Strategies for Supporting Student Goal-Setting

By setting and tracking some learning goals, students can build a growth mindset and practice metacognition.

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Student achievement is often defined by predetermined benchmarks, grades, or scores; however, this one-size-fits-all approach doesn't typically acknowledge or account for students' growth.

Taking a differentiated approach to student goal-setting enables learners to redefine success by demonstrating personal progress and taking accountability for their role in the learning process. Incorporating student-created goals into the assessment process promotes intrinsic motivation, purposeful engagement, and high-quality effort from students.

By [setting goals that are specific, measurable, and challenging](#) yet realistic, students and teachers can support growth at all levels of learning and content mastery. Here's how to implement the practice in your classroom.

COLLECTING BASELINE DATA FOR GOAL-SETTING

When determining which data to use for baseline measurements in connection with students' goals, select data points that can be assessed multiple times throughout the year and that align with specific grade-level concepts or skills. This ensures that students' data collection is meaningful and connects with instruction and learning activities.

It's essential that baseline data be charted in a way that is meaningful and comprehensible to students. In my class, each student receives their own data sheet, where they graph their initial data. The sheets include spaces for additional assessments, and by using the same collection sheet throughout the year, students can look at side-by-side comparisons of their performance over time. This format makes learning visible and lends itself to clear conversations about growth, reflection, and areas for continued improvement.

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GOAL SETTING AND PROGRESS MONITORING
Once baseline data is collected, I conference with students to identify their initial scores, highlight strengths, discuss areas for growth, and set their first incremental goal.

In the goal-setting process, I typically give students a minimum range (e.g., strive to achieve 10 to 15 points above their baseline measurements for their intended goal), particularly students who are performing below grade level and have the most growth to make.

However, I allow students to set higher goals if they choose to. This approach ensures that students are making progress and working toward grade-level standards while keeping their goals realistic. For students who are already performing at or above the grade-level benchmark, goals may include maintaining a specific average, making percentage increases in their results over time, or tracking a new goal or data measurement altogether.

Whether you choose to have your students track their growth biweekly, monthly, quarterly, or per unit, it is essential that they have enough time between measurements to see meaningful growth and change, yet are checking on their progress frequently enough to feel engaged and connected.

CONTINUED CONFERENCING

During follow-up conferences, students track their next data measurement on their individual graph, compare their scores with their intended goal, and reflect on the assessment. While students are tracking their assessment data, the teacher engages with students in quick (two- or three-minute) discussions about their most recent performance; they identify strengths and struggles, talk about progress made (or the lack thereof), and set the next incremental goal.

The goal-tracking graph sheet serves as an entry point for discussions with students, since the teacher is able to identify whether growth was achieved, scores were stagnant, or scores decreased. The focus of each conference is based on where students fall within this continuum.

For example, if a student made significant growth or reached their goal, that achievement is celebrated, the student reflects and determines what helped them succeed (e.g., effort, focus, learning activities), and they set a new, higher-reaching goal.

If a student's scores remained stagnant or decreased, then the conversation focuses on identifying challenges (e.g., rushed through the assessment) and brainstorming ways to support the student's performance as they work toward the same goal, or a revised goal, before the next checkpoint.

Goal-setting conversations typically take the place of small group instruction, allowing students time to complete independent work when not in their conference.

3-STEP CONFERENCING: REFLECT, TRACK DATA, SET GOALS

When engaging with students through reflective conferencing, I focus on incorporating three aspects regardless of how students perform on benchmark assessments. First, I probe the student's initial thoughts, such as "How did your assessment go? What went well, or what was challenging? What can you keep doing, or change for next time?"

Next, as students update their data sheet, we talk about their performance, learning process, and areas for adjustment.

Finally, after setting a revised or entirely new goal, I talk with the student about how to prepare for success, whether through independent learning activities, additional small group instruction, access to additional resources/supports, or strategies to support their performance on future assessments (e.g., taking their time, showing their work, going back and rereading, eliminating wrong answers, finding optimal seating to maximize their focus, or asking for clarification).

In my experience, setting goals holds students accountable for their learning; fosters positive perceptions of assessments over time (due to its emphasis on growth over time and its visual representation of student progress throughout the year); and bolsters connections between instruction, guided practice, independent application, and assessment.

THE 'WHY'

Through the use of differentiated goal-setting and data tracking, students authentically engage in the learning process and recognize the purpose and intentions behind learning activities that directly support progress toward their goals. This approach may also instill a growth mindset, providing students with equitable opportunities for success.

By setting goals, tracking individual growth, and celebrating their accomplishments while reflecting on moments of struggle (and engaging in collaborative problem-solving), students practice metacognition, gain self-awareness, and widen their definition of success while learning.

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