

Teacher of the Month

Laura Hipkiss teaches great expectations

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PHOTO BY DENISE KOSAREK

One of Laura Hipkiss' guiding principles as a first-grade teacher at Laverna Evans Elementary School in O'Fallon, Illinois, is to "teach the expectation." But she doesn't just do it for her own kids.

As a coach for Positive Behavior Intervention Support — a team that creates ways to help the school community encourage good behavior — she has a direct impact on every single student. "We plan events for the entire school, like assemblies or different quarterly or even monthly celebrations that go along with programs like our Word of the Month," Mrs. Hipkiss says.

Throughout the year, school staff — teachers, bus drivers, cafeteria workers — hand out tickets to kids as they are demonstrating positive behavior. These tickets can then be redeemed at a school store (established in part by Mrs. Hipkiss) for stickers, toys and other prizes. The store also teaches students about spending and saving — important skills that can help build a foundation for responsible decision-making.

Mrs. Hipkiss gives a lot of credit to the six- and seven-year-old students in her class, and she thinks that understanding concepts like planning ahead and thinking about the future are well within their reach. "They are little adults, and some of them are more aware of what's going on than other people might think. They pick up on adult conversations and context clues, and I think it's important to not talk down to them," she says.

Enthusiasm for teaching students how to read is a big part of what attracted Mrs. Hipkiss to first grade. "Some of them come in not knowing all of the letters, and then they leave first grade as fluent readers. They have these aha! moments when they can recognize smaller words within bigger words. You can see it in their eyes," she says.

Even seven years into teaching first grade, Mrs. Hipkiss experiences aha! moments of her own. "Sometimes you can feel like you're not getting anywhere, but when you step

back and look at the progress, it's really unbelievable. You almost forget how much they grow. When it really starts to click for them — that's the most rewarding part of teaching first grade."

Though Mrs. Hipkiss spends hours each day talking to students, she admits she felt a little awkward to be on the flip side when she was named the St. Louis Post-Dispatch's Teacher of the Month. "It's always nice to be recognized, but it was hard to hear people talking about me. Teachers tend to be humble. I was very sur-

prised. I didn't even know that I was nominated! It was very, very exciting for me."

Thanks to sponsors including First Community Credit Union, Elco Chevrolet, Kenrick's Meats & Catering, Penn Station East Coast Subs and Purina Farms, Mrs. Hipkiss was given gift cards and prizes totaling more than \$500.

Expecting the unexpected — say, being publicly honored for her innumerable contributions to Laverna Evans Elementary School on a seemingly ordinary day — is a part of the job that Mrs. Hipkiss embraced long ago: "That you never know what you're walking into is what drew me into teaching. It's the hardest part — but it's the most fun part, too."

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Shannon Keller presents a check to Laverna Evans Elementary teacher Laura Hipkiss with principal Ryan Keller.

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