

# Practitioner Insights Research-to-Results

Child TRENDS.

*...ideas for program designers and practitioners on the types and uses of incentives in out-of-school time programs...*

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## USING INCENTIVES TO INCREASE PARTICIPATION IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS

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### BACKGROUND

Research suggests that incentives can motivate children and teens to become interested in activities that they might not have been interested in initially,<sup>1,2</sup> and that incentives can also motivate them to continue their involvement in these activities.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, using incentives can help motivate children and teens to attend and remain involved in out-of-school time programs.<sup>4</sup> This motivation is especially important in light of the growing body of evidence showing the benefits of regular participation in out-of-school programs for children and youth.<sup>5</sup> Some research has suggested that external rewards (such as incentives) can decrease children and teens' intrinsic motivation,<sup>6</sup> interest,<sup>7</sup> and creativity;<sup>8</sup> however, effects have typically been reported for children and youth already motivated to participate in a particular activity.<sup>9</sup> This brief discusses the usefulness of out-of-school time program incentives and highlights several types of incentives that programs may want to consider.

### WHAT ARE INCENTIVES?

Incentives are tangible or intangible rewards used to motivate a person or group to behave in a certain way; for example, motivating children to increase their work effort and overall performance in school.<sup>10</sup> For the purposes of this research brief, incentives for out-of-school time programs are defined as follows:

**Incentives** are the various methods used to motivate and/or reward children and youth to participate in out-of-school time programs.<sup>11</sup> Incentives may be in the form of activities (such as special field trips, food, or recreation) or in the form of rewards (such as gift certificates).

### WHY SHOULD OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS USE INCENTIVES?

Research suggests that regular participation in out-of-school time programs can benefit children and youth in many ways. Out-of-school time program participation can spur higher academic achievement,<sup>12</sup> improve school attendance<sup>13</sup> and student behavior,<sup>14</sup> and increase effort in and enjoyment of school,<sup>15</sup> and it may deter youth from delinquency.<sup>16</sup> But such benefits cannot be obtained if children and youth do not attend programs, or do not attend them regularly.<sup>17</sup> With so many activities competing for pre-teens' and teens' attention (e.g., jobs, school sports, and even risky lures, such as gang involvement), it is sometimes difficult to recruit young people to participate in out-of-school time programs.<sup>18</sup> Incentives offer one way to boost this participation. In particular:

- **Incentives may promote program attendance.** Incentives can motivate youth to attend out-of-school time programs. Financial incentives, in particular, have been found to motivate older youth to attend after-school activities.<sup>19</sup> Research shows positive associations between program attendance and program offerings that can be used as incentives, such as special art projects and recreational and academic activities.<sup>20</sup>
- **Incentives may promote a sense of belonging to a program.** Research has found that program activities that can also be used as incentives—such as special leadership opportunities, career-development field trips, and service projects—can instill in participants a sense of belonging to a

program.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, research suggests that participants continue to be involved in a program when they experience a sense of belonging to a group or activity.<sup>22</sup>

- **Incentives may spur academic achievement.** Incentives may also strengthen participants' commitment to learning.<sup>23</sup> The increased program attendance that incentives inspire can provide youth with additional academic support and the personal adult attention that research shows can improve students' academic performance.<sup>24</sup>

## WHAT TYPES OF INCENTIVES CAN BE USED IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS?

Some incentives may work for almost all children and youth, but the value of other incentives will vary by participants' age, interests, and family characteristics.<sup>25</sup>

### INCENTIVES FOR ALL AGE GROUPS

Incentives that have been found to be effective *across* age groups include:

- **Financial Incentives.** Experimental research suggests that monetary incentives promote program participation,<sup>26</sup> especially for teens.<sup>27</sup> For example, youth participants in the National Mentoring Partnership, Inc., ranked financial incentives among the top aspects of the program.<sup>28</sup> Monetary incentives can include cash, gift certificates, school-store coupons, and stipends.<sup>29</sup>
- **Food.** Offering food can be a motivating factor in drawing and retaining out-of-school time program participants of all ages.<sup>30</sup> Some programs use food as a recruitment technique, inviting interested participants to a picnic or a pizza party at the start of the school year.<sup>31</sup>
- **Prizes.** Prizes can serve as an effective motivator for youth of all age groups, but the age and interests of participants must be considered when deciding on the appropriate prize.<sup>32</sup> Small toys, food, decorative pencils or pens, T-shirts, and tickets to high school athletic events can be effective incentives for younger children.<sup>33</sup> Some programs also hand out passes for every day that the child attends. Those passes can later be exchanged for prizes that are linked to the child's frequency of attendance.<sup>34</sup> For older participants, programs can use tickets to sports events and raffle prizes (e.g., iPods, school-spirit related apparel, and gift certificates).<sup>35</sup>
- **Special Field Trips.** Even though field trips may be a regular feature of out-of-school time programs, reserving special field trips for participants with high attendance can serve a dual purpose—to reward these participants for their outstanding attendance record and to encourage other participants to attend programs more frequently. Trips to children's museums, zoos, and planetariums have worked well for younger children.<sup>36</sup> Non-academic field trips<sup>37</sup> (e.g., to skating rinks, bowling alleys, and the movies) have been found to motivate older children.

