

education world®

Connecting educators to what works

[Home](#) >> [Administrators](#) >> [Recognize Your Staff's Stars](#)

 [Print](#)

Recognizing the Stars on Your Staff



[Essentials](#) [Administrators](#) [Lesson Plans](#) [Technology](#) [Prof Dev](#) [Printable Templates](#)

Most all your staff members do a terrific job, but each school has some folks who are exceptional at what they do. Yet, in most districts, those "stars" progress up the salary scale one step at a time just like everyone else. Chances are your star teachers don't expect or require recognition but, as a school leader, you want to recognize and support them in any way you can. So just how do you recognize their above-and-beyond efforts? That's the question we put this month to member of Education World's "Principal Files" team.

All principals are eager to recognize their star teachers and staff members. Recognizing those stars in public ways can help school leaders highlight the qualities they value most. Rewarding the best teachers can help them set the standard -- or even raise the bar -- of staff performance.

But, alas, recognizing and rewarding teachers is a slippery slope. Most teachers don't want to be held out to their peers as examples or role models. That celebrity status can be embarrassing and, in some cases, it could even alienate the stars from the rest of their colleagues.

While most of Education World's [Principal Files](#) principals admitted to walking a fine line when it comes to staff recognition, they all agree that thoughtful recognition of their stars accomplishments is a good way to establish a positive climate, build school community, and raise achievement.

ANYONE CAN BE A STAR

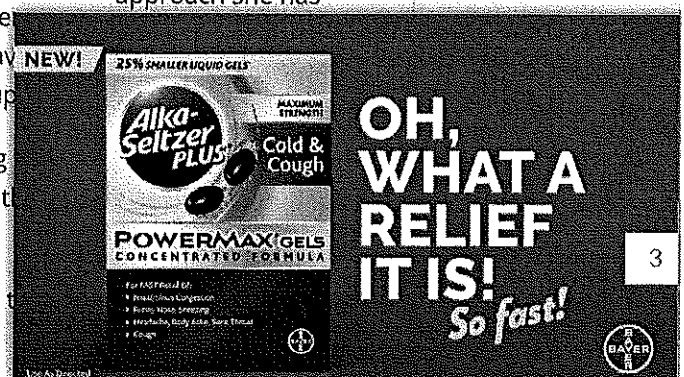
Principal Gretchen Schlie recognizes that few schools have just one star. As a matter of fact, most teachers have talents that are ripe for recognition. When someone approaches her with a classroom issue that's presenting a problem, Schlie offers her thoughts and often recommends others on the staff who have dealt with similar situations and might provide additional support.

Connecting teachers in this way is a quiet way of recognizing a deep pool of in-house talent, says Schlie, who is principal at the International Community School in Singapore.

Sometimes Schlie even approaches staff members and asks them if they would be willing to share some of their special skills.

Following the 80:20 Rule

Lolli Haws, principal at Oakridge Elementary School in Arlington, Virginia, credits a very wise mentor with an approach she has



I had a teacher who had excellent classroom management skills, Schlie recalled for Education World. The students loved her, the parents loved her so I got her to share some of her ideas at a staff meeting so others might have a chance to be more successful in their classrooms.

Another teacher had a very creative way of teaching paragraph writing. She had shared her techniques with her grade-level co-workers, and they were getting amazing results. So I asked her to share her approach with the entire staff. Even though she was a bit shy about getting up in front of her peers, she did it and it was very helpful for everyone.

Allowing teachers to shine in their passions goes a long way in building teacher productivity and ensuring retention of valued staff, Schlie told Education World.

It's very simple: everyone wants to be appreciated, she added.

BULLETIN BOARDS ANNOUNCE STAR STATUS

Alan Beam is another principal who accepts the idea that most staff members deserve star treatment from time to time. He's used several approaches that involve his entire staff in recognizing colleagues for their special efforts and skills.

