

Motivating Middle School Students

By [Mary Blow](#) Post Date: April 5th, 2011 Scholastic Inc.

Introduction

It takes a special breed to teach middle school students. Teens and preteens thrive on drama, struggle with hormones, and explode with emotions. As if that isn't enough, this time of year we also have to contend with a spring fever epidemic. Many students shut down as snow banks thaw and the Canada geese return to the North Country. With ten weeks left in the school year and only one month before state tests, we cannot allow students to check out. So, how do we motivate our middle school students and keep them engaged in learning? **Celebrate their achievements and give them choice and voice.** This post describes some of the ways teachers celebrate student achievement at my school, and a video illustrates what one student chose to do when given voice and choice.

Overview

Middle school students are motivated by the feeling of having choices, of belonging, and of success. As students strive to be viewed as "mature," they welcome the opportunity to make their own choices. Running a dictatorship will get you nowhere fast. They need to know their voice is heard.

And as you probably already know, when it comes to motivating students, bribery doesn't work. Let's face it: They often have more disposable money than we do. So don't refinance your home to buy classroom rewards. Instead, think back to a time when your superintendent acknowledged your efforts, or the principal shared one of your success stories. Did it motivate you? All people, regardless of their age, appreciate praise and acknowledgement for their efforts. **Positive reinforcement goes a long way because the more successful students feel, the more effort they will put into succeeding.**

Got Caught Reading Wall

Dawn Sweredoski, our 6th grade reading teacher, posts pictures of students caught reading on the wall outside her classroom. They may be reading in the hallway, in bean bag chairs, at desks, or under desks. Inside each die-cut camera in the picture to the right is a picture of a student who was caught reading [Charlotte Award Books](#). Dawn is on the Charlotte Award Committee, which means she receives hundreds of books from publishers for evaluation. Our students read the books, evaluate them, and share their opinions on Dawn's [Read a Good Book Lately?](#) wiki. She also posts these pictures on the wiki's [2010 Charlotte Award Picture Gallery](#). Recently Dawn also added a poster of the article she wrote for the school newsletter describing Mix-It-Up Day. After reading the book [The Sandwich Swap](#) by Queen Rania Al Abdullah of Jordan, the students were encouraged to eat lunch with peers they did not normally associate with. This is a challenge for many tweens and teens as they have a tendency to form cliques. Surprisingly, they enjoyed leaving their comfort zones and making new friends, expanding their school family. **If students feel as though they belong, they will be more invested in succeeding in school.**

Math Students Measure Up

Matt Macaulay, our 6th grade math teacher, also celebrates his students' achievements. For instance, he created this hallway display, "How Do We Measure Up?" for a geometry unit measuring the area and perimeter of the classroom, desks, bulletin boards, etc. He took pictures of his students, inserted them into documents explaining what they were doing, and posted them on the wall. Because of the way his classroom is configured, he uses the wall space above the lockers to showcase student achievements. **Students are acknowledged for collaborating with peers, staying on task, and successfully achieving their goals.**

In addition to the hallway display, Matt wallpapers his classroom with student awards. Each time a student earns a 90% or higher on a quiz or test, he fills out a notepad award (similar to the ones pictured to the right) with the student's name, test title, and score. **Students are motivated by a desire to see their name posted on the wall, and they share a common quest: to completely wallpaper every inch of the wall by the end of the year.**

If you'd like to do this as well, Scholastic offers a variety of inexpensive notepads for all seasons and holidays. You can also make them using clip art or die-cuts.

Star Students

The "Star Students" wall is new this year. If I can find wall space, I claim it. This display is located in the school lobby outside the principal's office. Each year, my students work hard to get published and win writing contests. I created this wall to share their successes with the school community.

Grace, the girl reading upside down on the poster, wrote a book review that was published in the April/May 2011 edition of *Storyworks* magazine. Other students pictured won the local VFW Patriot's Pen Contest. Liam won the local Scripps Spelling Bee. Tonight, as I write this article, I just learned that nine more students are going to be added to the wall for winning the SUNY Potsdam Peace Poetry Contest. They will be published in a poetry calendar. It has been a good year, and we aren't finished yet. It is important to also acknowledge the intrinsic learners. We put a lot of effort into students who struggle. **The intrinsic learners need the praise even though they don't need a pat on the back to do their job.** Praise and acknowledgement feed the learner's soul.

Red Raider Wall

When I first saw my outside wall, pictured at right, I was worried because the wall is broken up with pillars. As you can see, we figured out a way to make it work for our Red Raider Wall. For this display, I used the Ellison machine to cut out the letters. The quote around the door is our motto, "Enter to Learn. Go Forth to Serve." The L with the bird is our Lowville Academy Red Raider logo, which we created by projecting the image onto the SMART Board and tracing it onto poster paper. This wall expresses the spirit of our school and celebrates the diverse areas in which our students excel: academics, friendships, technology, chorus, acting, sports, positive attitudes, etc. It is a place where every student can shine. This wall is popular: students gather to look at the pictures and read the comical captions. **Students honored on this wall demonstrate that they not only engage in classroom learning, but they are productive citizens in our school community.**

Showcasing Student Work

Showcasing student work is often viewed as an elementary school practice, but you are never too old to see your best work in the limelight. As soon as a student realizes their work is being presented or displayed, the quality of the work increases.

Each year for our [Children of the Holocaust](#) unit, I showcase student work as part of a memorial wall. This year, my students put their own spin on the project: They wanted to create a museum. So after they presented their projects to their peers, we used them to form a Holocaust memorial museum in my classroom. Their work will be on display through the month of April, which is Genocide and Human Rights Awareness Month.

Empowering them with voice and choice was highly motivating. One student, Hannah, even volunteered to stay after school and create a video, "Holocaust Memorial Museum," to send to the [Florida Holocaust Museum](#) as a thank-you gift for the [Teaching Trunks](#) they sent us. Look at the life skills Hannah demonstrates as she takes on her first position as the museum curator:

Got Caught Doing Good

In our middle school, we also have a grade 6–8 program, "Got Caught Doing Good," which encourages positive citizenship. Any staff member can fill out one of these mini certificates when a student is caught doing kind deeds. The good deed could be as simple as stopping to help a student who has dropped his or her books. We send the certificates to the office, and each morning they're read during morning announcements. Then they are given to the children to take home to their parents. **When students participate in their school community, they are more motivated to invest in their learning.**

Student of the Month

We have a unique award for our Students of the Month. Lowville Academy is home of the AMF manufacturing company that makes bowling pins. They generously donate three bowling pins each month, one for a Student of the Month in the 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. In order to win this highly sought after trophy, students must excel in academics, citizenship, and attitude and be good role models in the school community. Grade level teachers nominate students. Pictures are published in the school newsletter to **celebrate students' achievements throughout the community.**

Additional Resources

For more on how to motivate students see Carlton College Science Education Resource Center's [Motivating Students](#) page, and the Scholastic articles "[Keeping Stress Down and Motivation Up During Standardized Tests](#)" and "[9 Ways to Motivate Kids](#)."

Motivating students comes down to forming a connection with them. If they feel valued, they will be less likely to disappoint you. This connection is especially important in middle school as teacher control wanes and students strive to establish their own identities. We often tell our students that in the real world you have to do quality work, or you'd better be prepared to look for a new job. Do we teach them that in the real world they will also be rewarded for superior work? Celebrating student achievement is the easiest way to motivate student to invest in their own learning. It can't end at elementary school. They need to know that their efforts are important to their teachers and the community.