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TRANSFORM YOUR SCHOOL'S CULTURE

Use student goal setting to create a new culture of learning

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At the end of the school year when the data on student learning has been collected, it can be difficult to determine the instructional moments that lead to all those results. Inside a proficiency percentage lies the thousands of opportunities in each classroom to motivate students to grow and to provide them with the tools they need to reach their highest potential. Those moments ultimately add up to a school's culture. Giving students the chance to set learning goals that motivate them can be a powerful tool in shaping that culture.

My book, *Step Into Student Goal Setting: A Path to Growth, Motivation, and Agency*, describes how teachers can incorporate effective goal-setting practices into their existing instructional routines, using concrete examples drawn from research and from the lived experience of other educators. But teachers can't do it alone. Support from school leaders can take individual goal-setting practices and connect them to the larger academic culture where goals become a routine part of learning across grade levels. While one teacher's investment in goal setting provides for accelerated student learning in a given school year, an entire school's investment in goal setting can create lifelong habits that drive long-term gains in student achievement.

Set Up a Goal-Setting Culture

Student goal setting—the process by which teachers and students work together to set short-term academic and social and emotional learning goals, track progress toward those goals, and continually adjust and set new goals for continued learning—is an opportunity to change the way students think about learning. When setting goals, students engage in metacognition: the process of thinking about thinking that is critical to other high-value practices such as cognitive task analysis, reflection, elaboration and organization, and evaluation and reflection. Goal setting can cultivate student interest in learning, alter students' perceptions of their own abilities, and clarify the relationship between success in academics and success in life.

As a school leader, your message about what learning is and why it's important matters greatly. Leaders that support goal setting celebrate growth in school assemblies, make time and space in the school day for students to reflect on their goals, and for school leaders to tell their own stories about how setting goals helped them achieve their ambitions. Just as important, school leaders understand the resources teachers need to enable proper goal-setting practices, and provide both the flexibility and instructional tools that teachers need to offer students individualized educational experiences. Remember, students setting individual goals won't make a difference if their teacher is still required to take each student through a one-size-fits-all daily scope and sequence.

What Effective Goals Look Like

Effective learning goals have three main features: They are individual to the student, they are mastery-oriented, and they balance what is meaningful with what is attainable. First, effective learning goals are specific to the achievement, needs, and interests of each student. The best path from where students are to where we want them to be is inherently different for each student. That's why goals work best when students and teachers work together to set them. To do this effectively, teachers and students need access to detailed assessment information to understand where a student is and should engage in conversations about a student's motivations, interests, and available resources.

Second, effective learning goals focus on mastery rather than performance. Mastery goals call on a student to learn in order to improve at something, become a more well-rounded person, or better understand the world around them; they're intrinsic to the goal setter. On the other hand, performance goals are focused on the student appearing smarter, outperforming their peers, or pleasing an adult. Only mastery goals regularly and routinely improve student outcomes. Students focused on mastery are more likely to feel confident, take ownership of their own success, and believe they can overcome the inevitable challenges that come with difficult learning.

Finally, effective learning goals balance what is meaningful with what is attainable. Students want to achieve goals that will make a meaningful difference in their lives—something that will help them take on a new challenge. At the same time, goals need to be attainable to prevent students from becoming discouraged and to provide a reasonable opportunity for students to succeed. These two ideas do not have to conflict with each other. If a student sets a big goal—reading a complex text or completing a large project—teachers can help connect shorter-term learning targets to the student's progress on that larger journey. These frequent connections promote the persistence students need to focus on the day-to-day activities of learning and see the value that connects those activities to what they want to achieve long term.

Support Goal Setting Across Classrooms

As a school leader, your first responsibility to student goal-setters is making sure you communicate using mastery-oriented language and approach goals with a growth mindset. Many schools celebrate those students with top grades or those who score the highest on standardized tests. Doing so demoralizes lower-achieving students, who feel they may never make the mark, and cultivates complacency among the highest achievers, who are likely to be celebrated regardless of their effort.

Instead, consider opportunities to celebrate students who meet ambitious growth goals regardless of their starting place. Find opportunities for students to benchmark their performance against themselves, and reward students who make meaningful growth over a month or a quarter. Address deficit thinking head-on by using stories and examples that highlight how all types of students can and do learn. These kinds of messages help students correctly understand that their ability to learn can change and improve over time.

Second, school leaders can empower teachers by giving them the tools and the flexibility they need to apply goals to classroom instruction. Students can best set goals when their teachers provide ample opportunities for students to understand their abilities and what they know through frequent formative assessment. Goals are also more meaningful when teachers have the flexibility to differentiate instruction based on what individual students need to reach their goals. Goals flourish in environments that are rich in the kinds of curricular resources that allow teachers to provide different kinds of learning activities for students—activities they can engage in individually, in small groups, and as a whole class.

Finally, school leaders should be prepared to embrace a different model for what effective classrooms look and sound like. A classroom where all students are working toward their individual goals is one where students are working on all sorts of different activities at any one time. To a principal peeking in through the hallway door, this kind of classroom seems louder, messier, and a little more chaotic than what they are used to. Nonetheless, these classrooms are ones where students take ownership of their learning and begin to build a different set of routines, habits, and attitudes about learning. Over time, these are the ingredients of long-term, sustainable cultural change.

The Time to Start Is Now

Just as commitment to a learning goal requires long-term persistence and a willingness for your students to set their sights high, ensuring that goal setting is an enduring practice at your school requires similar commitment and effort from day one, and day one should be today. Use this summer to prepare for a schoolwide focus on goal setting. The potential benefits from that change are vast: Students who are more invested in their learning make more meaningful choices about how and what they learn and better understand how to get from where they are to where they want to go. These values underscore the spirit that drives all educators, and they can be made real through the implementation of a goal-setting practice.

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