

CHAPTER 1

The Buck Reward System

Maria I. Davis

Cincinnati, Ohio

“**M**s. Davis, can I go to the bathroom?” asked Janice.
“No, *I* gotta use it!” demands Gary.
“Is we gonna do math or reading now?” asked Missy, politely.
“I need a Band-Aid, Ms. Davis. See.” (As Ashley tugs at my blouse.)
“Kirk hit me in my head!” shouted Fred.
Thinking: *It is now 8:02 and I still have six more hours of this? How on earth am I gonna get through this day?*
“Yes, you may go to the bathroom, Janice, but don’t waste time. Gary, I don’t know what ‘it’ is, but if you are referring to the bathroom, then you may use ‘it’ when Janice comes back, and I’d really like for you to say ‘have to’ instead of ‘gotta,’ okay? And Missy, did you say ‘Is we’?”
“Are we,” she says.

“Look at the schedule, sweetie. And Ashley, You said you *need* a Band-Aid, well, I *need* to win the lotto!”

“Ms. Daaaavis, you know what I mean,” whines Ashley.

“Yes, I do know what you mean, but when you would like something, ask me, don’t tell me. I will get a Band-Aid in a moment, but please sit down, and Fred, don’t start that nonsense. Kirk isn’t even here yet!”

This is a typical morning with my fifth-grade students in my urban neighborhood classroom. They are in constant conversation with me or one another, or simply having a private conversation within themselves. They are up and down, in and out of the closet, and someone is always sharpening a pencil! They always need something, and those needs must be met immediately. I know I hear “Ms. Davis” more than 100 times a day, and I feel that to be a good teacher, I must respond each and every time—well, not exactly.

I learned a rewards system years ago from a colleague by the name of Ms. Simmons. I adapted her idea and tweaked it to fit my needs and the needs of my students. This Buck System is not only a means of rewarding my students for positive behaviors, making smart choices, or for giving exemplary answers in class, but it also controls disruptive bathroom breaks and breaking class rules and discourages many of my students from yelling out answers during instruction.

For starters, I use play money that has my face on it. In the past eight years, I have used currency from 1 “buck” to 1,000 “bucks” and have tested their effectiveness with students from Grades 4 through 8. I never use all the amounts at the same time. I usually choose two amounts and stay with them the entire year. Last quarter, I introduced a larger “buck” to keep students interested during the last two months of the school year.

I use bucks to reward my students for various positive behaviors. The system is implemented the first day of school with little introduction. I simply give out bucks to students who remember to raise their hand, who show respect to a peer, or to that one student who is listening when the others just won’t shut their mouths! “Thank you so much, Todd, for showing me that you are ready,” I say, as I hand him five bucks. This *always* captures the attention of others.

As the day progresses, I try to find a reason to give every child at least one buck. Some may have a five, and others may have a twenty.

Of course, by midmorning, everyone is starting to ask questions. “What is this for?” “Why’d she give him twenty?” “What are we gonna do with these?” When the time is just right, the Buck System is introduced. I begin by asking the students, “When did you get that?” or “Why did I give that to you?” At first there is little response, but usually a sibling of a former student has all the answers—well, almost.

“We get these when we do something good. She doesn’t have to give them to us, but she thinks they are fun. You have to keep up with your own bucks just like it is real money, and you gotta save them up so you can buy something on Friday. She gets stuff like pencils, paper, pop, candy, or computer time, and if you got a lot of ‘em, you can buy lunch with the teacher! She orders pizza and pop, and you get to talk to her the whole time. If you lose them, oh, well. Plus, my brother told me that Ms. Davis will take them if you get on her nerves, or if she has to keep saying your name, and that it cost fifty bucks to go use ‘it,’ I mean, go to the restroom. Ain’t that right, Ms. Davis?”

After this condensed and somewhat inaccurate account of the Buck System, I try to mend the mistakes and get my students more interested in it.

“Thank you, Mattie. Well, almost. Let me clarify a few things. The bucks are given for positive behaviors and making smart choices, and I give them out when I think you did a fantastic job on something. Some days I may give out a lot of bucks, and other days I may not. If you want to know how well you are doing, count your bucks, but not during instruction, or I will take them. If you have had a great week, you may have a lot of bucks on Friday. However, if you missed an assignment, interrupted me while I was talking, or decided to get out of your seat without permission, you may not have many bucks. But guess what? Next week you start fresh.”

“You mean we *gotta* buy something on Friday? And if we don’t, we gotta give ‘em back to you?”

