Helping Students Set and Achieve Goals

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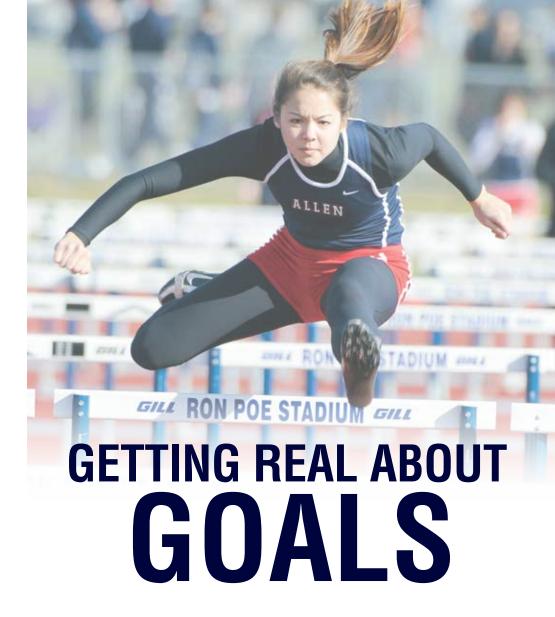
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GETTING REAL ABOUT
GOALS

Using WOOP to Overcome Obstacles

Jostens

Having and working toward goals is vital for success in school, work and life. Effective goals can motivate students to work hard, change their behaviors and focus attention on what really matters to them as they envision their own futures. But it's much easier to say you have a goal than it is to work toward and reach one. People aspire to many things that they say they want, but they never really work toward. For example, students may say they want to go to a competitive college, but then not take the actions and reach the milestones that will actually help them get there.

As the school year begins to wind down, it's a good time to encourage students to reflect on their goals for their summer and the near future. What do they really want, in the short- and long-term? What steps will they take to get there? How will they deal with obstacles and setbacks?

This month's Renaissance Kit highlights the importance of goals, goal setting and goal management for students. It introduces a research-based approach to setting goals called WOOP (Wishes, Objectives, Obstacles, Plans), which helps students set realistic goals, envision success and deal with obstacles that come up. And it shows how teachers, peers and parents can all help kids be successful in working toward their goals.

—Kent Pekel, Ed.D.
President and CEO, Search Institute

The Importance of Goal Setting

Goals are simply statements of what we intend to do. Setting goals is a critical part of student motivation and achievement that has been studied since the mid-1960s. Setting goals provides a focus for managing or changing behaviors or how we spend time. Key findings across numerous studies and contexts include the following insights:

- Goals are necessary for judging competence and defining success and failure in many endeavors.
- Having specific, challenging goals boosts performance in goal-related areas.
- If goals are so challenging that failure seems probable, they are not motivating.
- Consciously setting goals makes it more likely that people will take actions toward those goals.
- Determining how to overcome obstacles in advance improves self-discipline and performance.

A review of studies of goal-setting estimated that employers could increase productivity by 10 percent if they helped workers set realistic, specific, but difficult goals. Might the same be true for student achievement?

Three Parts of Goals for Behavior Change

By itself, goal setting will have little impact. Research on goals and behavior change identifies three aspects of goals that, when combined, lead to behavior change or learning:

1. **Setting goals**, which provides a focus for learning or behavior change. Goal setting includes both the goal itself (what you want to achieve) as well as what you will do to lead to the goal. Specific, short-term, measurable goals are more likely to be acted on and, therefore, lead to change or learning.

2. **Problem solving** involves identifying strategies for overcoming barriers to desired goals as well as dealing with setbacks that come up. This isn't a one-time activity, but an ongoing part of working toward goals.

3. **Goal review** involves monitoring and assessing progress toward a goal. Simply monitoring behavior (such as wearing a pedometer to track daily steps) can reinforce the desired activity. Goal review can also include checking in with others for accountability and support.

How Goal Oriented Are Youth?

A gap often exists between young people's future goals and their planning skills to "get there." A survey of 122,269 middle and high school students by Search Institute found that many young people have a positive view of the future, believe they can overcome challenges, and have a sense of purpose. Yet they lack planning and decision-making skills, and they don't consistently delay gratification for something they really want.

