

How student-driven goals make learning more meaningful

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The increase in conversations about how to serve the overall needs of students, including their social and emotional needs, is one of the silver linings of education during the pandemic.

While the energy around what's often called "social-emotional learning" has been growing in education circles for some time, the pandemic has required us to think more deeply and more comprehensively about how the outside world can impact all students' ability to learn.

With this added focus, however, comes a different danger: the danger of painting all students with a broad brush, assuming one single curriculum or set of supports can meet a variety of

different learning needs.

Educators will need to bring a whole toolbox to bear to support students who come out of this pandemic with a variety of hardships, needs, and abilities.

One tool in that toolbox is student goal setting.

In goal setting, students and teachers work together to set meaningful short-term targets for learning, monitor students' progress toward those targets, and adjust students' learning strategies to better meet those goals. While goals can provide many well-documented academic benefits, they can also serve a critical role in student wellbeing: providing the sense of meaning and belonging students need to fully engage.

Finding the energy and focus necessary to learn can be hard during any period, but is harder now for many students who are experiencing irregular school schedules, struggling with economic problems at home or worrying about their own health or the health of their families.

Academic resilience — our ability to see ourselves as capable of learning after hardships like these — is not a fixed quality. Instead, it depends on what we're being asked to learn and the attitudes we're being encouraged to have about that learning. Goal setting gives teachers a framework that lets them communicate what students are focused on, how they'll achieve that objective and why that objective should matter.

Students are most motivated by goals that are both attainable and relevant to them.

Attainability is crucial to resilience: no one should be repeatedly asked to achieve something they're unlikely to achieve and get discouraged when they don't see success. Equally important, however, is finding learning that is relevant to students' interests: the subjects they care about, the kinds of work they like to do or the types of people they want to become. In fact, attainability and relevance go hand in hand: students are capable of achieving more when content is tailored specifically to them.

One of the easiest ways to make goals relevant for students is to provide them ample opportunities for choice.

Too often, a student's goals are driven exclusively by algorithms, focused just on long-term improvement on test scores for themselves or a full class.

There's nothing wrong with these goals in and of themselves. However, to motivate students to achieve those goals, they also need short-term goals that describe the day-to-day work they'll do to build toward academic proficiency. These choices shouldn't just be about the group a student is in: they should be authentic opportunities to pick what they will focus on within the broader area of work being done by the whole class.

Goal setting doesn't look the same from teacher to teacher or even student to student. There are a variety of different approaches educators can take to setting goals, many of which have tremendous merit. One thing these effective strategies share in common is they provide teachers the time to understand a student's unique needs. Frequent interaction with students around their goals allows teachers to serve as mentors, working directly with each student on a set of goals that are attainable, related to their interests, and provide meaning.

Another critical element to effective goals is building student autonomy. The most important part of students' wellbeing in school is their sense of wellbeing as learners: whether they feel that they have a role to play in a community of learning.

School has historically not been a place where students feel in control. During the pandemic, students have lost control of the rest of their lives: who they spend time with, what activities they get to engage in, where they can go, and what they can do there.

Involving students in goal-setting and tailoring their goals to their interests and individual needs can help students feel more connected to meaningful learning. This student-driven approach provides an opportunity to bring choices back to learning in ways that help empower students to feel they belong with each other, and are capable, creative scholars.

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