**Teach.
Learn.
Grow.**
the education blog

Your guide to
goal-setting success

nwea

Table of contents

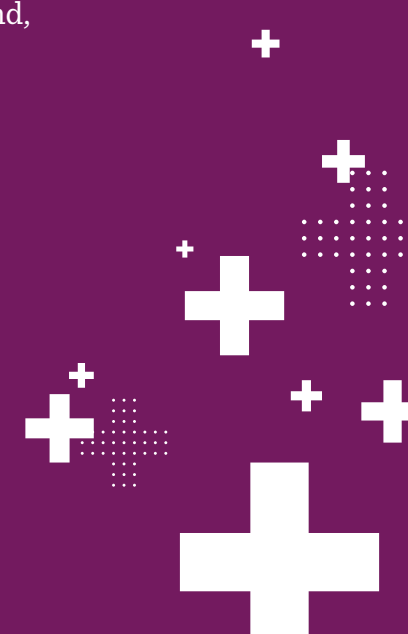All students—no matter their age, background, or abilities—have things they want to do and become. It's part of our job as educators to show students that their goals are seen, that they're valuable, and that education provides the tools they need to achieve them.

Student goal setting puts a process behind these efforts. By connecting directly with students about their goals, working with them to monitor their learning progress, providing more opportunities for students to exercise autonomy and choice, and celebrating student success, you can help kids see school not as a barrier to what they want but as the enabler that will get them there.

Any new practice can feel daunting at first, goal setting included. Administrators can be an important part of making that process easier for their teachers by providing the resources and flexibility teachers need to have goal setting conversations and plan instruction to meet each student's needs. This eBook is designed to provide another support: specific tips and practices that make goal setting concrete and show how student data can directly inform which goals are right for which students.

As you read these pages, look for small opportunities to start doing this work, with one goal or even one student. Chances are you're already using many of the techniques in formative assessment and social-emotional learning that goal setting draws upon. Rather than supplanting those practices, goal setting can be the glue that ties them all together into a single story that students can easily understand, motivating them to grow.

3 school goal-setting opportunities to seize—and 3 pitfalls to avoid

Jordan Grant

COVID-19 has disrupted learning in more ways than any of could have ever imagined. So where do we go from here? In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Do not go where the path may lead. Go instead where there is no path and leave a trail."

The following strategies can help you take goal setting from perilous to pioneering. They can help you rethink your goal-setting process as a whole and make lasting changes that will serve your school, teachers, and students well. I encourage you to focus on the possibilities of improved school goal setting while avoiding the pitfalls. Here's how.

Possibilities to pursue

1. **Use a baseline.** Using evidence for school decisions is more important than ever. While the extended school closures from COVID-19 are a first, summer learning loss has always been a concern. In previous years, many schools set goals based on spring data without taking potential summer learning loss into account. Now is an opportunity to set a new practice for getting a baseline. School leaders should assess early using MAP®Growth™ and other assessments to make the best informed decisions.

2. **Triangulate data.** In the past, spring summative data has made it easy for schools to set goals overly reliant on only one set of data, such as state exam scores. Moving forward, try establishing goal setting based on a more diversified set of data. Consider examining multiple measures when setting school goals this year. Revisit "Here's how to source and manage student data" for guidance on the key steps of data triangulation.

3. **Focus on proficiency and growth.** A prior emphasis on spring summative data has also led to school goals with a narrow focus, such as increasing the percent proficient on the state test. Students are back in school following COVID-19 disruptions with a wide range of unfinished, on track, and advanced learning. Learning at both ends of the spectrum will not be captured if we only look at proficiency. Include both type of goals instead: growth, which recognizes all the learning occurring at a school, and proficiency, which keeps an eye on benchmarks for success.

Pitfalls to prevent

1. **Waiting until fall to start this work.** Don't miss out on the great work time provided by the summer. If you use MAP Growth, here are two ways to go about getting good baseline data:

   - **Review your [District Summary Report](),** which shows district or school data over multiple testing terms and years. Look at your school's previous fall-to-fall RIT growth to consider what growth you might make. With this information in mind, set a finalized goal once you have your fall scores.

   - **Look at your [Student Growth Summary Report](),** which shows your school data by grade. For your last tested term, analyze each grade's percentile ranking and standard deviation (SD). Assume that grades with the lowest percentile ranking or highest SD last year will return in the fall at the same place or with even more needs. Use these findings to start to conceptualize where more support may be needed.

