

Setting Learning Goals

Overview of setting learning goals

Identifying goals for students' learning is fundamental for skillful teaching that supports students' growth. This is because the design of lessons, whether from instructional materials or independently, depends on articulating what students are to learn. For some subject areas, such as mathematics, reading, writing, science, and social studies, standards are articulated by professional organizations and by states. These provide guidance for the process of setting learning goals. In other areas, such as physical education, schools or districts may specify learning targets. And in still other areas, such as developing organizational skills or communicating across difference, teachers may identify them on their own.

Advancing justice through setting learning goals

To plan and enact instructional activities and classroom discourse to support students' learning, teachers must consider carefully what students know and can do. They set high expectations for their students and support their engagement in learning. Because over-helping students can actually reduce opportunities to learn as well as communicate a lack of confidence in students' capability, teachers exercise critical awareness of these risks and make careful judgments about the amount and kind of support that a student needs. In some cases, students thrive from having to puzzle about a problem or a task, and in others, such experiences are merely frustrating and discouraging. Teachers are watchful to monitor that activities are focusing on the learning goal and that appropriate supports are provided.



Decomposition of setting learning goals

Table 1: Areas of Work and Techniques for Setting Learning Goals

Areas of work for setting learning goals	Techniques for setting learning goals
Reviewing standards, materials, and information about students	• Review external standards for student learning of specific content. • Review learning goals in instructional materials. • Identify other learning goals important to developing competence in the subject (e.g., reasoning, explaining, academic identity). • Consider what students already know and can do.
Setting specific short- and longer-term learning goals	• Set learning goals for individual lessons, connected to longer-term goals. • Ensure coherence by articulating connection between prior learning and learning goals for individual lessons. • Express the learning goals in language that could be communicated to students.
Revisiting and revising short-term learning goals as needed in response to students' progress	• Revise learning goals based on students' uptake of instruction. • Review how students' progress aligns with external standards and guidance, and adjust next steps as necessary.

