

# RELATIONSHIPS, NOT REWARDS.

Many schools have responded to concerns about chronic absenteeism by ramping up incentives — prizes, parties, and privileges — intended to draw students back. The intention is caring. But research and practice point to a fundamental mismatch: **the primary causes of absence cannot be solved with rewards.**

**The RAISE Network is committed to a relational approach** that builds the trust needed to understand and address what students actually need. Instead of creating and managing extensive extrinsic reward programs, we believe resources are better spent on strengthening students' connections to school and rekindling their joy in learning.

## Why incentives fall short

**They don't address root causes.** The most common drivers of absence — illness, transportation gaps, housing instability, economic hardship — have little to do with individual motivation and cannot be addressed with prizes.

**They exclude the most vulnerable.** Classwide incentives or rewards contingent on a particular attendance rate publicly shame and undermine belonging for students who miss school for legitimate health or family reasons.

**They send the wrong message.** When students are rewarded for showing up, they learn the reason to attend is the reward — not the learning and relationships school provides.

**They consume precious time and energy.** Managing reward programs diverts staff attention from understanding and addressing the real reasons why students are absent.

**Their effects don't last.** Research shows incentive-driven behavior returns to baseline once rewards are removed. Pre-announced attendance awards have shown no impact; surprise awards have even reduced later attendance among already-present students.

## What to do instead

**Address systemic barriers directly.** Use outreach to identify what students need — transportation, health access, supplies, stability — and connect families to resources before absence becomes chronic.

**Create daily rituals and joy.** Morning circles, personalized greetings, student leadership roles, and engaging learning experiences make school itself the reward — accessible to every student.

**Assign a trusted adult anchor.** Pair students with a go-to adult for brief, warm check-ins. Sustained mentoring relationships reduce absenteeism, especially for older students.

**Maintain warm family touchpoints.** Regular positive contact — texts, calls, home visits — builds the trust families need to share what's actually getting in the way.

**Cultivate peer connection.** Students come to school to see their friends. Clubs, affinity groups, buddy systems, and peer-led routines give students a community they don't want to miss.

“ *The central challenge is not how to motivate students to show up, but how to build the relationships and routines that help educators understand and respond to what students need. An absence is not just a behavior to correct — it is a signal to investigate and act on.*

— MEYER & FRANKOWSKI (2026)

**Rethinking attendance incentives shifts the focus from individual motivation to the environments schools create.** Students are more likely to attend when they feel safe, seen, connected, and engaged in meaningful learning. Strong relationships with students and families also help educators identify and respond to barriers such as transportation, health needs, or housing instability. For more examples of relational approaches in action, see the article linked through the QR code below.

#### ❓ QUESTIONS TO BRING TO YOUR TEAM

- 1 *What role have incentives typically played in our attendance improvement strategy? What barriers to attendance do our incentives address, if any?*
- 2 *How do we know if and how well incentives are working, and for whom? What might be the unintended consequences of the incentives we offer?*
- 3 *If we stopped giving attendance incentives and rewards starting next week or next month, what would we predict might happen? What data would tell us if our predictions were correct?*
- 4 *How much time do we spend talking about, planning for, and obtaining and executing incentive plans? What is something more impactful that we could do if we invested this energy elsewhere?*
- 5 *Which of the relationship-based approaches recommended here resonate most? What new or different ideas do these suggestions spark?*



#### Read the full article

*"Want to Raise Attendance at Your School? Prioritize Relationships, Not Rewards."*

[hthgse.edu/want-attendance-incentives-to-work-prioritize-relationships-not-rewards](https://hthgse.edu/want-attendance-incentives-to-work-prioritize-relationships-not-rewards)