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Set Big Goals

REFLECTING ON WHERE their students are performing at the beginning of the year and holding high expectations for their true potential, highly effective teachers develop an ambitious and inspiring vision of where their students will be academically at the end of the year. They set big goals informed by that vision—goals that when reached will make a meaningful impact on students’ academic trajectory and future opportunities.

SET BIG
GOALS

INVEST
STUDENTS
AND THEIR
FAMILIES

PLAN
PURPOSEFULLY

EXECUTE
EFFECTIVELY

CONTINUOUSLY
INCREASE
EFFECTIVENESS

WORK
RELENTLESSLY

“By the end of the year, my first graders will read, write, do math, and behave like third graders.”

LIKE MANY OTHER NEW teachers in underresourced schools, Crystal Jones was initially dismayed by her first graders' skills coming into her classroom. Many of them had not attended kindergarten, and few knew all of the letters of the alphabet. Some did not know how to hold a book. On their very first day of school ever, they were already behind.

Determined to put them on track for academic success in the future, she tapped into her students' obsession with wanting to be big kids. She rallied them around the idea that they could and would learn not just first-grade material this year, but also second-grade material.



Crystal Jones,
First Grade, Georgia

The day before spring break, Ms. Jones's first graders giddily "graduated" to second grade in a "pomp and circumstance" ceremony in her classroom. All of her students had earned those diplomas by having tested on a second-grade level. Her first graders proudly called themselves "second graders" for the rest of the year.

By year's end, 100 percent of Ms. Jones's students met or exceeded the first-grade reading standards. Despite beginning the year lagging well behind incoming first graders in higher-income communities, 90 percent of her students were now a full year or more ahead of state standards, reading on or above a third-grade level. The rest were reading on at least a second-grade level.

“My students will think, speak, and write like world citizens as defined by our rubric, and 100 percent of them will pass the New York Regents Exam for Global History, earning a classroom average of at least 80 percent.”

MR. DELHAGEN SAW THE outrageous statistics of the achievement gap playing out in his students' lives. His students—most of them students of color whose families had immigrated from countries in the Caribbean and many of whom lived in or on the edge of poverty—were far behind in their academic progress and struggling to juggle school with significant responsibilities at home. He knew that the stakes in his classroom were high: passing the Regents Exam is a graduation requirement in New York State, and if his students did not graduate from high school, their life opportunities would be significantly limited.

All of my students will grow at least 1.5 years' worth of reading growth (as measured by the Developmental Reading Assessment) and will master at least 95 percent of ambitious, rigorous, and carefully tailored IEP [Individualized Education Program] goals, which are designed to move them toward the ultimate long-term goal of independent living.

MANY OF KATIE HILL'S sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade students had been diagnosed with moderate to significant cognitive disabilities, with IQs in the thirties and forties. When she first met them, they were, on average, reading below a first-grade level, and some were still unfamiliar with all the letters of the alphabet. Most of them were unable to give personal information such as their parent or guardian's name, their phone number, their address, or their lunch identification number.

In addition to the challenges posed by their learning differences, Ms. Hill's students were seen by many as unable to learn basic academic and functional skills and incapable of ever living independently. Ms. Hill however, was determined to ensure that her students made significant gains in the knowledge, skills, and sense of self-efficacy and self-advocacy they would need for successful independent living.

Ms. Hill committed herself to achieving this big goal with her students and worked with students' families to rewrite their IEP goals to include these academic and functional targets. With these individualized big goals driving her every decision, her students made, on average, 1.6 years' worth of reading growth and approximately three years of growth in math by the end of the year. They also mastered 83 percent of the grade-level standards they were shooting for as a class. Under her leadership, in one year, her students made more academic progress than they had in their previous six to eight years combined.



Katie Hill, Middle School Special Education, North Carolina



Taylor Delhagen, High School Global History, New York

Passing this exam was a daunting challenge. Not only did his eleventh graders lack many basic skills (with some reading on a fifth-grade level), but Mr. Delhagen had only one year to teach two years' worth of material. He committed himself and his students to this audacious big goal.

At the end of the year, Mr. Delhagen's students had fulfilled his vision of becoming "global citizens," embodying the qualities of rigorous thinking, eloquent speaking, and effective writing he had set forth in the first weeks of school. On the Regents Exam, his students beat the city average for students in communities who took the same course over the traditional two years. His students outperformed every other class in the school taking any Regents Exam. Fifty-one of his fifty-seven students passed the exam on their first attempt, with a few students just missing a perfect score.

Students make dramatic academic progress when their teachers begin the year with a clear, ambitious vision of student success. Highly effective teachers know exactly where they want their students to be by the end of the year. Teachers like Ms. Jones, Ms. Hill, and Mr. Delhagen realize that a bold (and some might say crazy) vision of student success can actually foster student achievement.

Virtually any successful leader in any context tackles massive problems in this same way, starting with a mental picture of a new and better reality. The United States was the first nation to land on the moon, for example, *because* President Kennedy made the bold (and some said crazy) declaration that it would be. While most of us (including Ms. Jones, Ms. Hill, and Mr. Delhagen) might be reluctant to compare ourselves to President Kennedy, these teachers are in fact employing leadership techniques when they develop and communicate their vision of a different reality as a means of driving dramatic change. As James Kouzes and Barry Posner found in their worldwide study of qualities of leadership, successful leaders are able to “*envision the future*, gaze across the horizon of time and imagine the greater opportunities to come. They see something out ahead, vague as it might appear from a distance, and they imagine that extraordinary feats are possible and that the ordinary could be transformed into something noble. They are able to develop an ideal and unique image of the future for the common good.”¹

If you are a teacher working to close the achievement gap who wants to maximize your impact on your students’ life opportunities, setting a big goal for student learning is a launching point for the single-minded focus and urgency that will drive your and your students’ hard work throughout the school year.

