

Titan Way: Time to Reevaluate

Without question, we all appreciate the hours and hours (and thought and money and effort) that so many people have put into this program. We think it may have just lost its effectiveness over time for a few reasons:

1. It does little to nothing to address the achievement gap at our school, which is increasingly at the center of our school-wide goals and concerns.
2. Few teachers were ever invited to participate in the program and, thus, many feel it's an inappropriate imposition to force them to use it as a reward system in their classes, particularly when it opposes their learning philosophy.
3. Many teachers believe that the high grade itself serves as a sufficient reward for the hard work and diligence that went into earning it.
4. It has veered from its original purpose by rewarding students who are already (heavily) rewarded and by encouraging a kind of addictive, harmful behavior.
5. Contrary to the motto of the Titan Way program, it is actually promoting learned helplessness, dependency, and less effort or engagement in learning.
6. The original aim of Titan Way as a platform for character education has been reduced to prize packages. More importantly, the Be Strong program is available and in practice as a more effective, focused personal and community development tool.
7. Some students who receive the reward display ingratitude for the work and generosity done on their behalf and fail to see their prize as a reward.
8. The public display of rewarding students in the classroom disrupts cooperation, collaboration, and community by promoting competition, jealousy, disappointment, and shame.
9. Some students display entitlement, demand, even petulance if they do not get the rewards.
10. The Keys to Success program, though imperfect as it is a rewards program, has advantages over Titan Way and addresses some of the negative consequences rewards programs have.
11. Using Titan Way teacher incentives as a “free pass” discourages students from participating in meaningful dialogue and relationship building with teachers and may mask real issues and opportunities for important decision making and sharing with parents too.
12. Research supports that predictable, extrinsic rewards programs may actually cause harm:
 - a. Extrinsic rewards diminish interest in the task and erode intrinsic motivations.
 - b. The offer of rewards actually impairs complex behaviors like thinking and learning.
 - c. Incentives for work decrease engagement and self-direction—elements that make work or learning enjoyable and create a sense of purpose.
 - d. Rewarding *results* like grades instead of participation and growth in the *process* of learning creates a view of intelligence called a “fixed mindset” where students value looking smart over learning, lack skill and motivation for creative and critical thinking or self-assessment, and conceal, avoid, or even lie about weaknesses instead of acknowledging and working on them.

The following pages explain and address some of these concerns in more detail. Ultimately, we ask ourselves the same questions psychologist Robin Grille poses. Furthermore, we arrive at her conclusions as well. Though she presents difficult examinations and challenging tasks for a better school, her expertise speaks clearly:

Do we want kids to become reward-addicts, crowd-pleasers, and recognition-seekers, or do we want them to be self-motivated, faithful to themselves, following their own interests? If the latter is true, then the way is not to praise them but to appreciate them. At school, when the work is made intrinsically interesting, enjoyable, meaningful and relevant, this works better than reward systems to improve both the quality and the commitment to the work.

When you do the right thing for the wrong reasons, it ends up being the wrong thing. Since the problem is one of intent, there is no other way but to become good examiners of our own motives. This takes practice, and the courage and humility to look within. When giving a positive comment, are you trying to seduce the child into pleasing you again, into making Mama or Papa [or Teacher] proud? Or are you genuinely glad to see the child accomplish something that pleases *him*, or genuinely delighting in *her* being? Therein lies a paradox: that which is not intended to reinforce, but merely to "connect," is the most reinforcing. (Grille, 2005)

Rewarding—and compromising—those who are already succeeding

4. When the program was first presented to the faculty, the goal was to provide recognition to students who are not regularly recognized in other ways. While there is still a small element of that with students who improve their GPAs or CPAs, **the majority of students who receive Titan Way are already in honors and AP classes, heavily involved in extracurricular activities, and rewarded for their performance in myriad ways.** The last thing we should do is to encourage these high-achievers to abandon their natural skills and curiosities. Grille (2005) explained how rewards can replace these intrinsic motivations and actually create students who *depend* on praise:

Rewards and praise condition children to seek approval; they end up doing things to impress, instead of doing things for themselves. This can hold back the development of self-motivation and makes them dependent on outside opinion. When children get used to getting goodies for 'performing,' they become pleasers, over-reliant on positive strokes. Rewards and praise can create a kind of addictive behavior: children can get addicted to recognition, and thus lose touch with the simple joy of doing what they love. . . . Giving rewards or praise can be habit-forming. This is because the more rewards we use, the more we have to use them to keep children motivated. Praise cannot create a personal commitment to "good" behavior or performance. It only creates a commitment to seeking praise.