### INCENTIVES FOR DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS

- **Incentives for young children:** Incentives that have been found effective in engaging young children in out-of-school time programs include special performing arts activities, computer or sit-down game time, and small tokens (toys, food, pencils, etc).<sup>38</sup>
- **Incentives for middle school children:** Incentives that have been found to work with middle school children include special enrichment activities, computer time (e.g., Web design), extended sports or game time, and TV/movie watching.<sup>39</sup>
- **Incentives for high school youth:** Older youth have multiple activities competing for their out-of-school time, including after-school jobs and extracurricular activities.<sup>40</sup> The following incentives have been found to attract and retain older youth: leadership opportunities (e.g., planning activities), internships and other job preparation activities, and financial incentives.<sup>41</sup>
- **Incentives for families:** While it is important to motivate youth to sign up for a program and continue to attend, it is also important to engage participants' families, especially in the case of

immigrant youth from cultures that put a high value on family closeness.<sup>42</sup> Some family-friendly incentives might include offering participants' families sewing or arts and crafts programs, English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) classes, and access to program facilities (e.g., the computer lab or space for family gatherings).<sup>43</sup>

#### FOUR TIPS FOR CHOOSING AND USING INCENTIVES

It is not enough to identify appropriate incentives for your program. It is also necessary to identify *how* incentives can be obtained and used to be most meaningful for your program's participants. The following tips may be useful in these regards.

**Tip 1: Ask program participants for ideas about incentives.** Asking about or observing participants' interests can help identify what incentives would be most desired by program participants, and might be more likely to have an influence on them.

**Tip 2: Introduce incentives immediately after goals are reached.** Provide participants with the incentive immediately after the set goal is reached, so they can draw a correlation between the desired behavior and the reward.<sup>44</sup> Also, limit the time set aside for an incentive (such as a pizza party from 6-8 p.m., or 15 minutes of special computer time). This strategy preserves the incentive's value and enables participants to easily connect the incentive with achievement of the outlined goal.<sup>45</sup>

**Tip 3: Gain community support.** Community partnerships can help provide incentives by contributing funds or providing special opportunities, such as allowing older youth to shadow a community leader who will act as a mentor, or sponsoring on-the-job training or special field trips. Possible community partners might include local businesses, museums, colleges, or social service agencies.<sup>46</sup>

- Match incentives that are on your program's "wish list" with community supporters who can supply these incentives.<sup>47</sup> For example, if your program seeks gift cards as a priority for attracting older youth, then it would be a good idea to explore local banks, movie theatres, or stores as potential sources of support.
- Use the phone book, community members, or the Internet to identify businesses, organizations, or other potential sources that might be able to provide or fund incentives. Libraries, schools, and universities often have Web sites with links to resource opportunities.<sup>48</sup>
- Community organizations and businesses that believe in the mission of your program are more likely to support your program over several years. If potential funders are unfamiliar with your organization, be sure to introduce them to your program's mission, successes, and future plans.

**Tip 4: Use incentives sparingly.** Research suggests that if incentives are used too often, program participants may begin to rely on incentives alone as the motivation for attending.<sup>49</sup> Thus, it is important to use incentives primarily to pique children and youth's interest in program participation.<sup>50</sup> Then, incentive use should diminish (or be eliminated) as participants' intrinsic enjoyment of program components (e.g., skill-building, activities of interest, leadership opportunities, and supportive adult program leadership) retains their interest and involvement.<sup>51, 52, 53</sup>

#### REMEMBER THE 4 TIPS FOR CHOOSING AND OBTAINING INCENTIVES

- 1: Ask program participants for ideas about incentives.
- 2: Introduce incentives immediately after goals are reached.
- 3: Gain community support.
- 4: Use incentives sparingly.

## CONCLUSION

The many benefits of out-of-school time programs cannot be attained without participation.<sup>54</sup> Using incentives can help attract and retain children and youth by promoting program attendance and making young people feel invested in programs. To identify and use incentives, programs need to consider participants' ages, program needs, and potential supporters, and create a strategy to obtain support. However, while program incentives can indeed encourage program participation and help maximize program benefits, research suggests incentives should not be used excessively.

## RESOURCES FOR YOUR PROGRAM

School administrators, teachers, and participants themselves are among the most useful resources for information on out-of-school time program incentives and activities.<sup>55</sup> The following is a list of printed resources:

- *Rethinking Programs for Youth in the Middle Years: New Directions for Youth Development*, No. 112 (2007); Dale A. Blyth and Joyce A. Walker, editors. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, CA.
- *Fun Literacy Activities for After-School Programs: Books and Beyond* (2004). Sue Edwards and Kathleen Martinez, authors. Nashville: School Age Notes.
- *School Age Ideas and Activities for After-School Programs* (2005). Karen Haas-Foletta, Michele Cogley, and Lori Ottolini-Geno, authors. Nashville: School Age Notes.
- *Youth Participation: Improving Institutions and Communities: New Directions for Youth Development*, No. 96. (2003). Benjamin Kirshner, Jennifer L. O'Donoghue, and Milbrey W. McLaughlin, editors. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, CA.