Foundations of Effective Goal Setting

Strong goals are founded on three ideas. First, like all other strong leaders, highly effective teachers insist on defining and measuring achievement so that progress and success are clear. In our context, that principle takes the form of ambitious standards—aligned and quantifiable goals—targets that help students see their progress and appreciate the benefits of their hard work.

Second, the highly effective teachers we have studied expect the best of those they are leading. In our context, this means demanding and seeing that their students reach their full potential, holding high expectations that actually raise student performance. The best teachers, in our experience, refuse to accept and instead set out to disprove the myth that students in low-income communities are destined for lower achievement and fewer opportunities than children in higher-income communities.

Third, like other great leaders, strong teachers are keenly aware of their constituents’ (in this case, their students’) needs and desires. These teachers not only seek to meet those inherent interests and motivations; they also find ways to build them into their vision of success to make it all the more inspiring to their students.

We will engage these three leadership tenets in two passes. First, we will explore the purposes and power of big goals. Then, to make these ideas more concrete, we will revisit these tenets through the processes and reflections of highly effective teachers as they design the big goals for their classrooms.

Inspiring Strong Results with Measurable Outcomes

The big goals that are introduced in this chapter are measurable. Ms. Jones, Ms. Hill, and Mr. Delhagen recognize that success must be defined in a way that makes clear when progress is or is not being made and when success has been achieved. Strong and highly effective teachers see the important benefits of having a clear, objective destination in mind:

- *By making clear the destination, big goals help focus and align the efforts of many individuals.* When we talk to successful teachers about why they put so much energy into developing and implementing an ambitious big goal, the responses often take the form of analogies: “to keep us on the same page,” “so everyone knows where we are headed,” “so we can work as a team,” or—a favorite—“the big goal is a litmus test for everything you do.” A number of teachers, like Erin Wahler, a fifth-grade teacher in Zuni, New Mexico, describe how virtually every conversation they have with a student about changing performance starts with a series of questions about how the student’s actions are or are not contributing to achieving ambitious academic goals. Eventually students begin to adopt this approach without prompting, asking themselves, “What am I doing to help us reach our goals?” These teachers are telling us exactly what management and leadership experts say: “Vision plays a key role in producing useful change by helping to direct, align, and inspire actions on the part of large numbers of people. Without an appropriate vision, a transformation effort can easily dissolve into a list of confusing, incompatible, and time-consuming projects that go in the wrong direction or nowhere at all.”²

- *The timeline and deadline inherent in setting a measurable goal bring urgency to you and your team’s efforts.* Jess Bialecki shared with us the influences big goals had on her daily intensity when she came to realize that her first graders were not progressing fast enough. When she calculated forward the progress her students had made, she was initially “devastated” to realize that their progress was not on pace to reach her goals. She decided she had to change course and increase her efforts: “Transitions needed to be tighter, restroom breaks had to be transformed into learning opportunities, literacy centers needed to be more purposeful, and even snack time had to double as sight-word game time,” she said. Ms. Bialecki says that her students initially balked at the changes to the routines to which they had become accustomed, but as they witnessed their own growth under their new schedule, attitudes changed and investment in the big goal skyrocketed. Ms. Bialecki explained, “I soon found that the roles had reversed, and my students were the ones holding me accountable for maintaining our sense of urgency. They reminded me when I forgot our sight-word cards when lining up for lunch or complained when their classmates took too long during transitions.”

► MEASURABLE OUTCOMES IN OTHER SECTORS

IT IS HARD TO IMAGINE a successful politician, coach, or business leader acting without quantifiable definitions of success, be those votes, wins, or dollars. Many great accomplishments in any sector of society began with an articulation of measurable outcomes.

Consider the Montgomery bus boycott, which started in 1955. When Rosa Parks was arrested, community leaders did not simply call for a boycott of the bus system. They called for a boycott of the bus system *until three objective conditions were met*: African American riders would not have to give up their seats to white riders, they would not have to pay their money at the front of the bus and then get off to enter the back door of the bus, and buses would stop as frequently in African American neighborhoods as they did in white ones. This specificity sustained the community's sacrifices and determination for 381 days, when all of those goals were finally met.

The world of business provides many examples of the power of clear measures of success. Jim Collins and Jerry Porras offer Boeing's work on the 727 as one example. When Boeing sought to become the dominant player in the commercial aircraft industry, the company did not say to its engineers, "Let's become the best." Instead it set out to "build a jet that can land on runway 4-22 at La Guardia Airport (only 4,860 feet long—much too short for any existing passenger jet) *and* be able to fly nonstop from New York to Miami *and* be wide enough for six-abreast seating *and* have a capacity of 131 passengers, *and* meet Boeing's high standards of indestructibility."³ While many observers thought that goal was impossible, Boeing's engineers were motivated and pushed by the goal's boldness, and they were also united and informed by its precision and clarity. They rallied for one of the greatest feats of engineering in history, creating the plane that became the standard for the airline industry.⁴

As one more example, when Steven Case's little-known company, AOL, became the standard bearer of the fledgling Internet industry, he explained that the key was setting the audacious goal of signing up 1 million subscribers. Case remembers that with this objective, measurable goal in mind, people began to work differently, with more focus and urgency, making innovative choices with the big goal in mind, and the numbers of subscribers began to climb at record rates. Case recalls, "It wasn't exactly the equivalent of 'Let's put a man on the moon,' but for us this march to a million was a big deal. . . . If we got to a million, we felt that kind of put us in the big leagues, so we were on this march to a million, and we got there."⁵

• *Measurable targets offer a benchmark against which a teacher can evaluate his or her own effectiveness.* Seeing progress is beneficial to more than students. A distinguishing characteristic of highly effective teachers is their insistence on constantly increasing their effectiveness. The big goal serves as a concrete benchmark against which to measure student learning and thereby gain insights about a teacher's strengths and weaknesses. (See Chapter Five.)

