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The Impact of Small Goals on Student Success

Goal Activity

One of the classroom activities I use teaches students the power of setting and achieving small and very short goals. At first I have students discuss the similarities and differences between wishes and goals. They begin to understand that goals involve a specific plan with measurable outcomes and deadlines. Then we take a look at and discuss the concept of Kaizen, which is the Japanese term for small steps for continuous improvement.

Brainstorming Small Goals

Students are asked to brainstorm several goals they would be interested in achieving that must be completed within the subsequent 1-5 days. Then I give each student a 3x5 card on which to write down one of the small goals that they brainstormed. (They are asked to choose a goal that is challenging, but achievable.) With many of my students, it is often necessary to have them discuss several examples. Some examples of goals students have chosen are: overcoming a habit of procrastination by turning in a paper on time, making a minimum and stated grade on an upcoming test, cleaning a cluttered room at home, saving a certain amount of money, making an improvement related to sports, etc.

Three Steps to Achievement

After writing their goal on one side, they are asked to list on the other side of the card the three steps needed to accomplish their goal. After the goal has been accomplished, they must write a self-reflection essay in which they state the goal, the steps taken, the obstacles overcome, the outcome, and the lessons learned. I provide a template for students to help them write half-page, typed essay.

Example Essay from a Student *(with student permission)*

My Goal Paper
by Sugey Zavala

My short and small goal that I achieved was to at least pass my biology test on Friday. To achieve this goal, for the first time I worked really hard and I did everything I could to pass my test. All of my hard work at the end paid off because I got an outstanding grade on my biology test.

The steps that I took to achieve my goal were a little difficult because I couldn't do other things that I like to do. One step was staying after school almost every day of the week so I could understand everything clearly. Also in my free time, I would study everything we learned that day in class to make sure I understood it. That week I paid extra attention to the teacher, because I didn't want to miss anything we were learning each day.

While doing these steps to achieve my goal, I had to overcome some obstacles too. One obstacle was not playing my favorite sport, soccer, like always because I stayed after school for about two hours almost every day. Another obstacle was that in my free time I couldn't go out with my mom to the stores because I stayed home studying really hard to achieve my goal.

Finally, it was Friday and I was doing my biology test that I worked so hard to at least pass. My surprise was the test was very easy, and I was the first one to finish. When everybody was finished, the teacher gave us back our tests already graded, and I was very happy because I had gotten my first 100 in biology, and I was the only one that got 100 in my class. At that moment, I was so happy because I had not only achieved my goal, but I went passed it with the best grade in my class.

From working on this short and small goal, I learned that when you work on something really hard, you can achieve or overcome anything you want. In order to achieve my goal, I had to overcome some obstacles, but at the end everything was worth it.

Lessons Learned

Sugey told me that this small goal activity completely changed her perception of the student she was capable of becoming. She worked hard just to pass the test and was shocked to make a 100. She realized the power of setting short goals and gained the insight that little goals can become like stepping stones to the achievement of her larger and long-range goals.

Even when my student's goals have to do with skateboarding or some non-academic goal, they usually understand how to apply this goal-setting process to school and to their life. As I am writing this, I am reminded that Robert Sternberg defined "Successful Intelligence" as the ability to achieve our goals.

I also write a lot of comments on my students' self-reflection papers and use them as a teaching tool to reinforce their lessons.

Strategies, Plus a Positive Mindset, Bring Success

In my experience, both effective strategies and a success mindset are important for success to occur. What I like about this simple goal activity is that it gives students strategies for setting goals, helps them realize that much can be accomplished with small steps, and changes their mindset about what they can accomplish.

Raymond Gerson, *Adjunct Professor, Human Development*

For further information, contact the author at Austin Community College, 1020 Grove Blvd. Austin, TX 78741. Email: r.gerson@austincc.edu