Last year, Beam posted a picture of each staff member on a bulletin board in the teachers' lounge. Under each picture, he hung a small bucket from a hook.

We had a contest in which we asked staff members to decorate their buckets in a way that reflected them, explained Beam, who is principal at Holton (Kansas) High School. The pictures and buckets were posted beneath a bulletin board headline that asked the question How Full Is Your Bucket?

Small water drops cut from paper were placed in a handy spot, and anyone could fill one out to recognize a staff member for his special talents, her handling of a situation, his extra help, or any other reason. Colleagues placed the completed drops in teachers' buckets, and some water drops were displayed for all to see.

The flood of comments was a great way to get everyone on the staff -- including teachers, custodians, and

your energy and time on the top 20 percent of your staff and 20 percent of your time on the other 80 percent of your staff because those superstar teachers will set the pace and create higher standards for the whole school."

Haws says she has tried to follow that rule over the years. "I find that it is really true," she told Education World. "Those exceptional teachers and my support of them is a strong message for all staff as to what is valued, what is expected, and where we're headed. And all teachers -- and the school -- are better when those exceptional teachers have leadership roles and receive recognition in subtle but important ways."

A Renewed Effort To Recognize Teachers

This fall, Jefferson Davis High School in Montgomery, Alabama, is piloting a program that will improve school-wide discipline by recognizing and reinforcing positive student behaviors. As the school's leadership team considered ways to implement the new student-behavior program, they decided that teachers and staff

paras -- to recognize all the special things that happen in their school and the special talents that each staff member brings to the school community, added Beam.

At other times, Beam has covered bulletin boards with paper and posted questions such as *Who would you like to thank and why?* or *What don't we know about a fellow staff member that we should know?* Teachers are free to respond graffiti-style to the posted question. They might note a special favor one teacher did, a teacher who worked hard to connect with or teach a particular student, and any other above-and-beyond effort that benefited the school community.

Beam has also involved students in recognizing staff members. One year, he invited all students to write about a teacher or other staff member who made a difference in their lives. I helped deliver those notes to teachers around the school and the district, Beam explained.

This year, Beam is thinking about starting an online blog where students, parents, and staff members can post their thoughts about staff members who have gone the extra mile to earn star status.

A GOLDEN JACKET AND A COKE AND A SMILE

At Oakleaf K-8 Charter School in Middleburg, Florida, teachers take an active role in recognizing their colleagues who have gone above-and-beyond. At each faculty meeting, a golden yellow jacket is awarded to a faculty member. The jacket, which is a colorful salute to the school's bee mascot -- the yellow jacket -- is not passed by Principal Larry Davis or other members of the administrative

also needed to be recognized and supported for their efforts.

"Although our intentions are good, we simply do not recognize our staff enough for the contributions they make to our school community on a daily basis," said the school's principal, Marie Kostick.

Kostick shared this idea with the school's staff, and during the first in-service day she collected their ideas for incentives -- both no-cost incentives *and* incentives that would involve some expense.

"I received a most interesting list ranging from classroom supplies, a free day off, gas cards, a massage, to exemptions from state testing," said Kostick. "I read aloud the list to everyone's delight!"

"I started off the first few days of school by placing simple thank-you cards in mailboxes for various things I noticed throughout the building," said Kostick. "I have also sent emails of appreciation for tasks accomplished. And on

team. Instead, it is passed from teacher to teacher.

Each month's winner is responsible for presenting the jacket to another teacher of honor the following month, explained Davis. The school has one jacket that is shared by elementary staff members and another for the school's junior high team.

At Hickory Flat Elementary School in Canton, Georgia, Principal Keith Ingram enjoys the Coke and a Smile segment that ends each of his faculty meetings. Ingram breaks out a 12-pack of Coke and some ice and invites staff members to eulogize their outstanding peers.

The idea of eulogizing staff stems from the thought that we should take time to recognize one another now rather than when it is too late, explained Ingram.