Thus, when a teacher states an unmeasurable goal like, "We will learn as much as we can," that noble but subjective idea offers none of the urgency, focus, efficiency, or alignment⁶ that we see when a vision is clearly and objectively expressed: "Every student in my class will score at least a 3 on the AP exam" or "My students will read on a fifth-grade level."

► EXAMPLES OF MEASURABLE AND NOT MEASURABLE ACADEMIC GOALS

Measurable	Not Measurable
"All students will demonstrate at least 85 percent proficiency of the state's fourth-grade math standards as measured by the state's end-of-year assessment."	"All students will improve their math skills."
"My students will each write a five-paragraph persuasive essay that scores a 4 or 5 on the state's sixth-grade writing rubric."	"My students are going to write great persuasive essays by the end of the year."
"My students are all going to score a 3 or higher on the Advanced Placement exam."	"Every student is going to do his or her best on the Advanced Placement exam."

Defining Academic Achievement with Rigorous Learning Standards

Highly effective teachers in low-income communities are determined to give their students opportunities comparable to those enjoyed by children in higher-income areas. They know that means ensuring their students receive an excellent education, with all the academic skills, enrichment, and character-shaping experiences that come from engaging in a rich and challenging pursuit of the ideas and skills necessary to succeed in college and in life.

For teachers striving to close the achievement gap in low-income communities, quantifying success means defining and measuring how much our students learn. Highly effective teachers recognize that academic achievement is both a quantifiable indicator of student progress and a key that opens doors to broader educational, occupational, and life opportunities for children growing up in poverty. So for teachers committed to changing their students' life paths, the ultimate measure of success is their students' measurable academic achievement as defined by rigorous learning standards.

In our context, achievement is defined by learning standards—guidelines that set out what knowledge and skills students are expected to demonstrate, grade by grade and subject by subject. Developed by districts, states, and national groups, these standards help teachers determine where their students are at the beginning of the year and how much progress they have made over the year.

► MEASURING LEARNING WITH STANDARDIZED TESTS

ALIGNING TEACHERS' DEFINITIONS OF SUCCESS

with students' academic growth does not equate to teaching to standardized tests that value rote memorization over more meaningful critical thinking skills. In fact, our focus on academic achievement only increases our obligation to ensure that how we assess academic growth captures meaningful learning. Even as we need to develop more rigorous and authentic assessments, the tests we have provide useful information about students' knowledge and skills, and we have to use that information for all it is worth. In our experience, the path to excellence and opportunity for our students embraces and improves—rather than rejects—assessments that measure student achievement.

► THE DEBATE OVER LEARNING STANDARDS

THE STANDARDS MOVEMENT IN education has been both welcomed and criticized. Some teachers are concerned that learning standards and the tests they spawn limit teachers' judgment and creativity. Some teachers extol the benefits of standards and appreciate the guidance they give about what students must learn. In our quest for educational equity, learning standards can play a key role in ensuring that student learning in low-income communities is comparable to student learning in higher-income areas.

Whatever your view of learning standards, all states and districts now use them to guide instruction, and it is important to think about your role as a teacher within that reality.

For example, according to state education agencies, a tenth-grade geometry student in Texas should be able to “use logical reasoning to prove statements are true and find counter-examples to disprove statements that are false.”⁷ A second grader in California should, by the end of the year, be able to “generate alternative endings to plots and identify the reason or reasons for, and the impact of, the alternatives.”⁸ A seventh grader studying geography in South Dakota should be able to “describe the impact of the natural environment on settlement patterns.”⁹

Although not all learning standards are as rigorous as some teachers would like, they do have a special role in the fight for educational equity in that they (and the assessments they generate) provide a standard yardstick for student learning. A lack of such standards and data in the past has been part of what allowed the achievement gap to fester and grow.

The key point is that learning standards help define the academic achievement we seek for our students and are therefore centrally important to setting big goals. When Mariel Elguero, a fifth-grade reading teacher in Newark, New Jersey, works with her team of colleagues to set a target of two years of growth in reading skills for each of her students, that target has specific meaning according to the New Jersey learning standards. By referring to those standards (available online and elsewhere), Ms. Elguero found a breakdown

of the specific skills and growth her students must demonstrate to have made two years of progress. Her analysis of those standards revealed a dozen or so essential skills and strategies that all involved knowing when you are missing comprehension as a reader and being able to independently apply strategies to resolve those misunderstandings. This realization was the foundation for Ms. Elguero's big goal and served as a useful framework as she planned the year.

In rare cases, you may find that your district or school does not have official learning standards for your courses. In this situation, you will have to do the best you can to derive learning standards from other respected sources. Arianne Kerr, for example, discovered that her district in Tennessee did not have clear learning standards to define what her English as a Second Language (ESL) students needed to learn. "I did not realize how much of my position as a teacher would involve research—Internet research, making district and regional connections, finding professional organizations and conferences, etc.," Ms. Kerr recalls. She immersed herself in relevant standards from other districts and states, deriving from them a list of objectives that she used to shape her big goals and plan her course. The learning standards Ms. Kerr developed not only became the backbone of her big goals, but earned her a new role as ESL coordinator at her school.

In most cases, of course, learning standards are available to you as a starting point to guide to what your students should understand and be able to do. The most effective big goals are built on these well-established learning expectations, not on your teacher's intuition, interests, or assumptions about what students should learn.