2. **Naming the "what" without the "how."** Setting goals is just the destination in the GPS; you still need the route. Given the interrupted learning experienced during the pandemic, it will be especially important that you map out various supports that will allow you to achieve school goals. Here are some support examples to consider:

   - **Staff professional development.** Determine how you will tailor staff professional learning to handle greater student readiness variance in classes.

   - **Teacher collaboration.** Add time for teachers to collaborate vertically across grades to gain expertise in their students' varied learning needs.

   - **Scheduling.** Get creative with scheduling by extending the school day, offering after-school tutoring, or developing a flexible block so students can get differentiated instruction.

3. **Not involving the community.** Goals should happen with people, not to them. When shared collectively, goals become more of a group effort. School leaders can distribute responsibility for reaching them across the full community and get everyone's buy-in. Some families might want to lend their time or expertise to further school goals, for example. Students might have some fun coming up with benchmark goal incentive ideas, while teachers may have creative ideas for adjusting curricular maps. Leveraging the full learning community helps ensure goals are met.

Imagine the possibilities

Setting school goals after COVID-19 disruptions is unknown territory for all of us and can be daunting. But by shifting our mindset, just as we ask our students to do every day, we can see this challenging time as an opportunity to improve goal-setting practices for this school year and beyond. Go forth, trailblazers!

Educators share their tips for setting and monitoring effective goals

Erin Ryan

In our webinar *Goals mean growth: Using student goal setting to jumpstart student motivation and success*, NWEA® researcher and author Chase Nordengren shared actionable strategies for making goal setting part of your practice. He highlighted insights and research from his new book, *Step into Student Goal Setting: A Path to Growth, Motivation, and Agency*, and provided fresh ideas for increasing motivation and student agency.

Educators attending the event had an opportunity to share what works well in their own goal-setting practice. In the spirit of teachers helping teachers, we're highlighting some of those responses and demonstrating how they align with Chase's five research-based principles for setting and monitoring effective goals: start, build, showcase, create, and center.

1. Start (early and keep it up)

Don't be afraid to start goal-setting work with younger students. While early learners may not fully understand the numbers behind an improving grade or test score, you can break down standards into learning targets that directly connect to students' interests and aspirations. For instance, a child interested in space exploration may be excited to improve their reading so they can check out more advanced books on the subject.

Begin the conversation with the concept of "yet": kids may not have a certain skill yet, but they are expanding the depth of their reading or math skills so they can understand and do more things in the near and distant future.

Teacher tip

- "I provide my early elementary students the growth goals [from the MAP Growth Student Profile Report], but they decide on how they can work to achieve the goals."

2. Build (the habit)

Student goal setting isn't a one-and-done event. It's a practice, a muscle educators and students continue to build.

Make time to connect with students about their goals and get to know how they learn and approach challenges. Offer plenty of support and step in to redirect when a student gets off track.

Teacher tips

- "I believe in face-to-face discussions, to create a dialogue with the teacher and the students."

- "I focus on co-constructing what the learning habits look like and sound like as we build toward goal setting within the learning tasks."

- "Peers can sometimes help each other process their goals. Pair and share goals and steps to achieve. Then have students check back in with each other once a week."

3. Showcase (success)

Give students the opportunity to demonstrate what they know and to see their successes. This can look like providing assessment opportunities to measure learning growth, visually documenting progress in the classroom, or keeping portfolios of student work.

Teacher tips

- "As a school leader, it is imperative for us to lead this charge by holding school- or grade-level assemblies to kick off the goal setting and again to celebrate meeting them. Displaying them in hallways also creates buy-in!"

- "In our district, student goal setting is non-negotiable. We use the custom goal-setting tool in the Student Profile Report to collaboratively set goals with students in one-on-one goals conferences. For some, we set them based on a RIT score goal, for some we use the achievement percentile, and for some we use the growth percentile. Student voice is key! Our student growth has been incredible since we started using this custom goal-setting tool."

- "Group goals are fun to use on the quadrant report [in the Achievement Status and Growth Report]. You can keep names private but see the overall gains of the group."

4. Create (personal relevance)

Goal setting can help students understand why learning matters and what expanding the breadth and depth of their knowledge can do for their lives. Like grown-ups, when students know and believe in their "why," they have increased agency and motivation to take on the "do" (in this case, their learning or assignments).

Teacher tips

- "We have freedom to adjust lessons per student interest within the context of their classes. I think this gives them more motivation for completing lessons."