This activity has been super powerful, he added. It brings the staff together as a team and helps inspire us. It's an inexpensive idea with a huge payback for the entire team, not just the stars. The inspiring words shared by colleagues have helped raise my staff to superstar level.

TEACHER OF THE...

Many schools, districts, and states recognize teachers for their outstanding contributions by selecting teachers to represent them for a period of time. Often a teacher is chosen teacher of the year, but sometimes that honor might be bestowed for shorter periods [Teacher of the Week, Teacher of the Month]. Sometimes, school leaders are the ones responsible for selecting the honoree, but, just as often, students, the PTO, or community partners are in charge of that process.

At Lewis Vincent Elementary School in Denham Springs, Louisiana, a Teacher of the Month recognition is tied to each year's school-wide theme. Last year's theme was jungle-related, so Principal Carol Robertson tied a different jungle animal to each month's teacher recognition. For example, one month's award was to the staff giraffe, a teacher who was always sticking her neck out for others.

This school year's theme is a western one. Students are being encouraged to Lasso Learning and teachers are Saddling Up for Success. Each month, Wanted posters will search for the staff member who exhibits a specific trait -- such as perseverance or fairness or responsibility -- that was modeled by western heroes from Annie Oakley to Wyatt Earp. Teachers will nominate their colleagues who exhibit the trait of the month.

the first Monday of the new month two of my teachers were rewarded with surprise day-off certificates for being the first to submit departmental minutes for the month just past."

The bottom line: By emphasizing the positive with regularity, Kostick and her administrative team hope to promote professional growth and camaraderie just as the new behavior program is intended to promote improved student discipline.

**Team
Competitions
Spur
Camaraderie**

When a teacher nominates a colleague, an explanation accompanies that nomination, explained Robertson. The three teachers receiving the most votes are recognized with a certificate that includes the text of their colleagues' comments. The teacher who gathers the most votes receives a coupon to order lunch from an area restaurant and some other prizes that complement our school theme. That top teacher's certificate is displayed in our faculty lounge.

This recognition aids our staff in selecting a deserving teacher each year as our Teacher of the Year candidate, added Robertson.

At Saint Michaels Middle/High School in St. Michaels, Maryland, two recognition programs -- Student of the Month and Teacher of the Month --- are connected. Both students and staff members nominate individuals for each of the awards. Those nominations are shared with the entire staff so they have an opportunity to support a particular nominee. Then, according to principal (retired) Frank Hagen, all nominations are reviewed by a committee of staff and students, which makes final recommendations. Hagen makes the final decision and notifies staff, students, and parents of the monthly winners.

Winning staffers are recognized in a variety of ways. The rewards include rights to a reserved parking spot, a photo displayed in the school office and on the school Web site, and a celebration at the monthly staff meeting.

Hagen also offers to teach the winners classes for a day or do his/her assigned duty for a week. Most choose duty coverage because they don't want to be out of their classrooms for a day, said Hagen. Or maybe they just don't trust me to teach their children!

In addition, the school's recognition programs have been expanded through community partnerships that provide gift certificates for dinners or brunches, movie tickets, lunches, CDs, and discounts for school clothing. The star teachers/staff are also first on the list to attend out of school -- state, regional, or national -- professional development. And those teachers are often the first nominated for PTO awards, district recognitions, civic/foundation (Rotary, Lions Club, Junior Achievement...) and business-partnership awards, and state and national programs.

Frank Hagen is not alone as a principal who works with outside partners to recognize staff stars. Marcia Wright, the principal at Clinton (Michigan) Elementary School, works with her county's service agency to publicize the school's Teacher of the Week. The agency sees to it that the teacher's picture and a brief article appear in the newspaper.

Principal Carol

Robertson likes to recognize teachers for their efforts, particularly when it comes to common tasks that they might not love to do but that need to be done. To make those tasks a little more enjoyable, she groups staff members into teams.