Has a positive view of the future	**73**%
Is able to overcome adversity	**69**%
Has a sense of purpose	**61**%
Delays gratification	**53**%
Has planning and decision-making skills	**36**%

Consistent Long-Term Goals Across Generations

Sometimes we think that each generation of students is completely different from past generations. Yet long-term research shows that the life goals of seniors in high school are not a lot different between the Boomers (who started college between 1966 and 1978) and Millennials (who started college between 2000 and 2009). This conclusion grows out of in-depth analysis of large, nationally representative studies of high school seniors and college freshmen that have asked the same questions since the 1960s about a wide range of life goals.

Analysis found that the top life goals of these two generations were remarkably similar when they each completed high school and entered college, with goals just in a different order:

	Boomers	Millennials
Developing a meaningful philosophy of life	1	5
Becoming an authority in my field	2	4
Helping others who are in difficulty	3	3
Raising a family	4	2
Being very well off financially	5	1

Millennials are, however, more likely to admit that they don't really want to work that hard for their goals than the Boomer generation: 39% versus 25%.

Goal Setting: Not Just a Rational Process

Sometimes the "teen brain" is characterized as being less developed, which leads to riskier behaviors. However, recent brain research suggests that the teen brain is more accurately thought of as being more flexible. It allows young people to adapt more quickly to changes in themselves and in the world around them. This flexibility makes it more open to exploring and adjusting to achieve goals, particularly if young people are motivated to do so.

Often the strongest motivations are more short term and grounded in their relationships and feelings. If we can tap into these motivations, we can cultivate "enduring, heartfelt goals" that are tied to young people's core values and attitudes. Researchers illustrate the point this way: "Individual differences in the tendencies to be kind, honest and loyal in a romantic relationship may have as much to do with one's feelings about these values and the consciously weighed decisions about the consequences of such behaviors" (Crone & Dahl, p. 647).

Motivating Goals: Are We Missing the Mark?

Common understandings of school success sometimes interfere with students setting goals that motivate them to learn. We typically think of school success based on comparisons (e.g., class rank), evaluation or performance (e.g., grades), or ability goals (e.g., test scores). These are called "performance goals."

We're less likely to think of school success based on task goals, learning or mastery goals. These would include goals about becoming more knowledgeable, getting better at something or learning to satisfy curiosity. These are called "mastery goals."

But this emphasis on "performance goals" tends to be counterproductive. Most positive motivation and learning occurs when schools emphasize mastery and understanding more than competing for grades. For example, middle schools that promote a "mastery learning" focus tend to have students who have more academic self-efficacy. In the end, that leads to better grades (even though that's not the focus).

Whether students are motivated by performance or mastery is not just a matter of an individual's makeup. Rather, it is greatly influenced by the dominant approach in the school. If teachers create a culture that emphasizes mastery, students respond accordingly. In reality, of course, most tasks include some mix of mastery and performance goals. The question is about which goals are emphasized.

Indulging or Dwelling

People, including students, tend to set and work toward goals in two problematic ways:

Indulging
This approach involves imagining all of the good things that could come from achieving a goal, but not identifying any of the barriers that might get in the way. This approach reduces the effort put into achieving the goal, because they have skipped over what it takes to get there.

Dwelling
This approach involves focusing only on the obstacles, without paying much attention to the benefits of achieving the goals. These people lose motivation to work toward the goal.

When the benefits of achieving a goal are considered along with the obstacles, the resulting mental contrast increases the chances that the person will achieve the goal. In this approach, people become realistic optimists as they pursue their goals in life.

Positive Goals Matter, Even in the Face of Challenges

It can be challenging to focus on goals and the future when you're not sure you have one — or that the future will be positive.

For some young people, the future doesn't seem positive because of personal issues such as depression, mental illness, addictions or a major loss. In some cases, negative experiences or choices in the past limit options for the future.

For others, the future doesn't seem positive because of community or social challenges, such as poverty, institutional discrimination, neighborhood violence and limited opportunities.

Yet, even in these cases, a focus on a positive future can be a powerful resource to motivate and guide choices. To be sure, the goals may be different. For example, young people may focus on how to adapt and navigate in the midst of adversity. Thinking about a positive future can help with motivation, coping, adapting and, potentially, connecting with others to improve the situation together.

One study found, for example, that working with juvenile offenders to think about their future selves had potential to help them think specifically about how they might turn their lives around, even though they had difficulty developing a concrete, positive vision of their future selves.