► COMMON PITFALLS FOR TEACHERS ENGAGING LEARNING STANDARDS

IN OUR EXPERIENCE, TWO errors characterize less effective teachers' engagement of learning standards as they develop big goals:

1. *Preconceived notions.* Less effective teachers may approach the big goal design process with preconceived notions of what *they* want to teach (perhaps because they remember learning some concept in this grade when they were in school, or they have an affinity for some particular subject or skill) instead of using the standards to determine what students need to learn. These teachers incorrectly see learning standards as informing their preconceived notions instead of *resetting* their assumptions about what students need to learn. Simply stated, teachers can and do teach more than the learning standards, but effective big goals start from them.
2. *Complexity.* Less effective teachers may start to engage with the standards but may be intimidated by the standards' complexity and give up before fully appreciating the guidance they offer. Learning standards are not always easy to use but highly effective teachers attest to the benefits that come from working hard to understand them.

Thus, rigorous learning standards (and assessments that demonstrate student mastery of those standards) play a central role in designing big goals. They tell us exactly what, at a minimum, our students must learn, and they give us objective bases for evaluating that learning. In our studies of more effective and less effective teachers, we have seen that teachers who do not engage with learning standards are inclined to develop big goals that evade measurement and therefore cannot influence teachers' and students' behavior in ways that accelerate achievement.

Building Students' Love of Learning, Persistence, Self-Esteem, and Other Empowering Dispositions, Skills, and Mindsets

Many teachers seek to instill in students certain values, dispositions, and life skills that will support students' hard work and success in the long term—concepts like resilience, love of learning, respect for others, self-advocacy, and independence. While these concepts are sometimes articulated as separate big goals, highly effective teachers emphasize that academic achievement is an integral part of achieving goals and cannot actually be separated from them. One cannot simply tell students to have self-esteem, or to be persistent, or to love learning; rather, these important characteristics are most effectively developed through the pursuit of something difficult and valuable—academic achievement. One effective teacher, Karen Fierst, explained:

“I have found that a child's self-perception and motivation are so intertwined with academic achievement that it is nearly impossible to address either one exclusively. For a student to make significant academic gains, they must internalize the desire to grow and develop the confidence to take academic risks. However, in order for a student to develop that intrinsic motivation and self-confidence, they must experience some success with academics.”

Highly effective teachers' focus on empowering traits comes from their insistence that these traits have a meaningful long-term impact on students' lives. These teachers are asking themselves, “What accomplishments and areas of growth will most open opportunities for students?” With that question in mind, Mr. Delhagen combined his strictly academic goal (passing the Regents Global History Exam) with his vision of effective thinking, writing, and communicating to help his students develop into global citizens. Ms. Jones, in her goal that her students would “read, write, do math, and *behave* like third graders,” similarly developed and shared with her students specific indicators of behavior, related in large part to cooperation, collaboration, and respect, that she sought to develop alongside academic skills.

As we see modeled by these teachers, the less tangible nature of such longer-term dispositions, mindsets, and skills does not mean they cannot be tracked and, in some sense, measured. In fact, if these ideas are going to be infused into a big goal, you must have a way to know that you are making progress toward them.

Mekia Love, a nationally recognized reading teacher in Washington, D.C., sets individualized, quantifiable literacy goals for each of her students but also frames them in her broader vision of “creating life-long readers.” This is a trait she believes is a key to her students’ opportunities and fulfillment in life. In order for both Ms. Love and her students to track their progress toward creating life-long readers, Ms. Love developed a system of specific and objective indicators (like students’ self-driven requests for books, students’ own explanations of their interest in reading, the time students are engaged with a book). By setting specific quantifiable targets for and monitoring each of those indicators, she was able to demonstrate progress and success on what would otherwise be a subjective notion.

Strong teachers—because they know that transparency and tracking progress add focus and urgency to their and their students’ efforts—find a way to make aims like self-esteem, writing skills, “love of reading,” or “access to high-performing high schools” specific and objective. These teachers—like Ms. Love, Mr. Delhagen, and Ms. Jones—ask themselves what concrete indicators of resilience or independence or “love of learning” they want to see in their students by the end of the year and work them into their big goals.

In our experience, less effective teachers may sometimes assume that because a measurement system may be imperfect or difficult, then it must be wrong or impossible. As Jim Collins reminds us in his studies of effective for-profit and nonprofit organizations,

“To throw our hands up and say, “But we cannot measure performance in the social sectors the way you can in a business” is simply lack of discipline. All indicators are flawed, whether qualitative or quantitative. Test scores are flawed, mammograms are flawed, crime data are flawed, customer service data are flawed, patient-outcome data are flawed. What matters is not finding the perfect indicator, but settling upon a consistent and intelligent method of assessing your output results, and then tracking your trajectory with rigor. What do you mean by great performance? Have you established a baseline? Are you improving? If not, why not? How can you improve even faster toward your audacious goals?”¹⁰

To drive this point home, Collins offers the helpful example of the Cleveland Orchestra, which defined its own success in terms of “artistic excellence.” Obviously tracking progress toward artistic excellence is tricky, and simply going with any subjective determination of artistic excellence negates the purposes of setting a goal in the first place. Subjective, after-the-fact opinions offer no destination against which to track progress and success and provide no urgency or focus.

