensure that the system keeps students motivated to complete the desired behavior/action. For example, a school may choose to add a lower-level goal (e.g. earning points for no behavior referrals for a week as opposed to all quarter) in order to motivate those students struggling to earn the quarterly reward. This adaptation does not break the trust with those students striving for the quarterly goal, since they are also eligible to earn the weekly reward, and yet it offers more opportunities to motivate all students.

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The elements outlined above form the basis of the *Connecting for Success Student Incentive Quality Measurement Tool*. The quality measurement tool assesses the extent to which a school's implementation of incentive-based strategies incorporates these critical dimensions, and also addresses the additional elements of quality. This tool can help schools and the Hawai'i Community Foundation monitor implementation of best practices, and identify areas to strengthen quality and further maximize impact for students.

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<sup>5</sup> Niemiec, C. & Ryan, R. (2009). Autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the classroom: applying self-determination theory to educational practice. *Theory and Research in Education*, 7(2), 133-144.

<sup>6</sup> O'Connor, C., Small, S., & Cooney, S. (2007). Program Fidelity and Adaptation: Meeting local needs without compromising program effectiveness, *What Works, Wisconsin- Research to Practice Series* (4).