It is the “easy” (and helpless and dependent) way

5. **The original motto of Titan Way was “It’s not the easy way, it’s the Titan Way.” The rewards program, though, has created expectations in students that contradict this motto.** Students expect the incentive to give them automatic extra credit or to compensate for work they did not do, did not do well, or did late. One teacher reports that despite explaining her policy that incentives would only help students who had a late assignment, ten students simply left them on her desk while she was out of the room or slipped them under the door after school with the expectation that simply handing them over would fix whatever issue they wanted. Other teachers report begging or even more aggressive harassment from students wanting their incentive to fix a grade. That’s not the Titan Way. Educator Herbert Grossman (2003) noted that “rewards may increase students’ learned helplessness and dependency if they come to rely excessively on their teachers’ approval and largess in place of their own motivation” (p. 310).

Additionally, other research shows that

students who are encouraged to think about grades, stickers, or other ‘goodies’ become less inclined to explore ideas, think creatively, and take chances. At least ten studies have shown that people offered a reward generally choose the easiest possible task [Kohn, 1993]. In the absence of rewards, by contrast, children are inclined to pick tasks that are just beyond their current level of ability. (Kohn, 1994)

A lost character education platform—and its replacement

6. **The original aims of Titan Way were to encourage specific values: integrity, responsibility, respect, caring, trust, and family. The only association our students have with the phrase now is a prize package.** As a way to manipulate students to behave the way we want, rewards work. As a way to encourage students to become good people, though, rewards backfire. Educator Alfie Kohn (1994) explained that “extrinsic motivators do not alter the emotional or cognitive *commitments* that underlie behavior—at least not in a desirable direction.”

Research and logic suggest that punishment and rewards are not really opposites, but two sides of the same coin. Both strategies amount to ways of trying to manipulate someone's behavior-- in one case, prompting the question, "What do they want me to do, and what happens to me if I don't do it?", and in the other instance, leading a child to ask, "What do they want me to do, and what do I get for doing it?" Neither strategy helps children to grapple with the question, "What kind of person do I want to be?" (Kohn, 1994)

The Be Strong program has largely replaced Titan Way as a character education platform and is flourishing. Considering how the program has been reduced and replaced, maybe it is time to end it and put our energy into Be Strong instead?

Ingratitude, predictability, and market value

7. When some students receive their prize packages, they often display ingratitude for what they receive, pick out one or two things and leave the rest behind on their desks, or make dismissive comments about the worth of their rewards. That is utterly disheartening considering the work and generosity that goes into putting their rewards together. More importantly, it is **disgusting behavior that we should avoid encouraging in any way possible**. It is NOT the Titan Way. As noted above, the teacher incentive has become particularly problematic as teachers are harassed, begged, berated, even "tattled on" when the incentives they offer don't please students. Obviously, it's not promoting good character.

These are not disgusting children, of course. More likely, even biological elements induce these reactions to rewards. Educator and brain-based learning expert Eric Jensen (2005) noted two reasons this may be. First, "the brain quickly habituates to rewards . . . which means that what worked at one time may not work for long" (p. 105).

In 1st grade, a gold sticker may be a perfect reward. By 3rd grade, the child wants a cookie, and by 5th grade, only a pizza will do. (Note the escalation in value.) By 8th grade, pizzas are not quite so great . . . stickers have long since left the equation. (Jensen, 2005, p. 105)

A useful guideline is that inappropriate (or "worse") rewards have two elements: predictability and market value . . . pizza, candy, stickers, and certificates all have market value. Research suggests that students will want them each time the behavior is required, they'll want an increasingly valuable reward, and rewards will provide little or no lasting pleasure. (Jensen, 2005, p. 106)

Secondly, he notes that "what one student finds rewarding may not be rewarding to another . . . the degree of pleasure that various students take in a reward is linked to the uniqueness of their brains, which makes rewards 'unequal' from the start" (Jensen, 2005, p. 105).

