



It Works for Me

BY NATALIA ALBACETE

Educators often seek new ways to engage students in the learning process, especially beginners who are learning to play instruments. One way I motivate these students is by awarding badges for conquering difficult musical challenges or reaching significant milestones.

Why Badges?

Badges are a relatively inexpensive yet tangible reward. Because students show them off to their friends, badges also serve as a great way to promote our program. Most of our badges feature our band's popular mascot, Tiny Potato, and our campus students and teachers recognize him as part of our weird yet charming band culture. He is cute, quirky, and trendy enough that the badges appeal to all our students. They've even become collectables. When we make limited edition badges, our kids scramble to earn them.

The Badge Challenge

Consider what you want your students to focus on, and remember that you don't have to reinvent the wheel. Look through your existing supplemental materials and decide what can represent an achievement. For example, there could be a badge for playing your warmup in tune all the way through. Need to focus on music pass offs? Create thematic badges to match the music you are having students play. We dressed Tiny Potato in a Santa hat and scarf for a button to award to students who passed off their winter concert music last year.



Build It

While they could be virtual, I prefer physical badges because students can pin them to their lanyard or backpack. Every time they look at their badges, they think about band in a positive way. I found a one-inch button maker online for less than \$100, and it has been a reliable and worthwhile investment.

Celebrate Milestones

Beginners all learn some basics, even before learning music. For example, every clarinet player should know how to properly position their mouthpiece and ligature, while brass players should be able to demonstrate the proper way to oil their valves. These otherwise unsung moments become special when you commemorate them with a badge. Students who struggle to earn more challenging badges can have an opportunity to feel successful with these.

Build Community

Consider surprising students with badges for service achievements such as an older student practicing with a younger one or a student who cleans up the band hall without being asked. Build the citizens and the culture you want by acknowledging and celebrating positive behaviors.

Involve staff and administrators, too! We created a badge based on an administrator called the "Boss Badge." Whenever a student earns it, the assistant principal comes to the band hall to present the badge to the student. It's a great photo op and Tweet, and it's good advocacy for your program (see an image of this presentation on page 1).



Create a Culture

To be successful, implementing a reward system like these badges requires they become part of your culture. Think of themes, jokes, characters, or traditions your band already has (or create them) to make this special. It doesn't take long to build traditions with kids, and nothing makes a band student feel more special than being included on an inside story the rest of the school doesn't get.

I've utilized badges for years, but the success easily quadrupled once Tiny Potato became an icon for our program. Several of our band kids have even submitted their own Tiny Potato artwork to be featured on a future badge. Even the *toughest* and *coolest* kids love it. The more fun and inclusive it is, the more the kids buy in!

Don't Give Up

Badges can be a fun aspect of the otherwise tedious, necessary work of mastering a craft. Know, however, that they may not be immediately effective. Don't give up! Sometimes it takes a while to start a trend. If your kids aren't buying in or think it's too silly, consider their personalities and interests to figure out what might appeal to them—perhaps let them invent the badges. After all, though challenging, learning music is supposed to be fun, and badges may be just the motivation they need.



Natalia Albacete is the Head Band Director at West Lake MS in Humble ISD.