Given the subjective nature of “artistic excellence,” the orchestra’s leaders developed a series of indicators that would serve as proxies for that vision. They tallied and tracked standing ovations, the range of pieces they could play with perfection, invitations to the most prestigious music festivals, demand for tickets, other orchestras’ imitation of their style, and the number of composers seeking out the Cleveland Orchestra to debut new compositions. As Collins

reminds us, those factors are not perfect, but they are good indicators of success. With those proxy indicators, the leaders of the orchestra were able to reap the same benefits as with more quantitative measures used in other endeavors.¹¹

Many teachers, in their big goal design, face some version of the Cleveland Orchestra problem. While some aspects of our goals (for example, “Every student will master 80 percent of the North Carolina chemistry standards as measured by the state assessment”) are obviously measurable, some other aims (for example, “Students’ writing skills will improve by X amount” or “Students will become stronger critical thinkers”) require development of proxy indicators, rubrics, or other means to ensure clear progress tracking is possible.

Inspiring High Performance with High Expectations

Leaders expect the best of the people around them.

— Warren Bennis¹²

Without exception, the strongest teachers we have studied tap into an amazing phenomenon of human psychology: the self-fulfilling prophecy of high expectations. These teachers recognize that we get from our students what we expect from them. These teachers’ every action is driven by the insight that high expectations cause high achievement.

In the words of a first-grade teacher in Phoenix, “Every time I have raised the expectations in my classroom, students have also raised their performance.” Another teacher summarized

► RESEARCH ON THE SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY OF HIGH EXPECTATIONS

CALLED BY SOME THE “Pygmalion” effect (after the mythical ancient Greek sculptor whose love for his statue made her come to life), the “self-fulfilling prophecy of high expectations” has been verified by researchers.¹³ In one landmark study, teachers were told by researchers that certain students in their classes had performed well on a test that predicts intellectual growth. In truth, these students had been randomly selected by the researchers to be described as high performing for the purposes of the experiment. These students were actually distinguished only by their teachers’ expectations for their performance. Eight months later, those randomly selected students described to the teachers as high performing had significantly outperformed their peers on IQ tests, showing an increase of an average of twelve points on an IQ exam (while other students had grown an average of eight points). And the teachers themselves consistently

the idea like this: “The biggest obstacle to my students’ success is actually low expectations. Too many of us, as teachers, do not expect them to succeed, so they do not. Too many students do not expect themselves to succeed, so they do not. When my students are expected to perform at high levels, they absolutely do.”

While the self-fulfilling prophecy of high expectations is well established by research, in our experience, the most compelling evidence of this idea’s power comes from the many testimonials we receive from strong teachers. Crystal Brakke, for example, is a teacher who in her first year teaching eighth grade in Henderson, North Carolina, took her students from almost 70 percent failing the state literacy assessment to over 80 percent passing it. Ms. Brakke shares how her high expectations helped change the academic trajectory of one particularly challenging student.

“The Wilson,” the self-appointed nickname of a young man named Scott, was a living legend at Henderson Middle School. He was nearly sixteen years old and had already spent three years at the middle school. The crowds would part in the hallways for him. He ruled the school, and he knew it. He also knew that, probably quite realistically, he would be promoted to high school no matter what he did this school year—we just couldn’t keep him in middle school another year. So my second-period class quickly became his personal playground . . . and I realized that if I didn’t do something soon, the year would be lost for both him and the other twenty students I needed to teach. . . . Scott wasn’t ready for high school—he was reading at a fifth-grade level.

So I got together with the other teachers on my team, who were facing their own struggles with Scott, and we came up with a plan that was supported by both Scott’s grandmother (his guardian) and his older brother, Richard, whom he idolized. We called him into a team

described the “bloomer” students as better behaved, more academically curious, more likely to succeed, and more friendly than other students in the class.¹⁴ Researcher Robert Marzano summarizes this body of research:

“A teacher’s beliefs about students’ chances of success in school influence the teacher’s actions with students, which in turn influence students’ achievement. If the teacher believes students can succeed, she tends to behave in ways that help them succeed. If the teacher believes that students cannot succeed, she unwittingly tends to behave in ways that subvert student success or at least do not facilitate student success. This is perhaps one of the most powerful hidden dynamics of teaching because it is typically an unconscious activity.”¹⁵

meeting, and he sauntered in, ready for whatever we could give him—in-school suspension, after-school detention. He’d seen it all before. Instead, I told him that his schedule had changed: he would now be coming to my class first period and working with the cluster of “gifted and talented” students in that class. Honestly, you could see the color draining from his face. I explained that I realized what the problem was—that it wasn’t him; it was me. I wasn’t teaching him what he needed; wasn’t teaching to his level and expecting from him what I knew he was capable of doing. That’s when he just flat out called me “crazy.”

But the next day, Scott came to my first-period class. He sat down, and didn’t say a word for the next ninety minutes. That’s when I knew we were on to something. I can tell you for certain that progress came slowly, very slowly. Some days I had to fight just for him to keep his head up, but then one day, he brought a pen and pencil to class. I almost cried, I was so excited. Another day, he raised his hand to answer a question. He had started participating, and that was the end of behavior problems with “The Wilson.”

By January, he was just another kid in my class and was sharing insights into *Romeo and Juliet* that made my jaw drop. My favorite memory from that year came when one of the seventh-grade teachers approached me after a staff meeting, asking, “What are you doing up there with Scott Wilson?” It turns out that “The Wilson” had made a visit to the seventh-grade hallway to chat with some of his old teachers and let them know that we finally figured it out: he’s gifted.

Another highly effective teacher, Brent Maddin, saw the power of setting and maintaining high expectations for student performance in his science classes in south Louisiana. Sometimes Mr. Maddin’s high expectations took the form of a low grade for a student who was not used to getting them (see table below).