A disruption of cooperation, collaboration, and community

8. When students receive their prize packages, it is a **public display** that should bring recognition to those who achieve, but it can also be embarrassing or disappointing to those who are excluded. In an honors class, for example, there have been instances where all but five or six students received Titan Way rewards. There are many times and places where students who excel receive certificates, applause, their names in the paper, cords to wear around their necks, etc. They neither need more general accolades, nor should the classroom be the stage for them.

The classroom is an inappropriate place to cultivate further competition. Kohn (1994) notes that rewards fail to teach students responsibility and should be avoided by any educator who “places internalization of positive values ahead of mindless obedience.” He notes that “the alternative to bribes and threats is to work toward creating a caring community” (1994). Grossman (2003) explains that “rewarding students for good behavior in hopes that other students will improve the way they behave to get these rewards can also engender resentment and jealousy” (p. 310). Worse, “statements intended to motivate students to copy their peers’ behavior . . . may backfire, causing some students to misbehave even more and interfere with group cohesiveness, an important goal in its own right” (Grossman, 2003, p. 310). Grille (2005) also weighed in on the topic, noting that “among siblings, or in the classroom, reward systems create competition, jealousy, envy, and mistrust. Rewards or prizes for ‘good’ performance are a threat to co-operation or collaboration.”

Entitlement and demand

9. When some students do not receive a prize package, they are petulant, angry, and demanding. We teachers see and hear it in class, the PTSA volunteers who deliver the rewards hear the complaints, and given the announcements for students who think they deserved it but didn't receive it, there must be a significant number of petitions each time. While some are certainly just mistakes that need remedy the **attitude of entitlement and constant demand** we see from other students is not something we want to encourage.

Grille (2005) explained that "so many of us are addicted to prestige: we get depressed when admiration fails to come. Instead of doing what we do for its own sake, we fish for flattery or reassurance, and when the applause dies away, we sink into despair." Further, she asserted that "rewards punish, because . . . the child who is used to being praised begins to feel inadequate if the praise doesn't come. Nothing feels more defeating to a child than to miss out on a reward that he or she had been conditioned to expect. Inside every carrot, there is a stick" (Grille, 2005).

Jensen (2005) notes that predictable rewards, especially, can cause this reaction. He explained that avoiding predictability (regular rewards) "is legitimate because it becomes a racket over time. Students often begin to feel a sense of loss when they *don't* get a reward. Research suggests the absence of an expected reward is often interpreted as a kind of punishment" (p. 106).

Keys to Success—A Better Alternative

10. As a rewards program, **we already have the Keys to Success program** that has advantages over Titan Way. First, it is designed to include any student in the building according to the judgment of the teachers and administrators who witness class performance, effort, attitude, and examples of character.

Secondly, students may have direct involvement in the process as they plan, negotiate, and evaluate progress with teachers and administrators. Jensen (2005) notes that “the brain’s pathways for rewards are complex because they involve the tasks of prediction, detection, goal orientation, planning, pleasure, expectations, and memory” (p. 104); if the students simply *receive* the reward, they actually miss nearly every interaction with the brain a reward could provide.

Finally, the Keys to Success program is not linked to academics in such a way that it replaces the hard work, responsibility, best efforts, higher order thinking, or creativity we want to encourage. Grossman (2003) explained that student involvement and awareness of positive consequences is especially needed with adolescents. In fact, the most important element to encouraging positive behavior and results for students in secondary school is encouraging “internalized standards they can use to evaluate their own accomplishments” (p. 312). He claims “teachers should *reduce* the amount of feedback they provide their students and instead encourage students to evaluate themselves (p. 312). He notes that doing so prompts students to “function independently to foster their personal growth” (p. 312).

Like all rewards programs, Keys to Success is imperfect, but it does have some advantages over Titan Way—most importantly that the great resource of time and talent and dedication it currently requires from our PTSA would be freed!

More than a “free pass,” students need better relationships and meaningful dialogue with parents and teachers.

11. Using a Titan Way incentive as a “free pass” of sorts may actually discourage students from making better choices or building relationships with teachers that may benefit them more. Yes, many of the students who win a Titan Way incentive are the ones who are highly involved in school and their communities, who take rigorous courses, and have busy schedules. When that student encounters a problem, though, and cannot finish an assignment due in class the next day, perhaps a better solution than a Titan Way incentive is a frank discussion with a parent about why the student’s schedule is impossible or overly stressful. Guiding a teenager through the tough decisions that life presents to those who want to do it all may have a longer-lasting benefit to him or her than a temporary quick-fix.