Supportive Relationships

Students don't work on goals in a vacuum. The people around them — peers, parents and teachers — can either motivate or de-motivate them to work on and achieve our goals. They do this by:

- Reinforcing or undermining students' self-confidence;
- Increasing or decreasing the perceived value of achieving the goal (including disagreeing with a young person's goal); or
- Placing obstacles or distractions in the way of achieving the goal.

Having friends, teachers and family members who are reinforcing the goal can be a big help. In addition, maintaining warm relationships can increase young people's self-confidence in general, freeing them to focus on achieving their goals, not worrying about their relationships.

Setting and achieving goals is a complex challenge. Success is shaped by who we are, the goals we set, the strategies we use, and people who support us. Educators and parents can influence each of these elements to help young people take responsibility for their own growth and learning.

Personal Attitudes
For students to work hard on goals, two attitudes are important. First, they must value the goal. It must be something that's important to them. If they don't really value or see the benefit of the goal, they are much less likely to invest in it. Benefits may include positive feedback from others, prestige and the intrinsic value of achieving the goal.

Second, they must believe they can achieve it. If they are not confident in themselves or if the goal is too challenging, they will not be motivated to reach it — even if they see value in it. Sometimes they may be blocked from believing they can achieve it based on stereotypes or gender roles.

Meaningful and Challenging Goals
Moderately difficult goals tend to evoke more effort than goals that are too easy or too hard. Their reach (goal) should exceed their grasp (current ability), enough to feel like it is doable with effort, and enough that it will be satisfying and reinforcing when they do succeed. All truly motivating goals arise from some level of dissatisfaction with where one is currently. It is the dissatisfaction that creates energy for improvement, as long as the improvement goal is reasonably realistic.

Effective Strategies: The WOOP Approach
WOOP is a research-based goal-management process (or self-regulation strategy) that helps people articulate their goals and the obstacles that stand in the way of reaching their goals. It has been used in many areas of personal behavior change. The acronym WOOP stands for the major components:

Wish	Think of a wish or goal that is important to you but possible to achieve.
Outcome	Identify the benefits or best thing that could come from fulfilling the wish or goal.
Obstacle	Identify things that you have control over that could prevent you from fulfilling the wish.
Plan	Identify steps you could take to remove or overcome the obstacles. Adjust as needed.

In a small study, researchers found that using the WOOP approach significantly improved students' grades, attendance and conduct. In another, students who practiced writing WOOP exercises completed 60 percent more practice exam questions than control group students.

The WOOP process developed by German psychologist Gabriele Oettingen and her colleagues helps people overcome difficulties and distractions that keep them from reaching goals and completing tasks. It works best for goals, or wishes, that take weeks or months rather than days or years to achieve. Thus, it helps achieve the intermediate goals that are often the building blocks of success in school and in life.

Use the WOOP process to coach individual students who are struggling with completing assignments. Or you can guide a class to use the process for working on a major project or paper that will take several weeks to complete, focusing on something about the assignment that is important to them personally.

Use the student worksheet, "The WOOP Process," for this activity. (Available at www.JostensRenaissance.com/renkit.)

Step 1

To introduce these concepts with your students it may be helpful to begin the discussion with some broad, goal-focused questions. The examples students generate from these questions may guide the classroom activities.

- Looking back, what is one goal you've met that you're really proud about? What helped you accomplish this goal?
- How has setting goals helped you in the past do something that is important to you? If you haven't set goals, how has that affected you, if at all?
- What is a goal you've had that you haven't reached yet? What gets in the way?

Step 2

Identify the WISH: Using the discussion points above, have students identify a wish or goal they genuinely want to achieve. It should be challenging, achievable and specific, such that success can be measured. Write this goal on the worksheet.

Step 3

Articulate and imagine the OUTCOMES: Have students imagine and write down the good things that would come from achieving that goal, and take a moment to form mental images of what that would look and feel like.

Step 4

Identify the OBSTACLES: Have students imagine and write down things that could keep them from reaching the goal. Focus on things they have control over (such as distractions or other interests). Then have them imagine when and where the obstacles might be encountered. (This will help create mental images that the student can bring to mind later if and when trouble occurs.)

Step 5

Develop a PLAN: Have students reread the obstacles, and then write an if-then statement to describe what they will do to solve each obstacle if and when they encounter it. Work with students to make the if-then statement as clear and actionable as possible.

Additional Reflection

Think of someone you know who is particularly effective at planning and working on goals. What does she or he do that seems to make a difference?