- "We revisit goals from time to time. Long-term goals are good for the big picture, and revisiting them keeps students motivated on a day-to-day basis."

- "I have done a lesson with student leaders in which they look at a list of leadership values and they determine which one they are strong in and which one they want to work on. Then they build a plan for how they will work on that, and we have revisited that once a week to discuss how they worked on their value, such as being a more creative thinker or being more nurturing."

5. Center (student choice)

Allow students to make authentic, meaningful choices about their goals. Students may have different levels of readiness for setting their own goals, but in every case, they should have a say in how they spend their time to meet their learning targets. They should have opportunities to direct their education.

Teacher tips

- "My goal is to empower students to be in control of their own education and learning. I offer choice on how to reach those goals."

- "Try class surveys. Let your students decide within their small communities what the goals are and plan around the ideas for goals you, as their teacher, created."

- "We have to set high expectations and believe in our learners so they can establish and come up with clear goals by themselves."

- "I've had students pick a topic of their choice to write about in a standard five-paragraph informational essay. We hit the standards for writing but they were actually interested in the topic."

Get going with student goal setting

For more information on beginning or refining your goal-setting practice, watch our webinar on demand and read *Step into Student Goal Setting: A Path to Growth, Motivation, and Agency*. I also encourage you to try our MAP Growth Goal Explorer tool.

How to use goal setting to carve a new path for student growth this fall

Chase Nordengren

Students and teachers across the country are still feeling the effects of interrupted learning during COVID-19. But despite current challenges, academic growth can still happen.

For many students, helping them connect to their growth can build engagement and determination at times precisely like these. One strategy for connecting to growth is student goal setting: a set of practices for helping individual students understand their academic performance, identify concrete goals for future performance, and collaborate with their teacher on the behaviors and practices that will get them there. Engaging students in goal setting may be a key practice in helping them prepare for whatever comes next.

What goal setting looks like

When students return to school, it doesn't make sense to pick up where their instruction left off or to start a new school year completely ignoring the content students may have missed. The tricky task awaiting educators is finding ways to synthesize essential missed content with a student's new grade-level needs to ensure they can keep up with peers without missing foundational knowledge that leads to true comprehension.

The return of students to school is an opportunity to provide them new paths for learning, focusing on the many and diverse sources of knowledge they bring back to the classroom as well as their unique learning needs. Formative and interim assessments kick off that process by zeroing in on what students know. With that data in hand, student goal-setting practices can help students connect with their growth and make tangible next steps to improve that trajectory in the future. Through building goals with their teacher, students examine their past learning, set short-term targets for additional learning, and plan the specific academic and social-emotional steps needed to get there.

> Knowing what to expect—and having a role in crafting that expectation—makes us all feel empowered. In this way, goal setting connects supporting students as learners with supporting students as people.

Bringing goal setting into the classroom does not require strict adherence to a set approach. My research with partners who use goal setting effectively finds that many strategies work well depending on the students and the context. What effective strategies share are five key ideas:

1. **Start early:** As early as kindergarten, students can begin setting individual behavioral or academic goals. This allows students to get used to the process of setting goals and make it part of their educational culture. Set goals as early as you can every school year.

2. **Do it often:** Individual goals should be short-term, often around four to six weeks. Successful educators use regular weekly check-ins with students to evaluate progress toward goals, make adjustments as necessary, and prevent students from feeling discouraged.

3. **Make it visual:** Effective goal-setting techniques involve tools like anchor charts, data walls, personalized learning plans, data notebooks, and other student-accessible resources. These ask students to directly identify their goal, describe the steps they should take to get there, and ultimately provide evidence the goal has been reached.

4. **Create personal relevance:** The best goal-setting processes begin in conversation with students about what matters to them. Teachers can use students' personal aspirations, areas of interest, or experiences as jumping-off points to discuss why setting a goal matters.

5. **Center student choice:** Regardless of process, students should feel they are in charge of what and how they learn. Centering their choices provides opportunities for self-reflection and agency that are critical for empowering learners.

Start on the right foot

Every student deserves the opportunity to feel successful. For some students, returning to grade-level proficiency may not be realistic this year. Students above grade level must also continue to find opportunities to learn and grow. Goal setting is a key strategy for reaching all students by finding opportunities for challenge and success at every level of current proficiency. With academic targets that are short-term, relevant, and independent, they can recognize the fruits of their labor in ways that keep them motivated to learn more.