"The teams are organized as a way to promote attendance, being on time for school and duties, and turning in reports on time," explained Robertson. "Bonus points are given for completing certain tasks on or ahead of schedule. The team that accumulates the most points for eight weeks gets to order lunch out."

The teams change for each nine-week period, added Robertson. In that way, staff members from different levels work together and get to know one another.

The Sincerest Form of Flattery

Sincere praise in a principal's weekly memos can be an

Principal Teri Stokes shared that her school's PTA nominates a teacher to represent the school -- Weatherly Heights Elementary School in Huntsville, Alabama -- in the citywide Teacher of the Year program. In addition, local newspapers spotlight local teachers in a special Golden Apple Award feature. Students nominate teachers for those awards.

At Hickory Flat Elementary School, Principal Keith Ingram and his administrative team choose a teacher of the month. That teacher is presented with a school logo watch at a faculty meeting. The watches can be purchased at a moderate cost -- about \$20 per watch -- from suppliers such as TOP-U.S.A., added Ingram.

At S&S Middle School in Sadler, Texas, Lee Yeager works with other principals and a local radio station to recognize a district-wide Teacher of the Month. Chosen teachers are given \$500 gift certificates and are brought to the radio station for a short on-air interview, explained Yeager. They are also invited to an end-of-year banquet that includes the ten winners of school year. At that banquet a drawing is held to reward one of the monthly winners and his/her spouse with a summer cruise.

PERKS AS PRAISE

Most star teachers don't require lots of attention or recognition. Indeed, many shy away from the limelight. In fact, most principals have found that small perks quietly passed the way of their stars will suffice.

Les Potter, principal at Silver Sands Middle School in Port Orange, Florida, has found many ways to reward his high-achieving teachers. I might allow them to go to a conference, select the course they want to teach, have the planning period of their choice, or the classroom they prefer. In some cases, I have rewarded them with a department chairmanship or recommended them for Teacher of the Year.

Lolli Haws might try to find a way to send her exceptional staff members to special conferences they would like to attend. In addition, I give them a chance to present at faculty or PTA meetings, encourage them to be mentors, invite them to be on the teacher leadership team, mention things they're doing in my weekly staff memo, and find opportunities for them to be on district committees or present at district events.

I also try to learn what items or resources they might need for their

effective way to recognize staff members and establish school-wide values.

The most important thing is to be genuine in your praise, says Layne Hunt, superintendent of Woodward Academy, a PreK-8 school in Detroit, Michigan.

"Sincerity is the essential element in any praise or critique," added Hunt. "It serves many purposes, including demonstrating appreciation, encouraging positive behaviors to continue, forwarding the mission of the organization, and establishing a culture in which your staff understands your desire to always raise the level of performance."

Media Mentions

Going public with good news is a great way to inform the community about the excellent people who staff your schools.

"When a teacher earns a special recognition at our school, we place their name on the marquee for all

students or classrooms, and then I try to find a little extra money to get them those things -- a set of novels, a new easel, a special set of math items for the overhead projector, things like that.

Marcia Wright tries to be responsive to her superstars, too. I make sure they have the support they need with challenging students, I cover their classrooms if they need to leave early, and I work to help in the classroom and with special projects.

Teri Stokes has found that her community partners are willing to support her as she supports those who go above and beyond. Several local restaurants and businesses are willing to give dinners or gift certificates, said Stokes. Our assistant principal awards them to teachers who have met certain criteria, such as having all their reports in on time or volunteering at our fall festival.

Principal Carol Robertson wanted to find a way to recognize one teacher who had perfect attendance for the entire school year. The reward she came up with was a year with no duties. Needless to say, the teacher is very appreciative, said Robertson. Three other teachers who missed less than five days received gift certificates.

Star teachers love surprises, so be creative as you motivate them to be star staff members!