Who are the people who have supported and guided you as you have worked toward goals? How has that made a difference?

Touch base with students from time to time. Find out whether the obstacles have been encountered and, if so, whether the if-then plans have been effective. If students encounter unanticipated obstacles, have them add those to the worksheet and create if-then statements for them as well.

THE WOOP PROCESS

WOOP is a strategy for setting and working toward your goals.
Use this worksheet to think through how to use the WOOP strategy to achieve a short term goal.

1. Wish:
Something you can achieve in the next few weeks or months.

I wish I could be better prepared for tests and study more ahead of time.

2. Outcomes:
Benefits that could result from achieving your wish. Why do you want to do this?

1. Better grades
2. Less stress
3. Good habits for college
4. Less embarrassment over bad grades

3. Obstacles:
What is likely to get in your way?

Don't ever seem to have enough time.

Studying is boring.

I'd rather spend time with friends.

I don't understand the material.

4. Plan:
What will you do to overcome each obstacle?

I will plan at least 15 minutes every day to study.

Break up study time with planned breaks.

Form study groups so I can hang out and study.

See the teacher or a tutor for help.

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Any student who has played video games has experienced sophisticated goal setting processes, since the secret of great video games is to motivate players to keep working to achieve higher and higher goals (or levels). Use these gaming experiences to articulate thoughts about goal setting, setbacks, and how to deal with the many obstacles that can pop up when you pursue the quest. This activity would work well in any class dealing with goal setting, though it might be particularly relevant in computer classes.

Step 1
Brainstorm with students their favorite 8 to 10 video games. Identify one game that (1) most students have played that (2) involves clear goals and (3) is appropriate to talk about in a classroom. (Some games will be offensive to some students due to violence, stereotypes or explicit sexuality.)

Step 2
Tell students that you're going to work together to deconstruct the goal-setting strategies the game creators used to make the game so fun and engrossing to play. Ask these questions to identify examples in the game that illustrate the power of goals and goal-setting, writing key points on the white board:

- What are you trying to accomplish in this game? (State the goals, both short-term and long-term.)
- What happens in the game to keep you interested and focused?
- How do you get better at the game?
- What happens if you get stuck? Do you give up or stay motivated? Why?

Step 3
Give students each a copy of the "Achieving Your Goals" flyer. How many of the ideas from this flyer are also found in the video game? Are there other ideas that came up as you discussed the video game that you would add to the flyer?

Goals and Video Games

If you need to nudge students to think of connections to goal management strategies, use this information that's relevant to many video games:

- Levels often represent milestones toward the goal of winning the game.
- Trophies, badges, awards, stamps, medals or challenges can keep you motivated when the bigger goals are further away.
- You problem-solve through many obstacles, enemies and setbacks.
- As you keep trying, you get better.
- They are repetitive, so you can practice getting better.
- When games are too simple, you get bored and quit.
- The games are challenging, but not so challenging that you give up. They get more challenging as you get better and better.
- There's always something you can do next.
- You get immediate feedback about what's working and what isn't.
- It's clear when you accomplish a goal.

Sometimes we get so excited about our goals that we charge forward to achieve them. Then we hit barriers or obstacles and, if we're not careful, these can set us back or send us off in a different direction.

This activity focuses on "if-then" plans, since it's easy to forget this part of reaching goals. Students look back at previous experiences in order to think more clearly about obstacles they may encounter in the future. This activity can be customized for any class where students are responsible for setting and achieving goals over several weeks (such as doing a paper or research project).

NOTE: Emphasize that the focus is on obstacles that they can overcome. Be prepared for some students to raise obstacles such as racism, sexism and economic disadvantages, and be ready to acknowledge those are real obstacles, but are on the back burner for the purpose of this activity.

Step 1
Find 3-5 objects for each student that can symbolize obstacles or barriers. These might include dominoes, buttons, pebbles or wooden blocks. Also give each student a sheet of paper and something to write with.

Step 2
Have students draw (or describe) a goal or wish they have had in the past for themselves that they did not reach. It could be a goal in school or work, or a personal goal (such as creating a project or being chosen for a team). It's important that it is a goal that the student really wanted, not just something he or she had to do for a teacher or parent, and won't mind discussing with other students.

Step 3
Have students form small groups of three or four. Place their papers with unfulfilled wishes at the center of the table. Describe them to everyone.

