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Stunt Pros

Making the Case for Motivational Stunts

Child psychologists and educational researchers suggest that performing an occasional silly stunt to spur academic achievement is a healthy way for teachers and administrators to have fun with their role as authority figures. Displaying a sense of humor won't undermine the respect students have for instructors and principals. But it will help kids see them as well-rounded human beings.

A motivational stunt "works because it's something odd," says Texas psychologist Jerald Gottlieb (Gillman, 2000). "It shows kids that something is possible that they thought was impossible. You've just introduced something that's an exception to the rule." And it's an exception that can inspire exceptional educational achievement.

Mark Baldwin, an education professor at California State University-San Marcos, further suggests that educators who perform stunts are "showing some connection, support" for their students (Jenkins, 2000). "They want kids to know they're with them." And children tend to respond academically when they believe their teachers and administrators are taking a positive, personal interest in their education.

STELLAR STUNTS, AMAZING RESULTS

So motivational stunts can be fun, inexpensive exercises in community building. But do these challenges really deliver the educational goods? A growing number of administrators and teachers offer solid—and smile-inducing—proof that they do.

2 ● 101 Stunts for Principals to Inspire Student Achievement

- Janis Stonebreaker, principal of Ottoman Elementary in Orangevale, California, dressed up as a princess, kissed a frog, and belted out “Someday My Prince Will Come” after her 400 students shattered their goal of reading for 500,000 minutes in six months by nearly 20,000 minutes.
- Mark Soss, principal of Roaring Brook Elementary in Chappaqua, New York, shaved off the beard he’d worn for 30 years after his 650 students kept a pledge to give up TV for reading and other activities.
- Janet Franklin, principal of Beaumont Elementary in Knoxville, Tennessee, turned herself into a hot dog complete with cardboard “bun” and encouraged students who exceeded a coupon-book sales goal to decorate her costume with ketchup, relish, and other messy condiments.
- Ron Hanson, a teacher at Fisher Primary School in Bellingham, Washington, exchanged pies in the face with principal Brad Jernberg after students read on their own time for at least 20 minutes every day for a month. The assembly performance also celebrated the school’s first-place finish in a state science competition.
- Alex Bacos, a counselor at Madison Middle School in North Hollywood, California, dressed up as the Little Mermaid—complete with seashell halter-top and gold sequined skirt. He warbled songs from the Disney film after students raised their collective score on the state’s Stanford 9 test by an impressive 66 points.

CRITICAL OF STUNTS? LIGHTEN UP

In recent years, an increasing number of researchers have called into question the propriety and long-term efficacy of employing behaviorist motivational techniques in the classroom. It was claimed that in addition to disempowering their subjects (Kohn, 1993), these techniques can decrease children’s intrinsic motivation to learn (Deci, Ryan, & Koestner, 1999). I agree with many criticisms of human behaviorism in general (it tends to devolve into a dehumanizing power trip for practitioners), and motivational rewards in particular (they’re unnecessary because, as the engaging Alfie Kohn puts it in *Punished by Rewards*, “we are beings who possess natural curiosity about ourselves and our environment, who search for and overcome challenges, who try to master skills and attain competence, and who seek to reach new levels of complexity in what we learn and do”).

But motivational stunts belong in a different, far healthier class of rewards than stickers, pizzas, or cash, for a couple of reasons. First of

all, these stunts shine a spotlight on how much fun learning can be while celebrating collective accomplishments. Second, they offer students no tangible reward in exchange for increased effort or achievement. Instead, the stunts merely show children the human side of their school administrators. They reveal educators taking such a personal interest in students that they are willing to act silly to encourage academic success. In essence, then, motivational stunts are an “empowering trip” for students, not a power trip for educators. These all-hands activities bring school communities closer together, and they inject a sense of play into the educational process even as they encourage higher achievement.

Other critics are more offended by the silly aspects of motivational stunts than they are by the idea of offering rewards for achievement. As one principal put it, “I just wonder whether the humanistic approach to the profession doesn’t cause us to lose the professionalism that we’d all like to have, the respect that all educators keep saying we don’t get. If we don’t act like professionals, how can we expect to be treated like professionals?” (Fetbrandt, 1996). But it becomes necessary to reject the notion that educators should adopt the buttoned-down demeanor common in many other disciplines when one considers a key ingredient those professions lack: a total focus on children. Creating a vibrant school community and delivering strong educational results should be enough to engender respect for any teacher or administrator—even if he or she spends one day a year engaging students through childlike play.