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Make It Stick

Goal setting for middle and high school students

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MAKE IT STICK

Goal setting for middle and high school students

BY PATRICK WU

All of us have goals. Whether it is simply to make it through the day without five cups of coffee or to save enough money for retirement, we are continuously setting goals for ourselves for the future. The same can be said about our students, whether it is a goal of completing a certain amount of service hours, becoming a more involved chapter member, or striking up the courage to step up and lead. But how do we make the goal-setting process of our students visible? And more importantly, how can we help them achieve their goals?

Just because something is taught doesn't mean it has been learned. As with any other content or skill, goal setting must be woven into a student's everyday routine and practiced. It has to stick.

As a classroom teacher and educational adviser, I have learned a few tricks that have helped my students with making the goal-setting process "sticky."



Goals do not need to be all or nothing, nor should they stay the same; rather, they should be constantly changing, as our students are.

FOCUS ON DEVELOPING POSITIVE HABITS

One of the biggest differences between the goals that adults and adolescents set is that students tend to only be able to focus on the short term. Research shows that adolescents have yet to fully develop their brains in a way that allows them to think about the long term. Instead of seeing this as a hurdle, use it as an advantage. Instead of motivating your students to take on big, hairy, audacious goals, have them focus on small, simple, achievable habits that will stick. As the adage goes, “How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.” The same could be said for goal setting, especially with students.

I once worked with a student who decided to run a marathon. She didn’t just wake up one day and run the race; rather, she focused on forming the habit of running 30 minutes a few times a week. Then she was able to build on that habit to run more frequently, longer, and faster so that one day she was able to complete her marathon. Similarly, for the student who might have the goal of becoming student council president, break down the daily habits that the student needs to reach this goal—habits like showing gratitude (make a list of three things you’re thankful for each day, for example), mentoring others, and creating a shared vision.

Focusing on these small, achievable habits that will stick eventually gets the student to the goal one small step at a time. Moreover, by developing habits, students are able to track their daily progress and receive regular feedback on their growth in a way that will develop confidence.

PRACTICE PURPOSEFULLY

Goal setting takes purposeful practice. A former coach of mine used to say, “Practice doesn’t make perfect; perfect practice makes perfect.”

We need to teach our students that spending lots of time working on something is a valuable skill, but it will only help

if you spend that time *purposefully*. For students who want to become professional musicians, I often need to remind them that there’s a difference between just practicing simple songs repeatedly and focusing on the specific skills they need to improve. Instead of playing easy songs that might be more fun, how about practicing more challenging scales or recording the practice session and playing the music back to catch mistakes so they can fix them?

For the student who has a goal of becoming a stronger leader in your group, teach him the skills of practicing purposefully. Instead of just assuming leadership positions for every project, why not encourage students to read books about leadership, study the habits of role models, and watch TED Talks to identify and focus on a few strong leadership habits? Or, for the student who doesn’t want to ask for help, teach her that purposeful practice means knowing where to find help and being able to ask for it when stuck.

The Freakonomics podcast (<https://freakonomics.com/podcast/peak>) has a great episode about this that I’ve shared with my students, one which resonates with them when it comes to focusing on purposeful practice to reach their goals.

CREATE A COLLABORATIVE ENVIRONMENT

Another tactic that’s important to teach students is not to compare their own goals and progress to the goals and progress of others. This is not to say that students shouldn’t be aware of the goals of others. In a celebrated recent example, marathoner Des Linden focused on helping fellow runner, Shalane Flanagan, try to reach her goal of winning the Boston Marathon. When Flanagan fell behind early in the race, Linden fell back with her, telling her that she might not finish the race herself and that she would do what she could to help Flanagan keep up. As the race went on, by focusing on helping Flanagan reach her goal, Linden herself ended up winning the marathon.

Teaching students to help each other reach their goals is a powerful and important lesson. It teaches them that goal setting should be a collaborative process, and that there is no shame in asking for help in reaching their goals. It is important to encourage students to share their goals with others so they can both get and receive help when necessary.

REVISIT, REVISE, AND RETRY

Goals that we can reach on the first try are often too easy, and goals that are impossible will frustrate us, so it is important for students to revisit, revise, and retry their goals on an ongoing basis. When I was an NHS member, I used to set goals for completing a set amount of service hours each year. Some years I would exceed those goals; other times I would fall short. However,

as time went on, my goals around service evolved as I learned that the quality of the service was more important than the quantity. I also learned that sticking with one service project for a sustained period of time would make a greater impact than trying out a whole bunch of different ones where I could barely scratch the surface.

The same is true with the goals our students set. They will no doubt meet obstacles and learn lessons that will cause them to re-evaluate their goals. They will also experience instances that will make them decide to set even more ambitious and thoughtful goals. Therefore, it is important to make time and space for the reflection and evolution of goals. Goals do not need to be all or nothing, nor should they stay the same; rather, they should be constantly changing, as our students are. One way to help students write and revise their goals is through the acronym SMART, which stands for specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely.

While meeting time is sacred, I encourage you to find 15 minutes a week to let students work on their goals. This can be reflection time, time to revise their goals, or actually putting some time into working toward their goals. Having students learn to put in time on a regular basis toward reviewing and reflecting on their goals allows not only for purposeful practice, but for them to develop the habit. Otherwise, goal setting becomes a mundane, lifeless process that students will forget about.

CREATE VISIBLE ARTIFACTS AND DAILY REMINDERS

To really make goals stick, it is important to make goal setting public and to have artifacts and regular reminders of goals. Just as you might set a daily alarm or set reminders on your phone to remember important times or dates, having a way to see our goals every day helps us become more accountable in striving toward them.

For instance, you can have students post their written goals in their lockers so that it is the first and last thing they see during the school day. You can also encourage them to list their goals on their ceiling at home somehow so they can see their goals when they wake up and before they go to sleep. One of my favorite stories about this strategy is from football linebacker Isaiah Kacyvenski, who made a sign to hang in his room when he was younger that read: “Let no one outwork you today.” Kacyvenski went on to become a Harvard graduate and NFL player.

Having everyday reminders of our bigger, longer-term goals is helpful when we spend much of our lives focusing on the short-terms goals. Some teachers already help to create visible artifacts of goals with mastery trackers; remember that tracking growth does not have to be solely about academics. Rather, tracking our

personal and chapter goals publicly can help everyone become more accountable to themselves and each other.

MODEL AND SHARE YOUR OWN GOALS

Modeling your own goals—much the same way you might walk students through doing a service project or organizing a school event—can often be helpful. This allows students to see the skills needed when you find it necessary to revise a goal or when you need to brainstorm ways to overcome a barrier. Plus, I’ve found that students love being able to give advice to help you reach your goals.

CELEBRATE THE PROCESS

Perhaps the most important piece of advice I can give, however, is to focus on the process of setting goals more than the goals themselves. In the long run, the actual goals are secondary to the effort students put in to achieving them. When I was younger, I wanted to be a professional tennis player. While I never made it, I do not regret the time and effort I put into this goal, as it taught me persistence, how to bounce back from failure, and many other lifelong lessons.

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The real benefit of goal setting is that students learn skills that will help them both inside and outside the classroom. It is important not only to celebrate students for reaching their goals, but also for the effort they put into them, their willingness to take risks in striving for them, their ability to deal with failure, and how they learn from their mistakes.

The best advisers are the ones who equip their students to be successful once they leave their school. The best thing we can do as educators is to teach students the sticky skills to be successful goal setters in the long run. •

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