Virtually every highly effective teacher we work with has similar stories of the power of expectations, starting with the expectations they set for all their students in the form of ambitious academic goals. At the same time, most of those strong teachers also have

Mr. Maddin’s Perspective	The Student’s Perspective
When Jeohn turned in his science fair project, it looked absolutely beautiful. But when I really looked at the work, it was substandard. He had cut corners and not put much effort into it. Not much learning had happened even though he had known the expectations. Our project evaluation rubric was much more about the science than the aesthetics, and even though it looked good superficially, I knew he could do so much better.	I got a D on my science fair project. I had never gotten a D before. I always got A’s. And I always won with my science fair projects. I was pretty upset about it. But when I sat down and talked to Mr. Maddin about it, he showed me there was a whole lot more I could have done. He showed me what success really looks like. He showed me what I was capable of. He was disappointed that I hadn’t worked hard, and I became disappointed too.

Mr. Maddin's Perspective	The Student's Perspective
<p>I knew I was going to take a lot of flak from people, and I did. Both Jeohn and his mother came in and said, "You can't do this. This project would get an A in any other class. This project looks better than any of those others."</p> <p>Jeohn's project might have done well in another class, but our standards were high, and also clear. Many of his classmates had in fact met those expectations, even though the product was not as pretty as Jeohn's.</p> <p>That was a moment when Jeohn suddenly just got it. He knew he could do better. He knew I wasn't going to accept less than his best. I think it was a real turning point. He knew he could perform to the high standard I had set, and he decided he would.</p>	<p>It was just a science fair project, but that was a lesson that translated into life, college, everything. That D made me realize that there could be a different standard. And I saw that it was hard for Mr. Maddin sometimes. He would give kids an F while others would give them an A and some people would be really mad, but once kids saw the bigger picture, they weren't bitter.</p> <p>It took a lot of courage and determination and tenacity from Mr. Maddin to stand up to students and colleagues when they questioned the standard he was setting. I certainly wouldn't be where I am today if I hadn't encountered him in high school.</p> <p><i>Jeohn went on to attend Yale and is now in the foreign service.</i></p>

counterexamples of times when they, for one reason or another, let slip their high expectations in ways that undermined student progress.

Cutting Through the "Smog" of Low Expectations

The fact that many strong teachers describe their struggles to establish and maintain high expectations for their students reminds us that acting on our students' true potential takes a strong commitment, affirmative work, and constant vigilance against powerful influences all around us. We live under a barrage of negative messages about our students that can, if we are not working against them, gradually erode our belief in our students' potential.

Beverly Tatum, president of Spelman College, psychologist, and author of *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* uses smog as an analogy for the racial bias all around us.¹⁶ The same analogy is appropriate for the closely related and constantly present low expectations that we as a society have for children in low-income communities. She writes, "Sometimes it is so thick it is visible, other times it is less apparent, but always, day in and day out, we are breathing it in. None of us would introduce ourselves as 'smog-breathers'. . . but if we live in a smoggy place, how can we avoid breathing the air?"¹⁷

One key form of that "smog" is the media messages we consume every day. Most of us are probably aware, at least in a general sense, that popular media portrayals of people living in poverty and people of color are rife with negative stereotypes.¹⁸ African American and Hispanic youth (especially boys) are, on the news, on television shows, and in movies, often portrayed as violent, criminal, lazy, and uninterested in academic success.¹⁹ A number of

► HOW THE GENERAL PUBLIC SEES THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP AND ITS CAUSES

THE GENERAL PUBLIC BLAMES our students and their families for the achievement gap in America. In a Phi Beta Kappa/Gallup survey, the general public pointed to lack of parental involvement, home life and upbringing, and lack of interest on the part of students themselves as the three most important factors in creating the gap.²¹

When we ask precisely the same questions of our teachers who are actually working around and against the achievement gap every day, we get very different answers. These teachers respond that a leading cause of the achievement gap is low expectations of students. They suggest that all of us—teachers, students’ families, and students themselves—simply do not expect enough of students in low-income communities.²²

“I think that one of the public’s biggest misunderstandings is that students in the communities and schools where we teach do not have the desire or the ability to learn and perform at the same level as students from more affluent communities,” responded a middle school English teacher in Philadelphia.²³

The complete report on these surveys of our teachers about the causes and solutions of the achievement gap is available online.



teachingasleadership.org

studies demonstrate that African American and Hispanic people are overrepresented as criminals on the news and underrepresented as victims.²⁰

Television and movie portrayals similarly misrepresent students’ demographics. One study found that in movies, African Americans are much more frequently cast in roles “involving physical action or buffoonery than those that rely on close audience identification with a complicated, dramatic problem faced by a main character,”²⁴ and another found that Hispanics are typically cast in caricatured roles with negative associations.²⁵ The rare instances of modern Native Americans represented in film and television tend to be “militant activists or alcoholics.”²⁶ In commercials, people of color use computers less often than whites, and white males hold a virtual monopoly on positions requiring technological expertise.²⁷

These media-perpetuated stereotypes are arguably both a cause and effect of the general public’s doubts and fears about our students. Whatever the cause and effect, we experience the smog of low expectations at every turn.

Sometimes we breathe that smog through personal interactions, like when a stranger stops Crystal Brakke in Wal-Mart as she buys school supplies to say how sorry she is that Ms. Brakke has to work with “those kids at that school.” Or when a cynical school administrator suggests that second-grade teacher Alaina Moonves stick to “finger painting and puppets” with her students with special needs. Or when Chancellor of District of

Columbia Schools, Michelle Rhee, is told by a teacher to slow down her reforms because “you can’t teach pigs to fly.”

