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**How a School Ditched Awards and Assemblies to Refocus on Kids and Learning**



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By [Linda Flanagan](https://ww2.kqed.org/mindshift/author/lindaflan/) August 7, 2017

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When Paula Gosal took over as principal of the Chilliwack Middle School, she walked smack into the middle of a long-standing debate among the staff over awards. It wasn’t exactly a rumble that Gosal was tossed into so abruptly in the fall of 2016. Most of the teachers at this school for seventh- through ninth-graders in British Columbia had read the literature on awards, and were looking for feedback and support from their new principal. The majority wanted to do away with the school’s awards and awards assemblies, and needed the backing of their principal to make it happen.

“I did not have to be persuaded,” Gosal said. She called for a vote, and the staff unanimously decided to stop handing out awards.

Though data on the extent of school award-giving is scarce, the practice of delivering them is so customary that the Common Application to U.S. colleges includes spaces to report honors and other forms of recognition. Alongside their ubiquity, however, is abundant research showing that awards, rewards and other external incentives undermine intrinsic motivation.

“This is one of the most robust findings in social science—and also one of the most ignored,” wrote [Daniel Pink](http://www.danpink.com/books/drive/), author of *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. Pursuit of the trinket or prize extinguishes what might have been a flicker of internal interest in a subject, suffocating the genuine sources of motivation: mastery, autonomy and purpose. “To say ‘do this, and you’ll get that’ makes people lose interest in ‘this,’ ” said [Alfie Kohn](http://www.alfiekohn.org/), author of *Punished by Rewards.* Awards are that much worse than rewards, Kohn added, because they are simply prizes made artificially limited.

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For the majority of students who don’t receive public honors, awards ceremonies spur boredom, anger or resentment, said [Marvin Berkowitz](https://characterandcitizenship.org/about-us/key-players?id=8), a professor at the University of Missouri—St. Louis and author of *You Can’t Teach Through a Rat*. Watching a peer receive an award inspires not a drive to succeed but rather a lingering bitterness, as well as an unfortunate association of school-sanctioned success with tedium.

“A key takeaway here is that awards aren’t bad just because the losers are disappointed; everyone (including the winners) ultimately lose when schooling is turned into a scramble to defeat one’s peers,” Kohn said.

Understanding the intellectual rationale for doing away with awards, as Gosal and her staff did, made their decision a lot easier. But there were other reasons. Teachers at Chilliwack bad been bothered by the exclusionary nature of the awards ceremonies; they noticed the same students and families being recognized year after year. As well, Gosal had been troubled in the past by the ugly encounters she’d witnessed among teachers who had argued for or against a particular student receiving an award. “My experience of watching teachers debate over children was unsettling,” Gosal said.

She and her staff also sought to change what motivated kids to work, so that they’d learn for the sake of it rather than for a prize. And they all had begun to realize that student life outside the classroom was just as rich as it was inside, and that those endeavors were just as worthy of notice.

Instead of being selected by the school for achievements in pre-determined categories, students were able to recognize their own achievements. (Courtesy of Paula Gosal) *(Courtesy of Paula Gosal)*

