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I Prefer to Count on Success:

A Summer Reading Program that Supports Lifelong Reading

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Just over a decade ago, I began questioning how librarians measure summer reading success. Was it by children who signed up? Children who finished? It seemed like many libraries measured success by finishers, but when I looked closely at those numbers (25–40 percent), they signaled failure to me. A hallmark of many summer reading programs is a free book for finishers preceded by smaller prize incentives along the way. Clearly, the possibility of a single book was not enough to sustain interest in the program. Perhaps our greatest goal as librarians is to create lifelong readers. I wanted to find a way to promote that goal through the Summer Reading program.

I started looking into research on incentives for doing something (practicing piano, reading, chores) and read a lot about intrinsic versus

extrinsic rewards. Intrinsic rewards are the intangibles that we feel when we do something we like or enjoy. Extrinsic rewards are what others give us for that success. As a young piano student, I was given a lot of extrinsic rewards. Practice an hour, get a sticker. When you have ten stickers, you get another gift. I no longer play piano. I had to attend Vacation Bible School each summer. For every Bible verse we learned, we were given tokens to use at the store to buy prizes. I am an atheist. To the best of my recollection, I was not given rewards for reading (no summer reading programs in small town Montana in the 1980s). Yet I can't not read (yes double negative) every day. Can't. Won't. It is one of the greatest pleasures in my life. Sharing books with others, especially children, is another great joy.

In the early 1970s, psychologists studied the effect of rewards on people's motivation. They discovered that people including children, who were not already motivated to do the activity did perform the desired activity, but, as one might suspect, only as long as the reward was offered.¹ Interestingly, they also discovered two negative effects. In one study, David Greene and Mark Lepper learned that

Children who expected and received a reward for engaging the target activity [drawing with highly-prized magic markers] showed significantly less subsequent intrinsic interest in the drawing activity than did children who had engaged in the activity without expectation of an extrinsic reward; and, although children expecting a reward tended to draw more pictures during the experimental session than children not expecting reward, these pictures were judged significantly lower in overall quality (Greene and Lepper, 1974).

In 2001, pioneering motivation researcher Richard Deci and his colleagues summed up decades of research on the effects of rewards on children's behavior and intrinsic motivation: "Thirty years ago, the first studies appeared showing that tangible rewards given for doing an interesting activity undermine intrinsic motivation for the activity" (Deci, Ryan and Koestner, 2001). Further research in the intervening 25 years has reinforced this initial experimental result. Deci, Ryan and Koestner (2001) concluded "the use of rewards as a



motivational strategy is clearly a risky proposition, so we continue to argue for thinking about educational practices that will engage students' interest and support the development of their self-regulation."

To put this in summer reading terms, if the offer of books and other prizes is considered a sufficient reward for reading, it will damage actual readers' desire to read. Non-readers will potentially read for reward, but they will not read after the reward is received and the reading they do will not likely benefit them.

So, how was I to use our summer reading program to pass on that love of reading to children? By looking at research on intrinsic versus extrinsic rewards, I needed to figure out a way to move the library away from the extrinsic rewards and into intrinsic. What if we took all of the money we spent on incentives and used it on books given as a present at the start of the program? What would that look like? About ten years ago, this is what Eugene Public Library began to do and continues to this day. They give a book to every child and teen who signs up for Summer Reading! That's it. No prizes at the end, just genuine excitement when a child reports back that he or she loves reading and books. They interact with the children by asking what books they liked best or which series captured their imagination. The Friends of the Eugene Public Library are the financial backers of this program and are committed to continuing it.


I left Eugene almost seven years ago and came to Tualatin Public Library, part of the Washington County Cooperative Library Services (WCCLS). While the partnered libraries are not branches of the cooperative, they do participate in many programs together, including summer reading. County staff will typically ask local businesses for incentives like tickets to sporting events or food from a restaurant. How was I going to break free of the incentives and give out books at the beginning? I was committed to the program we had started in Eugene and wanted to try it in Tualatin. I began by educating staff about rewards and asked them to give it a shot for one summer. Not everyone at Tualatin was convinced at my "lunacy", but the staff was willing to try. It is now a favorite part of summer reading. Staff and volunteers love to give the gift of a book to children. When asked what they like about summer reading, it is the book at the beginning. The children are wowed that they get a book to keep for their very own and their joy creates good morale for staff and volunteers.

To pay for the change, we stopped buying other incentives and we spent our Ready to Read grant money on books for children. The Friends of the Tualatin Public Library also generously contribute to this program. One of their missions is to get books into the hands of children. What better way than through our Summer Reading program? I no longer dread summer reading, but look forward to it. I love to give books away and then see kids later in the summer and talk to them about what they are reading and how awesome it is!

WCCLS still gives out incentives for signing up and finishing and Tualatin participates in this part of the program. We don't make a big deal out of these incentives, but for kids and parents who want something for finishing, we have it. As far as I know no other WCCLS library gives out books at the beginning of summer reading.

I view our Summer Reading program as a success! Rather than failing with our abysmal finisher statistics, we are succeeding by getting a book in the hands of every child who signs up to participate in summer reading. What a success story it would be if other libraries followed suit, and we got books in the hands of all summer reading participants!



Of the many librarians I have discussed this program with, I have often heard, “But we couldn’t afford to give a book to every child.” Yet isn’t that what every child who signs up for summer reading is being promised? What if your library had 100 percent finishers? What would you do? Libraries that count on children not finishing are counting on failure. I prefer to count on success. Through book wholesalers, you can find very inexpensive books and give them to children. They might not be the latest, greatest title, but some child will remember that the library gave him/her a book as a kid and how much they loved that book! 

Works Cited

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Footnote

¹Richard Wiseman discusses this idea in his book, *The As If Principle*: “The message from the studies is clear: rewarding the behavior of schoolchildren, smokers and drivers encourages them to behave as though they don’t really want to read books, stop smoking or buckle up. As a result, the moment that the rewards are removed, the desired behavior runs the risk of grinding to a sudden halt, or worse, becomes even less frequent than before incentives were introduced” (Wiseman, 2013).