Sometimes that smog is part of the system in which we work, as when ESL teacher Stephen Ready’s students were not tested for Gifted and Talented programs. Or when Kate Sobel’s school in a low-income neighborhood is “recognized” and celebrated because students earned a 3 on a ten-point assessment (but such celebrations happen in wealthy districts when students earn a 10). Or when Lisa Barrett inherits a new student with the IEP goal “to prove himself to be a helpful, outgoing student.” Or when a student has to bring his parents to school to convince a counselor to move him from a floor-covering class into Spanish as he requested.²⁸

Sometimes the same corrosive messages about our students come in the form of well-intended but nonetheless damaging praise for us as teachers. When we receive a compliment on our patience, bravery, or generosity for “dealing” with those difficult and needy students, what is that saying about our students? Of course, the work of teachers in low-income communities is difficult, and many students are in great need, but sometimes the motivation for appreciating a teacher is not actually the burden of those external difficulties but is instead negative assumptions about students’ potential.

We, as teachers, can be consciously and subconsciously affected by those comments, structures, and compliments in at least two ways. First, we may begin to believe that merely exceeding those low expectations of our students is success. But given the high stakes for our students, learning more than last year cannot be enough. Because we know our students can excel on the absolute scale used in well-resourced and high-performing schools and because we know they are so far behind those students, the same absolute bar used for students in higher-income communities must be our bar as well.

Second, the inundating smog of low expectations around us can shift our primary focus from our students’ potential to learn to the challenges that these students face. The unfortunate reality of our society is that violence, drug use, unemployment, malnutrition, and other symptoms of poverty do have higher incidence in low-income communities than in higher-income communities.²⁹ The unfortunate reality is that children in low-income communities, the vast majority of whom are children of color, are statistically more likely to fail, drop out, and be incarcerated than children in wealthier communities.³⁰ Highly effective teachers, however, realize that those realities do not change their students’ potential to succeed. They may require hard work to navigate, but they do not make these students any less capable of achieving success.

Imagine for a moment the “smog” at play when Ms. Brakke wrestled with how to handle “The Wilson” in her second year at Henderson Middle School. As a “young black male”—a phrase that one study of *Time* and *Newsweek* cover stories found to be synonymous with “criminal”³¹—Scott Wilson fit a stereotype that both Scott and Ms. Brakke encountered every day. As a student who had failed several years previously, Scott had a reputation among many teachers as someone who could not succeed. And in Scott’s bullying and misbehavior, he could

be seen to validate various negative assumptions others were making about him. And yet from within this smog of low expectations, Ms. Brakke, like all other highly effective teachers, worked to maintain her high expectations of Scott Wilson:

“There were definitely times when I was discouraged, when people, besides Scott himself, told me I was crazy for moving him to my advanced class. Some of his previous teachers, some of his classmates—even some of his friends—told me that it just wasn’t going to work. He couldn’t cut it in a regular class, there was no way he could make it in a more challenging one, they said. I just kept going back to this thought in my head: that I honestly didn’t believe that, and there was no reason to expect something different for him than for any of my other students. We had to get to our goal of every student reaching 80 percent mastery of the literacy standards, and that included Scott. I wasn’t doing my job if I put him off to the side.”

Scholar Sonia Nieto refers to the hidden curriculum in our classrooms—“those subtle and not-so-subtle messages that, although not part of the intended curriculum, may nevertheless have an impact on students.” Nieto points out through research and examples that our expectations of our students are one key element of that hidden, and powerful, curriculum. The highly effective teachers we work with, teachers like Ms. Brakke, take to heart Nieto’s warning that “many times, unintentional discrimination is practiced by well-meaning teachers.”³² They work diligently to check and preserve their high expectations for their students against the smog of degrading messages around them.

Thus, maintaining our high expectations requires affirmative work and commitment. When we cut through the smog of low expectations, big goals are at the center of that hard work and commitment. For strong teachers, setting big goals is a public declaration—to their students, themselves, and others—of their commitment to fulfill students’ potential. Successful teachers use this public pledge as an inoculation against the degrading influences of the doubts they hear, and may sometimes have, about their students.

Turning High Expectations into Ambitious Big Goals

High expectations drive a big goal’s design even as teachers seek a realistic and informed understanding of what their students can learn in the time available. Highly effective teachers develop a well-considered opinion of what their students, with great effort, can accomplish. They then factor that understanding into their big goals. Note that feasibility, therefore, is not a generic check on ambitiousness but rather a call for well-informed ambitiousness.

In our conversations, strong teachers suggested four important sources for pinpointing the frontier of ambitious and feasible for their students:

Relevant learning standards	Sometimes you may find yourself working with more than one set of standards. Experienced educators you work with will have opinions about which learning standards are more and less rigorous. By studying those standards and assessments, you will gain insights that help you calibrate the ambitiousness of your own academic goals for your students.
Evidence of your students' prior academic achievement	Sometimes you can obtain access to your students' prior academic achievement before the school year starts. Many teachers often also find or design diagnostic assessments to clearly understand what students know and can do at the beginning of the year.
Levels of achievement reached by students in higher-income communities	"Excellent school visits" (when a teacher gets to see what other students are achieving) are often inspiring catalysts for ambitious goals.
Levels of achievement reached by the strongest of your fellow teachers and predecessors	What is the higher end of academic gains achieved by students who previously came into this grade level and subject as far behind as your students are? Your best source for these data are often strong teachers in high-performing schools. Find those teachers teaching your grade or subject who seem to have clear goals themselves, and discuss their students' achievement and the challenges to that achievement. Find teachers with a proven record of dramatic academic gains for their students and ask them to describe those gains.

These considerations, taken together, help a teacher make an informed judgment that a big goal is both ambitious and feasible.

