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How to Help Students Set and Reach Their Goals

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"If you don't know where you are going, you'll end up someplace else." Yogi Berra

Helping Students Reach Their Goals...One Step at a Time

Do the students in your class set goals for themselves? Do they achieve these goals? Perhaps, those questions should be rephrased. Do the students in your class set *attainable* and *realistic* goals? Do they *develop a plan and have the skills* to achieve these goals?

It is easy to set an arbitrary goal for some point in the future; however, it is quite different to consciously choose a realistic goal to attain and develop an action plan in order to achieve it. Understanding how to set realistic goals and developing a plan to achieve these goals is essential in helping students understand who they are as learners and provides them with the opportunity to reflect upon their journey, instead of simply focusing on successes and failures.

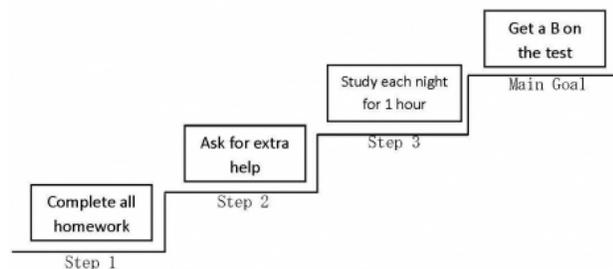
Teaching students how to set goals can be divided into three parts: first, students set realistic goals, then a step-by-step action plan is developed to help them attain their goals, and finally, students then reflect on their progression towards reaching their goals.

Setting realistic goals

Why is teaching students to set realistic goals so important? In our experiences, when we ask students to write down some of their goals, many of them quickly scrawl something along the lines of "Get an A in math," "Become captain of the basketball team," or "Become a better student." These are great goals to have, but are they realistic for that particular student? Is the goal specific or is it too broad? Is the goal clearly defined? For example, getting an A in math is great, but does that mean an A on an assignment, on a unit test, or at the end of the term? These are three very different definitions of getting an A in math, so it is very important for students to clearly define what they would like to achieve. More importantly, is that A in math realistic for *that particular* student? If a child normally gets Ds in math, then it may be overwhelming to suddenly make that A. The fear is that a child who makes an unrealistic or poorly defined goal will not be successful and then feel disappointed in their perceived "failure." If a student receives Ds in math, then it is probably more attainable to first try to achieve a B on the next math test and then work towards the A after that.

Developing a Step-By-Step Action Plan

Once teachers have worked with students to set a realistic goal, the next step is to develop an action plan that makes the goal more achievable. We define a realistic plan to not only include a set timeline and end date, but also "mini" goals to reach along the way. Students need to ask themselves, "What do I have to do in order to reach my goal?" In our experiences, we find a monthly plan to work well with students, as they then have a weekly check in to reflect on their progress. Let's take "I want to get a B on the next math test" as the goal for the month. What are some things the student can do to work towards this goal? Perhaps completing all their homework, asking the teacher for extra help, and studying each night during the week of the test are the mini-goals. We can look at this as a step-by-step progression.



Each week, students can reflect on their progression towards their goal. This makes students accountable for their success and provides them with the opportunity to understand what they need to work on next.

Reflecting on the Journey

At the end of the month, students are to reflect upon their journey and whether or not they achieved their goal. It is important to discuss with students that not everyone in the class may reach their goals—this may be due to lack of effort, difficulties along the way, or circumstances beyond their control. The class discussion should also focus on reflecting on the journey and not just on the final outcome, as the journey is just as important as the destination. For example, if the student's goal was to get a B on the next math test, but they end up with a B-, should the student be disappointed that they did not achieve their goal? Are they

a failure? No, of course not. This is the key lesson for students to realize—the journey to reach their goals is just as important (if not more important) than the outcome. If a student who normally gets Ds in math has begun to complete their homework, ask for extra help, and study for tests, then they are well on their way to attaining that B.

Too often, our students only focus on the end point instead of considering the entire journey. The key lesson for students is that determination, hard work, and reflective thought is needed in order to recognize an area for improvement and actively work to accomplish a change. At the beginning of the year, we allow students to choose any type of goal to work towards, while at other times, we choose a particular theme for students to focus; for example, teachers can have students focus on academics, extra-curricular activities, social relationships, or personal goals. In order to help you with this endeavor, we have provided a lesson plan, including a student booklet.

For a goal oriented exercise, check out this [Language Arts Goal Setting Activity](#) that is free to download.

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