

7 goal setting strategies for high expectations teaching

Teachers' expectations of their students' learning may be more important in influencing student progress than pupils' abilities. 'High expectation teachers' believe that students will learn faster and will improve their level of achievement. They also have more positive attitudes towards learners and more effective teaching practices.

However, high expectations on their own are not enough to impact on achievement. It is the combination of high expectations with particular beliefs and teaching practices that have the biggest impact on student learning.

Christine Rubie-Davies at the University of Auckland has demonstrated that when teachers adopt practices common to high expectation teachers (specifically relating to grouping and activities, class climate, and goal setting), there are gains to students' achievement.

Here are seven ways to implement effective goal setting:

- **Communicate the learning goals for the class clearly**, as this facilitates students' goal setting. Goal setting is more likely to be effective in classrooms where students understand what they are learning and how they can show they have been successful. For example, use the acronym WALT ("We are learning to ... ") at the beginning of every lesson, or after introductory or motivational activities. Ask children to generate the success criteria with you, for example, "We have used at least four describing words in our story about our visit to the farm", or "We can tell someone the names of eight planets in our solar system". Prominently display both learning goals and success criteria. Occasionally provide students with the big picture about the reasons for learning goals, for example, "Learning to include describing words in our stories makes our stories more interesting, and readers are much more likely to enjoy our stories if they are interesting." This helps all students engage.
- **Have students set their own goals** and work towards achieving these, with you as their facilitator and guide. Students can then move forward in their learning at their own pace (rather than having to spend an allocated number of lessons, or a set number of pages in a workbook, on a skill), and this enables rapid progress. Allow an hour a month in class for goal setting (one month is a good timeframe for primary students, although very young students might require weekly goals). Support students to learn to set appropriate goals at first, using conferencing, for example.
- **Teach students about SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, and time-bound) goals**. Students' commitment to goals is supported when goals are specific, clear, and challenging but achievable. An appropriate level of challenge is particularly important, as the satisfaction and sense of accomplishment of attaining a challenging goal increases student self-efficacy and motivation. Have students write goals down or share them with peers; these are powerful motivators to completing the goals, and keep goals clearly visible.

Examples of SMART goals for primary students:

- By the end of this month I will be able to add and subtract two-digit numbers accurately at least 90% of the time (I need to get 9 out of 10 correct).
- By the end of this month I will choose 20 words in my reading books that I don't know at the moment and will find out what they mean.
- By the end of this month I will make my writing more interesting by using describing words in all of my stories.

- **Promote self-directed learning by breaking larger goals into proximal goals**, which detail the specific steps needed to reach the challenging goal. Proximal goals enhance motivation because progress towards proximal goals informs students that they can be successful and enhances their feelings of self-efficacy.
- **Focus on mastery goals** (emphasising the process of learning, self-improvement and new skills acquisition) over performance goals (based on an outcome or the ability to demonstrate competence). Performance goals imply winners and losers, success and failure, whereas all students can achieve skill-based goals at their level. Mastery goals are emphasised when students are required to give more than one-word or factual answers to questions, when they are asked to read or engage with complex texts or problems, and when students collaborate. All of these activities downplay notions of 'getting it right' as the goal of learning. Mastery goals are associated with better motivation, engagement, and achievement, and most positively related to learning and effective outcomes, such as deeper thinking, more systematic processing of information, and greater effort and persistence. While mastery goals and performance goals can be synergistic (with students motivated to both learn and achieve), for lower-achieving students, focusing on mastery goals maintains higher levels of motivation and interest.
- **Use portfolios, goal-setting, self-evaluation, self-reflection and peer feedback** which increase both students' self-efficacy and their achievement. When students have high levels of self-efficacy, they choose more difficult goals and show greater commitment to their goals. They are more resilient to setback and failure, increasing their effort to achieve the goal.
- **Use carefully targeted feedback** to assist students with goal setting and reaching goals. Feedback should always follow on from instruction and should be based on students' current understanding or stage of skill development, otherwise students may not be able to make the adjustments needed in their learning to achieve their goal. Feedback helps reduce frustration and risk of failure, and supports students' engagement with the goal by directing them to appropriate actions. Students come to understand that if they fail or make mistakes, they will be supported by sensitive feedback and guidance on how to overcome errors, which helps them to maintain motivation. Students generally find process-oriented feedback more useful than competence-oriented feedback.