Goal-Setting in Middle Schools

by Jerry Rottier

Young adolescents, ages 10 to 15, often ask themselves “Who am I?” and “Where am I going?” as they begin to view themselves as active contributors to what happens to them in life. They are ready to take on some responsibility for their actions, but they have little experience in setting and completing goals. Simply telling them to “grow up” or “get a higher grade” is not helpful. In fact, these types of statements may lead to increased frustration. They need practical assistance if they are to achieve success in managing even simple goals.

During the 2000-2001 school year, I developed a set of materials that could be incorporated into a middle school curriculum to involve students in goal-setting experiences. In a pilot program, students were given a notebook in which space was provided to complete lessons on goal-setting, record their goals, identify strategies to reach their goals, keep a record of their progress, and reflect on their accomplishments.

Teachers were given a guidebook to help them work with students on the goal-setting and goal management processes. Included in the guidebook was a set of stories about individuals like civil rights leader Martin Luther King, scientist Rachel Carson, and figure skater Michelle Kwan, who have distinguished themselves by setting and achieving goals under duress. These stories help students realize that great achievements do not just happen but require diligence, courage, and tenacity. These stories, which can be read to students or copied for them to read, are used to reinforce the various steps of goal-setting.

The Goal-Setting Process
Below is a summary of the goal-setting process used in the pilot program.

Lessons
To help students prepare for the goal-setting process, they were taken through a series of brief lessons designed to help them:

- Understand the concept of success;
- Identify people they perceived as successful;
- Identify activities achievable by students their age;
- Realize their own previous accomplishments;
- Identify reasons why some students are not successful;
- Identify reasons why some students don’t do their homework on time;
- Create a list of strengths that students possess;
- Identify their own personal strengths;
- List areas where they might improve; and
- Identify several possible goals for themselves.

Examples of goals that middle school students might work on were put into three different groups: physical/wellness; intellectual/academic; and personal/behavioral. In each of the goals selected by students in the pilot program, the goal selected most often is listed first.

Physical/Wellness

- Exercise every day.
- Participate in after-school athletic activities.
- Eat more healthy food.
- Practice better hygiene.
Intellectual/academic

- Do homework on time.
- Study more for tests.
- Be more organized.
- Get higher grades.
- Participate more in class.
- Read more.
- Be a positive leader.

Personal/Behavioral

- Work harder.
- Be more organized.
- Seek out more friends.
- Be a better listener.
- Be friendlier and more respectful of others.

For their first goal-setting activity, students should be encouraged to select a goal that is achievable. The success they achieve on the first goal will help motivate them about the goal-setting process. As students become more comfortable with the process, the teacher must encourage them to begin selecting goals that may require some risk-taking.

Strategies
Students need to be engaged in a discussion about the need for establishing and thinking through strategies to achieve their goals.

Monitoring
Too often, goals are defined, filed, and forgotten by young adolescents. Goal-setting procedures should be visited at least once each week and students need to regularly refresh themselves on the goals they have set and record their progress toward those goals.

Reflection
Students should reflect on the goal-setting process by reviewing their progress each week. Since goal-setting periods are long---nine weeks or more---it is important to establish shorter closure points. Having students summarize their progress every three weeks would be very helpful.

Scheduling Goal-Setting Activity

Goal-setting is an ideal activity for middle school advisory programs. Student reflections on their progress can be conducted on a weekly basis during the advisory period, which can also be used for instruction related to the goal-setting process, such as time management and nonverbal behaviors.

If the middle school does not have an advisory program, an alternative is to use regular class time. The fact that students become more goal-oriented in relation to academic goals warrants the time taken from core subjects for this activity. This also is an excellent activity for teaching teams, whose members can help one another to keep the process focused and moving.

Goal-setting is a worthy activity that all middle-grades schools should consider. Simply requiring students to set goals without guidance will not achieve the desired results. The program must be planned carefully and implemented wisely. When done properly, goal-setting can have positive short-term and long-term effects for students.

If you would like to learn about teacher responses to the use of the goal setting material, and how you can obtain the student notebook and teacher guidebook, please contact the author at rottiejj@uwec.edu.