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Inspiring Student Ownership of Learning is a Critical Part of COVID-19 Recovery

Dr. Chase Nordengren // Mar 23, 2021

Chase Nordengren, Ph.D., is a senior research scientist at NWEA. Here, he dives into the benefits of short- and long-term goal setting for students' academic and social-emotional growth.

It is hard to believe that it has been a year since our education system was thrust into the throws of the COVID-19 pandemic, causing unprecedented disruption to schools and changing teaching and learning as we had previously known them. For most students, gone is the typical brick-and-mortar model and in-person class time, replaced by fully virtual or hybrid learning.

As a result of this shift, many tried-and-true classroom practices and tactics have been disrupted, and teachers have faced the additional challenge of developing meaningful, trusting relationships with their students across a digital platform while building an engaging learning environment. It has also created an environment where students are expected to take charge of their own learning—with greater independence and agency over how and when they participate in school, and the types of learning they'll achieve.

As students are responsible for how and when they learn, it is critical that educators empower students to take a real ownership of their learning and help them set meaningful and realistic targets for learning that connect what they want for their lives with their educational experiences. The [learning impacts](#) we've seen as a result of the COVID-19 school disruptions make this an urgent priority.

One of the first steps in getting students to "own" their learning during this unprecedented time in education and begin to address the potential learning gaps and varied needs among students is through individualized goal setting—the process where students, teachers, and families work together to identify a short- or long-term goal for learning and outline the steps students will undertake to meet that goal.

[Goal setting provides important benefits](#) to students' academic and social-emotional growth, and that's not likely to change for students learning from home this school year. In fact, it may be extra important because goals can provide focus when things get chaotic—as students switch between in-person and virtual regularly, or their schools rapidly shift their models in order to adapt to the waves of the virus.

Furthermore, the potential impacts of goal setting on student learning are huge: [research by Robert Marzano](#) and colleagues finds students with goals may perform 18–41% higher on assessments than students without goals. Goals, research shows, tap into two important resources that support learning: they help students stay motivated, and they reinforce within schools an academic-focused culture.

We've already seen some states and educational agencies around the country recognize these impacts. For instance, in the state of California, the [California Standards for the Teaching Profession](#) call on all teachers to help all students set goals. Innovative teachers, the Standards say, develop "students' meta-cognitive skills for analyzing progress and refining goals towards high-levels of academic achievement." In line with best practices from research, the Standards are clear that teachers can't be the sole decider: students should make the ultimate decision on goals that are meaningful and realistic for them.

Given the inequity and the continued challenges students are facing, goal setting allows teachers and students to together pick a realistic target for the year's learning, not to discourage or label students as low performing, but to provide opportunities for success along the way and keep motivation high. Using frequent conversations around goals, teachers can show students how successfully understanding a mathematical concept or completing a piece of independent writing are stepping stones on the path to college or career.

[My own research on goal setting has documented](#) how effective educators use these goal setting conversations to help students develop personalized learning plans and understand the relationship between a skill like geometry and future success in careers like construction, engineering, or graphic design. All students want to succeed at something, and goal setting provides a language to connect those aspirations back to day-to-day classroom learning.

Effective goal setting doesn't require teachers to buy into an expensive program or find a magic approach. The most important elements of a goal setting practice include:

- Regularly revising goals with students
- Helping students visualize their progress, focusing on the relevance of goals
- Centering on the role of student choice

Setting goals with students is an extension of an existing student-teacher relationship. The strength of the relationship is at the heart of why goal setting is successful. That relationship will also play a major part in helping students recover from the impacts of the COVID-19 disruption. With all they know about their students, teachers are best equipped to help each student achieve both what they need and what they want.

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