Teachers will, understandably, want to spend their first days with students addressing their social-emotional needs. Goal setting can be a way to begin to do that. In a survey conducted by Phi Delta Kappan, students revealed what they most want to help support those needs is structure. Knowing what to expect—and having a role in crafting that expectation—makes us all feel empowered. In this way, goal setting connects supporting students as learners with supporting students as people.

3 tips for student goal setting this winter

Chase Nordengren

Goal setting provides important benefits to students' academic and social-emotional growth throughout the school year. Here are three ideas for how to set meaningful goals for students in the winter.

1. Start with a conversation

The most important part of any teacher's goal-setting practice is ensuring students set goals that are meaningful and realistic for them. You can't set goals for students on your own—without understanding their aspirations, abilities, and motivations—and expect students to achieve them. They simply won't be motivated that way. But when you put students in the driver's seat, you play an essential role in guiding them toward focusing on learning that meets grade-level expectations and helps them catch up on essential missing content, as needed.

In talking with dozens of teachers about how they set goals with students, I've learned nothing is more important than one-on-one conversations with kids about what they hope to accomplish and why. When you talk with your students, you can start by reflecting on all you were able to accomplish the previous year. Next, be sure to review evidence of their learning, talk about their aspirations, and set concrete goals and action steps. If your school tests with MAP Growth, include assessment data in the conversation. Our MAP Growth Goal Explorer can help you think about average, stretch, and custom goals to work on between test events.

2. Find new, independent activities to build and measure skills

Well-chosen digital tools can be an invaluable source of formative assessment information that provides you with ongoing feedback on each student's learning progress while empowering them to be more independent in their learning. The insight will make it easier to pair students with the exact content that's most appropriate for their current learning so they can build their skills.

If your school uses MAP Growth or MAP Accelerator™, assessment data can also help you personalize instruction with tools including Newsela and Khan Academy.

3. Practice patience and grace

The pandemic—and the related racial and economic crises entangled with it—created incredible hardship for both adults and students. Let us pause often to consider what types of learning are meaningful and realistic for every student.

As learning has understandably slowed, students also appear to be receiving more failing grades than before. But a failing grade is the end of a learning conversation; it communicates that a student can't master an area of knowledge and shouldn't bother continuing to try. Under the present circumstances, that judgment is not only harsh, but also premature. Whenever possible, shift the focus from letter grades to learning goals. This will put the learning we seek from students in context and provide an opportunity to get back on the horse even after a temporary misstep.

Setting goals with the future in mind

The hardest part of working with goals is often not setting them, but maintaining the motivation and persistence to follow through. The tips I've shared here can strengthen your student's motivation to learn—this year and throughout their academic career. We're seeing proof of student learning in classrooms across the country every day and in research on learning during COVID-19, so we know it's not all for naught.

About the authors

Jordan Grant

Jordan Grant has extensive experience in K–8 education as a teacher, school leader, and network leader. Before joining NWEA, Jordan worked as a MAP partner for eight years and was responsible for everything from setup and test administration to report generation, data analysis, and family communication. Throughout her career, Jordan has sought innovative ways to use data and instructional best practices to help ensure students reach their goals. She holds a bachelor's degree from Dartmouth College and a master's degree in elementary education with a bilingual concentration from Pace University. She is currently a doctoral student in the Urban Education Leaders Program at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Chase Nordengren

Chase Nordengren is the principal research lead for the Professional Learning team at NWEA. His work supports the long-term growth and development of the Learning and Improvement Services teams at NWEA through primary research, thought leadership, and strategic planning. With insatiable curiosity, Chase works closely with leading scholars from around the globe, turning theory into actionable practices to drive instructional improvement. He received a PhD in leadership, policy, and organizations in K–12 systems from the University of Washington and is the author of *Step into Student Goal Setting: A Path to Growth, Motivation, and Agency* from Corwin Press.

Erin Ryan

Erin Ryan joined NWEA as senior writer in 2018. Her way with words and passion for helping kids have met in unexpected ways. She earned a master's degree in educational leadership and policy analysis from the University of Wisconsin, then taught second grade at a STEM-focused magnet school in northern Florida. She later shifted to creative writing, dreaming up children's books, greeting cards, and digital content. She also worked in solutions journalism, focusing on equity, education, and small—but impactful—ways to change the world. At NWEA, she continues doing just that.

Read more at

Teach.
Learn.
Grow.
the education blog

nwea.org/blog

nwea