Online resources include:

- **The Council on Foundations** offers a database for identifying potential sources of funding for incentives. The database, which lists these sources by state, can be found at: <http://www.cof.org/Locator/>.
- **After-School Snack Program** offers cash reimbursement to schools and out-of-school time programs that serve children after-school snacks. For information on how to apply for reimbursements, which programs qualify, and the type of snacks required, see: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Afterschool/default.htm>.
- **The After-School Corporation** is a nonprofit organization working to improve the quality, availability, and continued success of after-school programs in New York and across the nation. The organization's Web site provides information on staff training, publications, and funding that can be used to provide and enhance program incentives; available at: <http://www.tascorp.org/>.
- **National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST)** is a clearinghouse for effective out-of-school time program practices. The NIOST Web site features publications on building community partnerships and engaging program activities, and it spotlights programs that effectively engage youth: <http://www.niost.org/>.
- **Harvard Family Research Project** conducts research on out-of-school time programming in an effort to improve program practices and policies. The project's research briefs discuss how to increase program attendance and engage adolescents, as well as strategies for attracting and retaining out-of-school time program participants. These briefs are available at: <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/pubs/publist.html>. One of the project's particularly helpful publications is *Moving Beyond the Barriers: Attracting and Sustaining Youth Participation in Out-of-School Programs* (2004) by Sherri Lauver, Priscilla Little, M.D., and Heather Weiss. Available at: <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/issuebrief6.html>
- **Afterschool Alliance** is a nonprofit organization that advocates for quality and affordable after-school programming for all children. It shares examples of engaging young people in out-of-school time programs, as well as potential funding resources: [http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/funding\\_main.cfm](http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/funding_main.cfm).

## **IN THE SPOTLIGHT**

**Program:** Latin American Youth Center

**Locations:** Washington, D.C., Silver Spring, MD, Langley Park, MD, and Riverdale, MD

In this interview, Isaac Castillo, the Latin American Youth Center's Learning and Evaluation Director, describes the organization's use of incentives to promote the participation and retention of young people in the center's activities.

***What is the Latin American Youth Center?*** The Latin American Youth Center (LAYC) offers social services, education, work skills, advocacy, and a residential program for adolescent males in the District of Columbia's Child and Family Services system.<sup>56</sup> LAYC's goals are to help youth attain academic success, obtain postsecondary education or employment, and acquire and practice healthy behaviors.<sup>57</sup> The mission of the program is to support the desires of young people and their families to "live, work, and study with dignity, hope, and joy."<sup>58</sup> The center was founded in the late 1960s to address the absence of services available to the Latino community. Annually, LAYC serves 4,000 low-income immigrant and minority children, teens, young adults, and their families.

***How are youth recruited and retained?*** Recruitment varies across programs. However, the majority of participants are recruited by word-of-mouth. About one-fourth of participants are referred from other organizations, schools, or the criminal justice system. Other participants are either walk-ins or attracted by center advertisements and fliers. Retention is often not a problem due to attractive programming (i.e., academic services) and other incentives.

***What incentives does the program use for youth?*** LAYC has found that academic services serve as their own reward. Younger children are especially more likely to participate in activities without incentives. But older youth typically require incentives to encourage them to participate. Incentives that have proven helpful in attracting the participation of older youth include:

- Movie tickets
- Foot Locker gift cards
- Pre-paid American Express® cards
- Cash (i.e., \$3 and \$5 for every workshop attended)
- Food

***When is the use of incentives helpful?*** Whereas children and youth of all ages appreciate receiving incentives, they are often more necessary for attracting at-risk older adolescents (i.e., those between the ages of 16 and 24). A variety of factors compete for the attention of this age group (e.g., money-making opportunities and illegal activities), and older adolescents are more calculating in how they spend their time.

***Do incentives differ across age groups?*** Different types of incentives work across different age groups.

- Younger children are more willing to accept less expensive incentives, such as T-shirts and small toys.
- Older youth are more interested in financial incentives, such as payments for attendance or gift certificates.

***Is parental consent obtained before offering incentives?*** Whether permission is needed depends on the type of incentive. Also, some program incentives are offered to youth above the age of 18 or to those who have little contact with their parents (i.e., homeless youth or runaways). For research-related focus groups, parental consent is always obtained before participant incentives are disbursed.

***Are parents offered incentives?*** Yes, parents are also offered rewards for meeting certain attendance criteria or for participating in research-related activities. Rewards are helpful in ensuring long-term program attendance, getting better returns on research projects, and communicating LAYC's appreciation of parents' time spent at programs. Gift certificates to grocery or drug stores have worked best because parents can use them to buy groceries or medicine for their families.

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