Few teachers would balk at working with a student who finds himself in a bind or who has done all she could and hit a “bump” in the road after doing quality work and giving best efforts at all other times in the class. (Any teacher who would not do so in this scenario would not likely take an incentive either.)

This honest and brave interaction with a teacher can build a better relationship between the learner and his or her teachers and demonstrate an important lesson in compromise and problem-solving.

Furthermore, students who would rather turn in an incentive as a sort of patch or bandage and not reflect on their own behavior or choices or assess their schedules demonstrate a “fixed intelligence mindset”—one that will keep them from learning with resilience and passion (see page 11 or Dweck [2009]).

What the research says

12. Research states that students who work for extrinsic rewards are actually harmed, not encouraged by the practice.

- a. Critics of behavioral psychology note that intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation tend to be inversely related.

In general terms, what the evidence suggests is this: the more we reward people for doing something, the more likely they are to lose interest in whatever they had to do to get the reward. Extrinsic motivation, in other words, is not only quite different from intrinsic motivation but actually tends to erode it. (Kohn, 1997)

- b. Jensen (2005) notes that “rewards can temporarily stimulate simple physical responses; however, more complex behaviors are usually impaired, not helped, by rewards. So if you think giving rewards will help develop great minds, you’re likely to be disappointed” (p. 104). In other words, a medal available for winning a footrace can push a person to run. The complex and delayed response of earning a high GPA or improving it, though, isn’t encouraged by a certificate or T-shirt—or even a \$100 bill!—especially one they receive after the fact.
- c. In his book *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us* (2009), career analyst Daniel Pink illustrates this same principle. “If you want engagement,” he argues, “self-direction is better” (Pink, 2010). The RSA Animate adapted from his RSA talk has more than 12.5 million hits on You Tube as people begin to question how rewards affect those who receive them:

<http://youtu.be/u6XAPnuFjJc> . At its conclusion he states the following:

I think that the big take-away here is that if we start treating people like people, not assuming that they're simply horses --slower, smaller, better smelling horses --if we get past the ideology of carrot and stick and look at the science, we can build organizations and work lives that make us better off. They also have the promise to make our world just a little bit better. (Pink, 2010)

While his model is based in business and work, the principle of motivation and drive for students is a similar scenario. Surely as parents and teachers we want our students to be more self-directed and more driven to be “purpose maximizers, not profit maximizers” (Pink, 2010).

The full lecture is available as a video and podcast at <http://www.thersa.org/events/video/vision-videos/the-surprising-truth-about-moving-others>.

His TED talk, “The Puzzle of Motivation” also discusses how traditional rewards are ineffective and offers other ideas to motivate: http://www.ted.com/talks/dan_pink_on_motivation?language=en.

- d. In her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (and in her article “Who Will the 21st-Century Learners Be?” from *Knowledge Quest*, a journal of the American Library Association), Stanford University Professor of Psychology Carol Dweck explains how rewarding only *results* like grades instead of participation and growth in the learning *process* creates a “fixed mind-set” in students. She notes that “the twenty-first century will belong to the passionate and resilient learners” and that only those with the growth mindset will be among them (Dweck, 2009). She describes five characteristics of students with a fixed mindset:
- They “value looking smart over learning,”
 - They are not interested in exploring topics in depth,
 - They are not “disposed to engage in critical thinking to gain and share knowledge,”
 - They lack skill or strategies for self-accountability and self-assessment, and
 - “Rather than trying to recognize their weaknesses, they run from them, conceal them, and even lie about them.”

Given the competition and social intensity of a high school setting, particularly strong at a school of high achievers like ours, these characteristics are common—maybe even more so among students in honors and AP courses, sadly. For example, three different students last year approached one teacher during the last week of a quarter because the B- grades they had earned in their honors class would not count toward the Regent’s Scholarship. These students made no effort to come in for help during the quarter or to assess where their grades were falling short throughout the quarter (even though scores were

current and available on Gradebook and showed even lower grades at every point in the quarter, including midterm). Only when the reward was compromised did they seem to take any action. One student indicated he didn't come in earlier because he thought extra credit would raise the grade (a C+) to what he needed for the scholarship (a B). These students seem to fit the criteria Dweck established exactly.