“No,” I continue. “Once you earn your bucks, they are yours, although I may take them, but I’ll explain that in a moment. What I meant was that some weeks you may get a lot of bucks, but other weeks you may not. That’s okay. It’s up to you. You will be able to tell on Friday what type of week you have had. Bucks are not to be used for any other purpose than for what we use them for here in the classroom.

They shouldn't be used at lunch to buy someone's food. If you abuse them and I find out, I will charge you."

"Charge us? What do that mean?" asked Kevin.

"Say that again, Kevin," I reply.

"What do that—I mean, what *does* that mean, charge?"

"Good question. You know that you get bucks for certain behaviors; well, I can take bucks, too. You know my rules and expectations. They are posted, and we discussed them earlier. If you break a rule, you have to pay me. I take the entire class on a restroom break once a day, but if you need to go again, you have to pay. That way, you are less likely to waste time by asking to go."

"What?" shouted Andy.

"Aw, man!" says Fred.

"That ain't fair," mumbles Gary.

"That will be five bucks apiece. Andy, Fred, and Gary, you know that you don't yell out in my room, we just talked about that."

"Aww, that's funny! She got y'all," laughed Jacob. (By the way, Jacob has already earned fifty bucks today. He is bright and opinionated, but also very loud.)

"But guess what, Jacob, I got you too! You owe me fifteen bucks."

The room has hushed. Not a sound. Thinking: *I love this. He is going to be a little upset with me, but he has enough bucks that it won't matter. Jacob will think twice next time he is ready to laugh at others.* Just then Jacob reluctantly shuffles up to me with his head down and hands me fifteen bucks without protest.

"As I was saying, when you break a rule or interrupt or disturb others, I will charge you. I sometimes forget, but believe me, your classmates will remind me. Any questions?"

"How much *does* the stuff cost?" asks Kevin.

Well, you don't buy things, you bid on them. We have Silent Auctions on Friday afternoons.

"Does anyone know what an auction is?" Heads turn, and some eyes roll as Mattie raises her hand.

"My brother told me that you set up all the things on a table during lunch. When we come back, we can look at all the stuff and pick out in our heads what we want, but we might not get it. And you can't talk during auction. That's why you call it silent auction."

“Thank you, Mattie, but you still did not answer my question. What is an auction?”

Jacob, who is no longer giving me the evil eye, raises his hand. “An auction is when items are sold to the kid who wants to pay the most bucks for it. You don’t set the price, we do.”

“Excellent, Jacob. Here you go.” Another twenty is handed to him. Jacob takes it and gives it a peck.

Helpful Tips

The Buck System is a simple way to control certain behaviors and reward students on a daily basis. I pass them out during instruction, in the hall, and any time I think a behavior should be rewarded. I make it clear to my students that I don’t *ever have* to reward them for what is expected of them, but using the bucks is my choice. Items can range from nickel candies and school supplies to the most popular one, lunch with the teacher. Initially, auctions may seem expensive, but be creative and smart. Don’t start off big, or the students will always expect big items, but remember to have at least one really “good” thing each time. Hold auctions monthly if weekly seems too often. My family members, friends, and colleagues offer items to me all the time. Take anything and everything someone gives you. You save a lot of money doing this.

Don’t give out too many bucks, or they will lose their value. Be selective on how and when to use them. For students that challenge you daily, try to “pay” them for every single positive thing that they do. This way, when you have to charge them, they can pay. It may seem unfair, but trust me, it works out in the long run. These students will miss the first few auctions, but when they start to control their behavior and have bucks to spend, they will be angels on auction day.

My students have included a wide range of unique personalities and varying abilities. I have used the bucks every year regardless of the demographics of my class. Students learn the value of money and how to count money, and they learn to budget it as well.

They learn that immediate gratification is good, but having the ability to save for that one special item is awesome.

I have shared this system with many colleagues. Sometimes they buy into it, other times they pass. I know the Buck System is nothing new. I have met a lot of teachers who use similar reward systems. However, make it your own; make it part of your daily routine. It should not be a hassle or too intrusive. Have fun with your reward system. The more you enjoy it, the more your students will as well.

Using bucks as part of teaching may seem silly, complicated, or a waste to some, but my students either learn to be respectful or they pay. I don't have to search for a quick punishment or give threats when minor incidents occur because they automatically know their consequence: They pay bucks. The amount of money I spend for my students for auction or lunch with the teacher is worth every cent because the buck system makes my day more enjoyable—and sometimes even more tolerable.