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# Making Kids Work on Goals (And Not Just In Soccer)



By SUE SHELLENBARGER

Thirteen-year-old Jackson Sikes has been struggling for years to raise his test scores in math. When he got a 33% last year on fractions, Jackson says, "I didn't know how I was ever going to learn them." Battling his homework just made him frustrated, says his mother Linda, of Gilmer, Texas.



New research suggests the inability to set personal goals is a weak spot for U.S. children and hurting their academic achievement. Sue Shellenbarger explains.

Jackson's teachers proposed a solution: They taught him to trim his goal into smaller steps and try improving his scores just a little from test to test. Gradually, he raised his results to 90%. "I'd take those little steps, then I'd just keep on stepping," Jackson says.

A student's ability to set and achieve realistic goals is linked to higher grades, lower college-dropout rates and greater well-being in adulthood. In a recent study in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, college students who completed an intensive written exercise identifying their goals and mapping out steps to reach them posted a significant increase in grades and credits earned, compared with other students.

Yet a majority of U.S. students lack faith in their ability to reach their goals, according to a nationally representative survey of 642 students last year by Gallup Inc. Although children begin to form their ideas about what they can and can't achieve by age 7 or 8, only 42% of students ages 10 to 18 say they are energetically pursuing their goals, Gallup found. And only 35% strongly believe they can find ways around obstacles to their goals.

The Gallup surveys are the first broad look at goal-setting at this age; students may struggle with this skill



Stephen Voss for The Wall Street Journal

Renee Lamarque, a 12-year-old who attends school in Alexandria, Va., set two goals: to get A's in math class and to learn to dance en pointe in ballet.



Stephen Voss for The Wall Street Journal

To meet these goals, she devotes more time to homework and does exercises to strengthen her muscles when not in ballet class.

partly because schools tend to focus more on raising test scores or lowering dropout rates. However, as more states mandate career planning for all students, goal-setting is drawing increasing attention.

At Bruce Junior High in East Texas where Jackson Sikes attends, test scores and state ratings have risen since administrators began a goal-setting program three years ago, says Principal Dawn Harris.

Students at the beginning of the year use their own test scores to identify specific, measurable learning goals, such as achieving a certain grade, and set a target date for achieving it. They break big goals into smaller steps, write down the skills they will have to learn, and name specific strategies and resources they will use to overcome obstacles, such as more homework time. Teachers help them track their progress each quarter.

The benefits spill outside the classroom. Ms. Sikes says that Jackson has started applying his goal-setting skills on the baseball diamond, drawing praise from his coach. The approach "taught me to out-do other people," Jackson says. "Even though they might be better physically, I think I might be a little better mentally."

A goal-setting pilot program in Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia has been so well received that administrators plan to make it available in all 196 schools.

To help students remember the steps to effectively setting goals, schools often use an acronym "Smart:" setting Specific, Measurable, Attainable goals with clear Results in a set Time frame.

### Goal-Setting Forms

See Renee Lamarque's goal-setting form mapping out steps toward learning to dance en pointe:

**S** - My SPECIFIC Goal To get on pointe.

**M** - How will I MEASURE my progress? My teacher

**A** - This is an ATTAINABLE goal work on it True

**R** - These are the steps I will take to meet my RESULTS - **B**

4. Do 6 minutes of stomach work
5. Do different jumps every class
6. Practice balancing on our feet

**T** - This is TIME -Bound and I will achieve my goal by this February.

[Renee's form mapping out steps toward getting an A in math](#)

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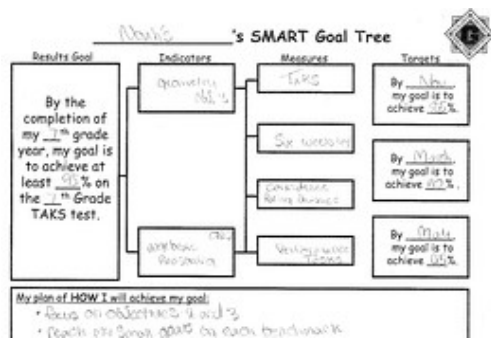
See Jackson Sikes's form showing step

Renee Lamarque, 12, is using that approach in her classes at Glasgow Middle School in Alexandria, Va., to work toward getting an A in math. She also filled out a Smart goal-setting template to map out steps toward learning to dance en pointe in ballet.

So Renee works on strengthening her muscles even when she is not in ballet class, doing sit-ups and other exercises, she says. "A lot of my role models at the studio are en pointe. When they dance, they are really graceful and they're pretty to watch," she says. "I want to be like them."

That kind of intrinsic motivation makes goal-setting work with kids, says Anne Conzemius, Madison, Wis., an author and consultant who works with school districts on goal-setting.

toward improving his math scores:



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[Goal-Setting Form Template](#)

The concept of "Smart" goal-setting came into use by project managers in business in the 1980s. Some educators began to embrace it more than a decade ago to help administrators and teachers set their own goals. More recently, a smaller number of school districts have moved this goal-setting approach into the classroom.

After Katie Franke, 13, of Falls Church, Va., set a goal last fall to get straight A's, she gave up time with her friends and stayed after class to re-take tests or get help from teachers. When she hit the mark, "I felt really proud of myself," she says. Now she's striving toward another goal—winning a perfect rating on her

trombone solo at a competitive spring band festival. "One week I want to get all the rhythms right, and the next week I will practice hitting the higher notes," Katie says.

Children begin early to form beliefs about what they can and cannot achieve, says a recent study in the Annual Review of Psychology. Before they reach their teens, most kids have settled on certain goals and given up on others.

## The Juggle

### Ready, Set, Goal!

But even when students cling to lofty ambitions, they often set themselves up for failure by not aligning their behavior with their goals, says Dominique Morisano, an assistant professor of clinical psychology at Columbia University and lead author on the college goal-setting study. "They might say, 'I want to be a pediatrician,' but they're not attending school, they're using drugs, they're not taking care of themselves," says Dr. Morisano, who is also a psychologist at St. Luke's Roosevelt Hospital Centers in New York.

## Student Survey

**42%** of students ages 10 to 18 say they are **energetically pursuing their goals**

**35%** strongly believe they can **find ways around problems that may arise**

**53%** say they are **hopeful for their future**

Source: Gallup survey of 642 students, June 11-July 6, 2010

The result is often hopelessness. A belief in one's ability to achieve goals is important to building a hopeful attitude, which in turn is a high predictor of college success, says Shane Lopez, a senior scientist in Omaha, Neb., for Gallup.

When Robin Schafer's son David was in elementary school, his peers were constantly competing for high grades. Noticing that it made him anxious, Ms. Schafer encouraged David instead to set a different goal. He worked to make a traveling soccer team but failed in his first tryout. Instead of giving up, she helped David map out a new approach, practicing at home, getting coaching and learning to visualize himself playing well. He then made the team for several years, boosting his confidence.

Now 16, David knows that if he fails in some endeavor, "there is always something else to strive for," says Ms. Schafer, of East Brunswick, N.J. When he missed getting a spot on the high-school soccer team, David says, he tried out for and made the cross-country team, then set out to become "one of the best guys" on the team. He runs six to eight miles a day in pursuit of that goal, even in snowstorms. The striving instills a sense of mastery and confidence. And with an A-plus average in school, he doesn't worry about grades any more either. "If you aim to be No. 1—even if you can't achieve that in everything—you're still going to do great," he says.