

Instruction in Goal Setting as an Intervention Intensification Strategy for Secondary Students

Introduction

Data-based individualization (DBI) is a research-based process for intensifying intervention for students with severe and persistent learning needs, including students with disabilities. When students are not making adequate progress in an intervention, teams may need to intensify support. In DBI, intensifying support means adapting or adjusting the intervention to increase its effectiveness.

For many students with disabilities, academic challenges may occur alongside difficulties with persistence, self-regulation, and other learning-related behaviors. Students may avoid challenging tasks, disengage when work becomes difficult, or demonstrate low persistence when facing academic demands. These challenges can limit students' ability to benefit fully from academic instruction and intervention.

One way to adapt an intervention is to explicitly teach self-determination strategies, such as goal setting, within the context of a student's academic intervention. Instruction that promotes self-determination is an effective strategy for supporting

Self-determination refers to acting as the primary causal agent in one's life and includes skills such as self-regulation, problem solving, decision making, self-advocacy, and goal setting (Shogren et al., 2016).

both the academic and behavioral needs of students with disabilities (Shogren et al., 2025). Although involving students in goal setting can be beneficial across grade levels, instruction in self-determination skills is particularly important during adolescence because secondary students are increasingly expected to take responsibility for their learning and behavior (Estrapala & Reed, 2020). Instruction in goal setting is one practical approach for helping students develop these skills and become more active participants in their own learning. In this resource, we describe how educators can use this approach to support secondary students with disabilities.



Instruction in Goal Setting

Goal setting helps students focus on meaningful academic outcomes, identify behaviors that support success, and monitor their progress over time. Instruction in goal setting involves explicitly teaching students to review data, identify strengths and needs, select actions for improvement, set goals, and monitor progress. Exhibit 1 presents a four-step goal-setting process adapted from Estrapala and Reed (2020). The educator's role is to guide and support the goal-setting process while ensuring that the student is an active participant.

To teach goal setting effectively, educators use modeling, think-alouds, guided practice, and written supports to help students learn each step of the process. For example, educators may model how to interpret performance data, use think-alouds to demonstrate how to identify strengths and needs, guide students in selecting actions that are likely to improve outcomes, and provide graphic organizers or goal-setting templates to support goal development.

As educators gradually fade supports, students learn to apply the process independently. Goal setting is iterative, and students may revisit earlier steps as they monitor progress, refine goals, and identify next steps.

Exhibit 1. Steps and Actions for Goal Setting

Step	Focus	Key activities
1	Identify Strengths and Needs	▪ Discuss current academic performance and the purpose of goal setting. ▪ Gather and organize data (e.g., grades, assignment completion, progress monitoring data, attendance, and behavior data). ▪ Summarize strengths and needs in one or two sentences.
2	Identify Actions for Improvement	▪ Identify three to five positive actions most likely to improve outcomes. ▪ Prioritize and document the actions with the greatest potential to affect the identified area of need.
3	Write a Goal	▪ Write a goal that clearly defines the target behavior, how progress will be measured, and when progress will be reviewed.
4	Assess Progress	▪ Monitor progress and review outcomes. ▪ Reflect on results and revise goals or actions as needed.

Note. These steps and activities are adapted from Estrapala & Reed (2020).



Instruction in Goal Setting as an Intervention Adaptation Within DBI

When a student is not making adequate progress in an academic intervention, the team may hypothesize that the student would benefit from explicit instruction in self-determination strategies, such as goal setting. Instruction in goal setting may be an appropriate intervention adaptation when data suggest that difficulties with engagement, persistence, motivation, or self-regulation are limiting the student's response to the intervention.

The goal-setting process parallels many features of the DBI process. Both involve using data to identify needs, develop a plan, monitor progress, and make decisions about next steps. When students engage in goal setting, they become active participants in the same type of data-based decision making used by educators in the DBI process.

Despite these similarities, an important distinction is that DBI focuses on a long-term intervention goal, whereas instruction in goal setting focuses on a student-developed goal. The callout highlights the differences between these two types of goals.

Intervention goal: A long-term academic outcome measured through progress monitoring (e.g., improved algebra performance).

Student-developed goal: A short-term goal focused on behaviors that are expected to improve the student's response to the intervention (e.g., completing intervention activities, asking for help, or reducing distractions).

