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10 Tips for Setting Successful Goals With Students

By Nancy Barile

We've all heard the acronym **SMART** for goal setting. You may have even used it with students in helping them create and achieve their own goals.

But I've found that effective goal-setting needs a little something more. I have a close friend who works in the corporate world, and I frequently turn to her for advice in my own decisionmaking and goal setting. She encouraged me to create "action plans" and "action items" for each goal I want to achieve.

These techniques worked well for me, so I've transferred them to my classroom. Now my students use these concrete steps to reach their goals, giving them hope, teaching them perseverance, and helping them practice skills they can use in college and in their careers.

Here are 10 tips for creating action plans and action items with students.

1. Use verb-noun structure. Action items must *drive* the student to action—not simply be part of a "to do" list. Each action item should begin with a verb: "Attend every class," "Review notes with study partner before major tests," "Finish homework each night."

General goals are important, but students should also focus on goals that are specific to their classes. When I return corrected papers to my students, I make a list of three action items for improvement, such as: "Proofread to catch run-on sentences," "Provide literary evidence to support your claim," and "Point to broader implications in your conclusion." A student can create similar action items to improve in any subject.

2. Plan strategically and tactically. The *strategic* part of goal-setting asks students to plan with the big picture in mind: "Get an A in English," "Write an accurate lab report," "Complete 26 hours of community service," "Join the track team."

The *tactical* part of an action plan asks students to break that big picture into smaller, doable increments. If the student's action plan includes "Get an A in English," his/her action items need to include the steps to achieve that goal: "Read 10 pages each night to finish my book on time, "Annotate each soliloquy," "Attend extra help sessions."

3. Recognize when help is needed. Sometimes students aren't able to accomplish their goals without help from other people or sources. For example, if a student's action item is to earn a 700 on the Math SAT, he or she may need to get a tutor or use the College Board's **My College Quick Start** program in order to reach that goal.

4. Stop and reassess. About once a month, stop and reassess action plans with students. Sometimes circumstances and variables change, and those changes can affect students' goals. Make both you and the student ask questions like, "Are you still going down the right path?" "Have any variables changed that will affect your plan?"

5. Review action plans regularly. It's also important for students to regularly check in with their action plans. I used to tell students to keep their action plans in the front of their binders so they could see them and think about them often. Now I encourage students to keep their plans in the Notes section of their iPads or smartphones where they can be reminded of them frequently.

6. Include a timeline. Some action plans and action items may be ongoing, while others have specific time requirements. For example, for seniors applying to college, action items with deadlines are critical. Make sure students include timelines when applicable, and encourage them to sync those timelines with their calendars to achieve the best results.

7. Identify obstacles to success. Creating action items is key—but identifying what stands in the way of students' success is also an important piece of the puzzle.

A student may articulate a goal of raising a grade from a D to a B. If the student determines the grade is low because he or she isn't doing enough homework, dig deeper to find out why. Is it because they have a boyfriend or girlfriend who is distracting them? Is the student is spending too much time on social media or playing video games? Is it because the student has to take care of younger brothers or sisters or work outside the home? Once students identify obstacles, you can help them determine how to eliminate or circumvent roadblocks.

8. Include parents and families. Having student action plans with strong action items can help offset the negative feelings and anxiety that parent-teacher conferences sometimes cause (for both parents *and* teachers). Focusing on an action plan allows students and parents to work out action items and fosters a true collaborative spirit. It also restores power to the student, lessens resentment, and gives hope.

9. Aim for progress—not perfection. Sometimes improvement takes time. Students may not be able to accomplish all the action items on their action plans. Aiming for progress—rather for than for perfection—will allow students to maintain perspective, celebrate achievements, and continue persevering towards their goals.

10. Have fun! Not all goals have to be academic. Students can create action plans for relaxation and fun, too. One of my students included the goal "Learn to moonwalk." I think I'll add that to my action plan for 2015!

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