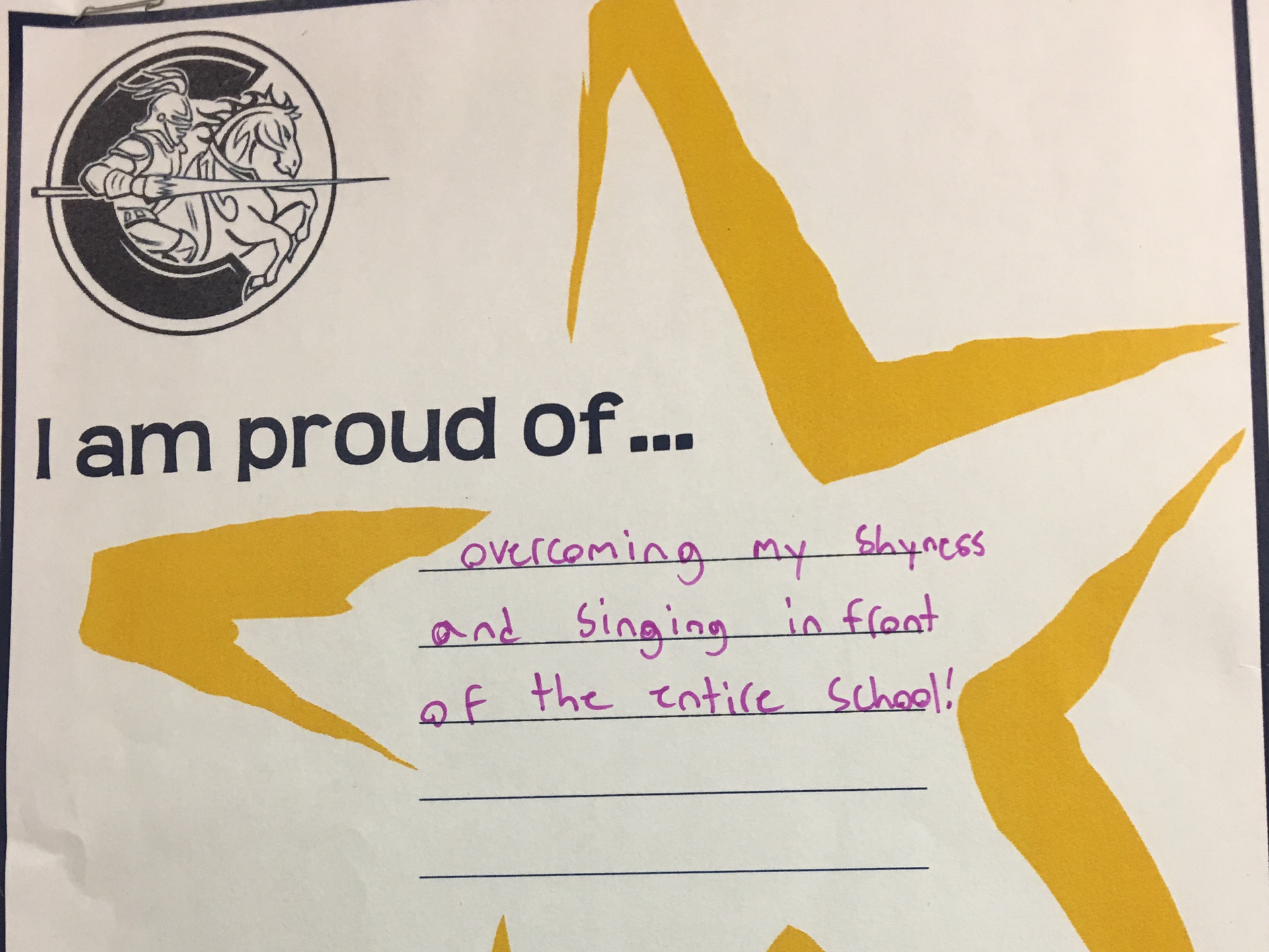
In May of 2017, Gosal told parents in her weekly newsletter that the June awards ceremony was off. Instead, the school would be hosting a success showcase for all students. “I wanted to marry the two worlds, who you are inside of school and who you are outside,” Gosal explained. The showcase would be more than a talent show, she added. It’s “this is who I am,” she said.

About 200 parents and children walked through the school halls on the night of the showcase. Everywhere, the students displayed their unique skills and interests: some danced, played a jazz set or sang. Others dribbled and scored on the basketball court, or demonstrated knot-tying, or dueled one another at a gaming station they had set up especially for the showcase. One child with training in professional dog handling showed her prowess to the crowd, and scores of others displayed their art, poetry and other creative work in the school gallery. Plastered throughout the school were one-page statements every child filled out that finished the phrase, “I am proud of \_\_\_.”

‘We hope that they continue to develop their best selves for their own benefit—not because someone tells them to or because there’s an award at the end of the year.’*Chris Wejr, principal of James Hill Elementary School in British Columbia*

Chris Wejr, the principal of James Hill Elementary School in British Columbia, eliminated awards and the ceremonies that go with them after talking with teachers and parents about the school’s practices and mission. He had wondered if the regular “student-of-the-month” assembly violated the everyday message of community they were attempting to build; the award seemed to be suggesting that “we’re one community—but you’re a little bit better,” he said. This approach also seemed to contradict the strengths-based model of education they sought to instill, which emphasized each student’s abilities and aptitudes.

“Every single person in school has strengths, skills and talents, and it’s our job to bring them out more,” Wejr said.

Courtesy of Paula Gosal

Together with the staff, they decided that handing out awards neither aligned with their beliefs nor brought out the best in their students—even for the sliver of kids who received awards. “Winners” got the message that product rather than process is what matters in education, Wejr said. “Learning should be the reward,” he added. And the far more plentiful “losers” heard that they weren’t good enough to be spotlighted on stage, or that their unique combination of attributes didn’t truly count.

Wejr replaced the ceremony that called out one student with a series of assemblies that highlighted chunks of fifth-graders, so that by the end of the year every graduating child was honored. Students said they learned more about their peers in the ceremony, Wejr said. And some appreciative parents approached him afterward to say that their child had never been recognized this way before. “If we believe all students can achieve, our practices have to align with that,” he said.

Neither Wejr nor Gosal heard much in the way of criticism from parents or students after they eliminated their school awards. From a population of 575 students, just two parents at Chilliwack Middle School sent emails questioning the decision, and social media channels were quiet. “The ease of the change has been surprising,” Gosal said. Though Wejr heard some grumbling outside the school about the educational system drifting toward mediocrity, he was quick to point out that marks of achievement at James Hill Elementary School have gone up since they eliminated awards.

“It’s not an award at the end of the year that drives achievement,” Wejr said. Excellence comes from a school culture that fosters collaboration and provides opportunities for students to lead, especially in those areas where children have special talents and skills, he added.

When people challenge him about the wisdom of removing school prizes, Wejr asks, “When was the last time you handed out family awards?” If school is an actual community, separating out individuals for special notice makes no sense. School leaders ought to be looking beyond the short term and thinking more about what kinds of adults they’re trying to develop. He added, “We hope that they continue to develop their best selves for their own benefit—not because someone tells them to or because there’s an award at the end of the year.”

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