Step 4
Have one student describe something that got in the way of fulfilling that wish. Place one of the "obstacle objects" on top of the "wish" paper. Then have the next student do the same for her or his wish. Continue until everyone has put down one obstacle, then go around adding one obstacle at a time.

Step 5
When everyone has identified several obstacles, have them discuss these questions:

- Looking back, which obstacles would have been the hardest to overcome?
- What strategies could you have used to overcome or work around some of these obstacles?
- If you were to try to achieve this goal or wish now, what obstacles would you anticipate? What plans would you put in place to help you work around them?

Additional Opportunities

Have students think next of a goal they are currently working on, and discuss:

- What obstacles might come up?
- What would they do to overcome them?

Have them write their ideas as if-then statements:
If [an obstacle happens], I will [take these actions].

Some people go through life mostly waiting for things to happen to them or for them. Other people actively go after what they want—their goals—investing a lot of time and energy in their quest. This activity invites your family to learn about goal setting from stories of their ancestors who took personal initiative to achieve important goals.

Step 1

Choose a story.
As a family (including grandparents and great-grandparents, if possible), recall a story about when someone in your family, past or present, made bold changes to achieve a new goal. Perhaps someone moved to a new country or town, sacrificed to start a business or advance education, or confronted a social injustice. These changes might have been voluntary, or they might have been forced on the individual by circumstances (such as a job change, divorce, chronic illness, discrimination, war or other factors).

Step 2

Flesh out the story. With your family's help, answer these questions in a way that tells the story:

- Who was involved and what did they do?
- What goal motivated their change? Why did they do it?
- What obstacles or challenges did they face? How did they deal with them?
- How long did it take to see positive results from the change?
- In what ways has this change affected your family today?

Additional Opportunities

Researchers find a number of qualities that distinguish people who take initiative to achieve their goals from those who don't. People who take initiative tend to:

- Be willing to invest themselves in their goals and achieve a sense of purpose.
- Not take failure, setbacks or disappointments personally.
- See obstacles or challenges as opportunities for personal growth.
- Feel energized when working for things that matter, even if it's really hard.

Do you see any of these qualities in your own family's story? Add these elements.

Create a small poster showing "Lessons from Our Past on Taking Initiative." Write down the top five lessons that you see in these stories. Keep it handy so family members can look at it when they need a motivating boost to tackle a challenge.

"Setting goals is the first step in turning the invisible into the visible."

—Tony Robbins, motivational speaker and author

NOTE:
This activity is adapted from www.parentfurther.com. For more family activities on goal-setting and planning for the future, visit www.parentfurther.com/content/set-goals-growing

Helping Students Select and Reach Goals

We know that students are most motivated when they set their own goals based on what is important to them. But teachers still play an important role in encouraging them to reach their goals. In addition to introducing the WOOP process to students, try these strategies to enhance their abilities to set and reach goals.

Connect with students.
Get to know what makes them tick and what motivates them. This understanding will help you coach them to identify goals that are meaningful to them. It will also boost their self-confidence when they believe they matter to you.

Give choices when making assignments.
This can increase the likelihood that they will be motivated to work on goals based on the assignment.

Coach them in setting goals.
Goals tend to be most motivating when they are specific, challenging and achievable. For example, a goal to "get better at" algebra is not terribly motivating. A goal to get 8 of 10 algebra problems correct instead of 5 out of 10 is easy to visualize.

Think out loud about strategies to achieve goals.
Encourage them to verbalize strategies for reaching their goals. (Saying it out loud helps students remember.)

Give specific feedback.
It shows that you are paying attention and that they are doing specific steps to make progress. "Good job" doesn't explain why the student is moving towards a goal. "I like how you've broken that big assignment into small, doable pieces" would be better.

Help them create positive habits.
People are more likely to work on goals when there are cues in the environment that trigger the goal-related action. (A note on a mirror is a classic example.) This makes the actions more automatic or habitual, so you do them even when you're thinking about other things.

Coach them in setting plans and priorities.
This planning includes not only what they intend to do, but also problems that might occur and ways of dealing with them. It also involves setting priorities for how to use their time so they can stay on track.

Recalibrate when needed.
Slip-ups will happen. They are part of the learning process. It's important to help students learn from mistakes and setbacks, and then work to get on track toward the goal.

Celebrate milestones and achieved goals.
Positive feedback and celebrations to mark goal achievement reinforce students' confidence and their motivation to pursue their next goals.

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