Case Example: Peter

The following example illustrates how instruction in goal setting can be incorporated into the DBI process.

Validated Intervention Program and Progress Monitoring

Peter is a ninth-grade student who receives a small-group math intervention three times per week for 20 minutes per session. The intervention focuses on algebra skills aligned with Peter's identified needs. To monitor Peter's response to the intervention, the interventionist administers a weekly algebra progress monitoring measure. The interventionist set a long-term goal using the measure's established benchmarks and graphed Peter's progress monitoring data each week. After 8 weeks, Peter's trendline was below the aimline, indicating that he was not on track to meet his long-term goal. The team met to review diagnostic data and determine how to intensify his intervention.

Diagnostic Data

The team reviewed teacher observation notes and Peter's intervention work. The data showed that Peter frequently disengaged when work became challenging, often by taking out his phone. He also left practice activities incomplete and rarely asked for help from the interventionist or



peers. Based on these data, the team hypothesized that difficulties with engagement, persistence, and self-regulation were limiting Peter's response to the intervention.

The team decided to adapt Peter's math intervention by adding explicit instruction in goal setting. The team hypothesized that teaching Peter to set and monitor a goal for academic engagement would increase his completion of in-class math activities and provide him with more opportunities to benefit from the intervention.

Intervention Adaptation

The team adapts Peter's math intervention by adding explicit instruction in goal setting. Before school each day, the interventionist meets with Peter for approximately 10 minutes to teach the goal-setting process. Over multiple sessions, the interventionist uses modeling, think-alouds, guided practice, and feedback to teach Peter each step of the process and gradually transfers responsibility to him. Exhibit 2 shows how the interventionist teaches Peter each step of the goal-setting process.

Exhibit 2. Application of the Goal-Setting Process With Peter

Step	Focus	Application with Peter
1	Identify Strengths and Needs	Peter and the interventionist discuss his academic performance and the purpose of goal setting. Peter reviews his math intervention data, course performance, and progress toward earning the credits needed for graduation. Using a graphic organizer and a summary statement template, Peter identifies strengths and needs. He writes, <i>"During math intervention, I am good at understanding the lesson when I complete the work, but I need to work on persisting when work becomes difficult because I often stop before completing practice activities."</i> The intervention data show that Peter currently completes approximately 25% of assigned in-class practice activities.
2	Identify Actions for Improvement	Peter identifies three actions that could help him complete more practice activities: putting away his phone, asking for help when he becomes frustrated, and working with his peer group during the final 10 minutes of each intervention session. He selects asking for help and working with his peer group as the two actions he will try first.
3	Write a Goal	With support from the interventionist, Peter develops a goal that reflects the outcomes he hopes to achieve: <i>For the next week, I will complete at least 80% of the assigned in-class practice activities during my math intervention sessions.</i>



Step	Focus	Application with Peter
4	Assess Progress	After 2 weeks, Peter and the interventionist review his data. Peter completed 50% of assigned in-class practice activities, an improvement from his baseline of approximately 25%, but below his goal of 80%. Peter determines that asking for help and working with his peer group was useful, but that distractions from his phone continued to interfere with his progress. He decides to continue asking for help and to turn off and put away his phone during intervention sessions. Peter and the interventionist revise the plan and continue monitoring his progress.

Progress Monitoring

The interventionist continues to collect weekly algebra progress monitoring data. After 8 weeks of providing instruction in goal setting, the team reviews Peter’s progress monitoring data to determine whether the adaptation is helping him benefit more fully from the math intervention. As Peter’s engagement and work completion improve, the team looks for corresponding improvements in his progress monitoring data.

Related Resource

For guidance on engaging students in progress monitoring, see the PROGRESS Center’s [Six-Step Instructional Routine for Engaging Students in Progress Monitoring](#).

Conclusion

Goal setting is a self-determination strategy that helps students become more active participants in their own learning. By teaching students to review data, identify strengths and needs, set meaningful goals, monitor progress, and revise their plans, educators can support students in taking greater ownership of their academic and behavioral success. In addition to addressing

immediate academic challenges, instruction in goal setting helps students develop self-determination skills that are important for success in secondary school, postsecondary education, employment, and other adult outcomes. For students who are not responding adequately to an intervention, instruction in goal setting may also serve as a valuable intervention adaptation within the DBI process by addressing barriers related to engagement, persistence, motivation, and self-regulation.



References

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