Dweck (2009) notes that "praising students' intelligence puts them into a fixed mindset with all of its vulnerabilities" (p. 2). Furthermore, because these students are so eager to "uphold their image" they will actually "reject a chance to learn if they might make mistakes" (p. 2). While three students certainly do not represent every child at Olympus, the tendency toward this mindset is clear in every classroom here. Similarly, to cultivate the opposite "growth mindset" where students are praised for the *process* of learning, given strategies and opportunities for better self-reflection and assessment, and directly taught the growth mindset will require great efforts throughout our learning community. The problem is not caused by Titan Way, of course. However, we should embrace every effort we can to keep our students away from these vulnerabilities and help them become more passionate and resilient learners.

Conclusion

In his book *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes*,

Kohn (1993) offers five reasons that rewards fail:

- i. Rewards punish.
- ii. Rewards rupture relationships.
- iii. Rewards ignore reasons.
- iv. Rewards discourage risk taking.
- v. Rewards cut the "interest rate."

To illustrate this last reason, he offers a story:

An elderly gentleman is taunted by a group of ten year olds who insult him as they pass by his house on the way home from school every day. The old man came up with a way to end the rude comments about his baldhead and sagging stomach. On Monday afternoon he met them on his lawn as they passed by. He said, "Anyone who comes by tomorrow to insult me will receive a dollar. So on Tuesday the children showed up even earlier to harass the old man. True to his word he gave them a dollar. Then he said, "If you come by tomorrow and do the same thing I will give you 25 cents." So on Wednesday the same thing happened. He told them that from now on he would only pay a penny to be insulted. The kids decided that a penny was not worth the effort they were putting in and never came back again.

"Praising and rewarding are deeply ingrained habits, particularly as that's how most of us were raised and educated" (Grille, 2005). Even Kohn (1993), when asked what the solution should be, says "I have found it frustrating and difficult to answer for several reasons" (p. 179). The alternative to rewards depends on many factors (where the rewards are in place, for whom, to what objective, etc.). For teachers, though, he suggests that removing rewards altogether is an important first step:

Children are likely to become enthusiastic, lifelong learners as a result of being provided with an engaging curriculum; a safe, caring community in which to discover and create; and a significant degree of choice about what (and how and why) they are learning. Rewards--like punishments--are unnecessary when these things are present, and are ultimately destructive in any case.

This, of course, calls for a lot of work for all of us, especially teachers and administrators. But it is the work we all signed up for and work we are committed to do. Fortunately, we have an amazing network of support including our PTSA to make that happen. If rewards are unnecessary, even "destructive," we need to take a second look at Titan Way.

References

- Dweck, C. (2009, November/December). Who will the 21st-century learners be?. *Knowledge Quest*. Retrieved from http://www.ala.org/aasl/sites/ala.org.aasl/files/content/aaslissues/toolkits/bldnglvl/09_NovDec_Dweck.pdf.
- Dweck, C. (2007). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books
- Grille, R. (2005). Rewards and praise: The poisoned carrot. *The Natural Child Project* [website]. Retrieved from http://www.naturalchild.org/robin_grille/rewards_praise.html
- Grossman, H. (2003). *Classroom behavior management for diverse and inclusive schools*. New York, NY: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Jensen, E. (2005). *Teaching with the brain in mind* [2nd Ed.]. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Kohn, A. (1997, February). How not to teach values: A critical look at character education. *Phi Delta Kappan*. Retrieved from <http://www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/hnttv.htm>.
- Kohn, A. (1993). *Punished by rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A's, praise, and other bribes*. New York, NY: Mariner Books.
- Kohn, A. (1994, December). The risks of rewards. *ERIC Digest*, ED3769900. Retrieved from <http://www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/ror.htm> .
- Pink, D. (2010). *Drive: The surprising truth about what motivates us*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.
- Pink, D. (2010, April 1). RSA animate—Drive: The surprising truth about what motivates us [video]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6XAPnuFJjc> .
- Pink, D. (2013, March 13). RSA lecture—The surprising truth about moving others [podcast]. Retrieved from <http://www.thersa.org/events/video/vision-videos/the-surprising-truth-about-moving-others>.
- Pink, D. (2009, July) TED talk—The puzzle of motivation [video]. Retrieved from http://www.ted.com/talks/dan_pink_on_motivation?language=en .