A SIMPLE THANK YOU

Many principals find the most effective way to reward teachers is with simple notes of praise and thanks. Those notes are always appreciated and don't set up teachers as role models since most teachers are embarrassed when such public

passersby to see," said Larry Davis.

Davis acknowledges teachers who help out in special ways in his weekly Friday Buzz staff newsletter.

"Everyone loves to read about their peers," said Davis. "And if staff members know of someone who deserves recognition, they will let me know.

"We also announce special recognitions on our school Web site and the TV station that carries our school updates."

Many other principals have found the local media to be a great outlet for good news about their schools. Several times each year, Rob Ackerman, principal at Job Lane School in Bedford, Massachusetts, connects with his local newspaper to suggest they profile one of his teachers. He makes sure the teachers are aware before a reporter shows up on their doorsteps.

"Parents love to read about the teachers in our school," Ackerman told Education World. "The profiled teachers are always very modest and usually a bit embarrassed, but I

celebrity status is bestowed upon them.

Principal Keith Ingram often uses the well-written letter as a way to reward above-and-beyond efforts. It is popular with teachers and other staff, and it is inexpensive, said Ingram. I copy the superintendent with a request that the letter be added to the individual's official personnel file.

Frank Hagen has always recognized the power in a personal and written thank-you. When I was a new teacher, I quickly recognized the star teachers and sought them out for advice when I was confronted by a situation needing more than my limited experience in the classroom. I always said thank you to those who helped me, whether the person was a fellow teacher, secretary, paraprofessional, or administrator. I knew from the look in their eyes that this was reward enough, though I often followed up with a written thank-you.

When I moved from the classroom to administration, I made a point of recognizing the star teachers and other staff with thank-you notes in their mailboxes.

In my many years as a teacher and principal, I have worked with a significant number of stars who consistently went above and beyond to serve *all* students. The real stars did not seek monetary awards or rewards, or even special public recognition. What kept them motivated to go the extra mile were the inherent rewards of students succeeding academically and growing emotionally on a day-to-day basis and throughout the school year.

What is more rewarding to any of us than a student who comes to us, looks us directly in the eyes, and simply says "Thank you for being there for me?"

know deep down they really appreciate the recognition."

Alan Beam posts special news about his great teachers on his school Web site. "I also recognize them at faculty meetings, spread the word via bulk e-mail, and make announcements at board meetings, which often make it into the local paper. And I work with my tech folks to develop video highlights that air on our school network and local cable channel."

Principal Contributors to This Article

The following members of Education Worlds Principal Files team shared their thoughts in this article about recognizing star staff members.

- Rob Ackerman, principal, Job Lane School, Bedford, Massachusetts
- Alan Beam, principal, Holton (Kansas) High School
- Larry Davis, principal, OakLeaf K-8 School, Middleburg, Florida
- Frank J. Hagen, principal (retired), Saint Michaels (Maryland) Middle/High School
- Dr. Lolli Haws, principal, Oakridge Elementary School, Arlington Virginia
- Dr. Layne B Hunt, superintendent, Woodward Academy, Detroit, Michigan

- Dr. Keith Ingram, principal, Hickory Flat Elementary School, Canton, Georgia
- Marie Kostick, principal, Jefferson Davis High School, Montgomery, Alabama
- Dr. Les Potter, principal, Silver Sands Middle School, Port Orange, Florida
- Carol Robertson, principal, Lewis Vincent Elementary School, Denham Springs, Louisiana
- Gretchen Schlie, principal, International Community School, Singapore.
- Teri Stokes, principal, Weatherly Heights Elementary School, Huntsville, Alabama
- Marcia Wright, principal, Clinton (Michigan) Elementary School
- Dr. Lee Yeager, principal, S & S Middle School, Sadler, Te

To explore other practical articles from the Principal Files series, go to our [Principal Files Archive](#).

Click [here](#) to learn how you might contribute to a future "Principal Files" article.

Article by Gary M. Hopkins
Education World®
Copyright © Education World

Last updated 12/2019