One implication of ensuring that big goals are ambitious and feasible for all students is the need to individualize goals. When students begin the year with dramatically different prior knowledge and skills, or different interests and motivations, or different experiences and learning styles, excellent teachers design big goals that reflect those differences. Mariel Elguero, for example, the fifth-grade teacher whose big goal is in part to improve students' reading levels by two years, must know each student's literacy skills at the beginning of the year in order to make her growth goal meaningful. While all of her fifth graders should be reading chapter books like *Harry Potter*, her diagnostics indicate that some would struggle with *Magic Tree House* books, and some would even struggle with advanced Dr. Seuss books. By looking forward from a student's starting point to where two grade levels of growth would take the student, Ms. Elguero in effect creates individualized goals for each student.

Other big goals aspire to some absolute end that does not depend on where students start: Mr. Delhagen's determination that all his students would pass the Regents Global History Exam or Ms. Jones's vision that all her students would "read, write, do math, and behave like third graders" are examples of mastery goals that are independent of where students begin. Mastery goals, of

► DOES THE GOAL GRAB YOU IN THE GUT?

A COMMON QUALITY of effective big goals is that they are exciting to both the students and the teacher. Not only did Ms. Jones's goals bring alignment and urgency to her and her students' efforts, but her students were also inspired by the idea that their academic skills and behavior would compete with the big kids upstairs. As Collins and Porras found in their studies of extraordinarily successful organizations, the best big goals are those that constituents instantly understand and that "reach out and grab them in the gut."³³

Big goals prove to be critical motivators in the face of great difficulty. In fact, one extensive study of leadership found that clear big goals are especially important for helping people stay the course when the leader and organization faced tough challenges.³⁴

In our context, the power of big goals to sustain effort is hugely important given the debilitating challenges we may face in our quest to put our students on a new academic track. The harsh reality is that some (certainly not all) of the schools where the achievement gap is most prominent are dysfunctional settings. We may face unforeseen surprises (perhaps five more students have just been assigned to your classroom in the middle of the semester), exhaustion (perhaps neither you nor your students slept enough last night), disruptive administrative demands (perhaps attendance records must be handed over halfway through your class), or seemingly impossible challenges (perhaps your eighth graders read on a third-grade level). Teachers working to change the life paths of children in low-income communities face potentially frustrating obstacles along the way. Highly effective teachers report that having the clear vision of victory down the road helps them keep all those daily challenges in perspective and keep working hard.

course, run the risk of underachievement for students who start the year ahead of others and may need to be individualized accordingly. Either a growth or a mastery model can be a powerful driver of student achievement. In our experience, the key is whether the teacher is asking, "Does this goal realistically maximize the potential for every student in the class?"

With either growth or mastery goals, individualization can sometimes be an effective sub-strategy of setting big goals. As Sara Egli, a teacher in Phoenix, explains:

“Each month I update the personalized big goal signs on each student’s desk. Juan’s February goals were to read ninety-two words in one minute and to count by threes to ninety-nine. George was working on reading eighteen words in one minute, and counting by ones to fifty. They each met both goals. It was pretty powerful to see Juan and George stand in front of the class to receive their class cheer together last week. Both students beamed with pride as their peers congratulated them. . . . Class averages are great in some situations, but I know that personalized monthly big goals have kept both of these students motivated to work hard to achieve.”

► BELIEVING IN OUR GOALS EVEN WHEN WE MISS THEM

MARTIN WINCHESTER, AN AWARD-WINNING veteran teacher in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, sets a number of big goals for his students. Reaching one of those—that 100% of students will pass the state assessment—has just barely eluded him, but he has no regrets about setting it:

“In eleven years of teaching, I’ve had 99 percent of my students pass the state assessment four consecutive years in a row, and I’ve averaged 95 percent over the last six years, but never every single student. And you know, I’m proud of those numbers, and at the same time each year’s failure truly, truly hurts. But you know what? At the beginning of every one of those years, and at the beginning of every year I teach, I honestly believed and will believe that **THIS** is the year we’re going to get every single one of them to pass the test on the first take. Seriously, I’ve never described that goal to my students without absolutely, completely believing we were going to get there. How could I ever be satisfied with aiming for 90 percent or 95 percent passing? . . . Sure, there are days in the year when I struggle with doubts, but when that happens, I reach deep inside myself and make myself believe we’re going to do it. . . . I have to be able to look every one of my students in the eye and say with conviction that we can do this together. If I didn’t believe it, even for one brief moment, they would see right through me.”

Mr. Winchester believes that “90 percent of the value of the big goal is the motivating power of high expectations.” In his experience, the value that comes from setting high expectations and acting on them, even if you don’t quite meet your goal, far outweighs any damage that missing the goal can have—especially when the teacher is tracking and celebrating progress along the way. “The key to dramatic academic progress is students’ belief in their own ability to do it,” Mr. Winchester says. “The key to their belief in their own ability, is *my* belief in their ability. I’m going to keep setting ambitious goals knowing, in my heart, that we can and will reach them.”

Whether you are individualizing student goals or not, the stakes in the difficult and imperfect search for an informed ambitiousness are high. If we underestimate the potential of our students to master rigorous content, we contribute to the low expectations that drive educational inequity in the first place. Yet setting a goal that is impossible for students to reach even with extraordinarily hard work might further undermine students' shaky confidence, cementing their impression that effort does not lead to achievement and that they are "not smart" enough to achieve in school.

Most of the highly effective teachers we work with acknowledge the heavy burden of those high stakes and difficult tensions. At the same time, they express a sense of empowerment and inspiration that comes from deciding on a vision and doing everything they can to lead students to it.

Leading with Students' Needs and Interests

A teacher's vision of the future must also take into consideration students' visions of the future. The most effective big goals are those that build on students' desires and motivations. They have meaning in students' lives, even if the teacher has to do some work to ensure every student appreciates that meaning (see Chapter Two). As Mekia Love told us, "You have to really ask why those academic targets are so important to you and your kids, and the answers to that question will help shape how you articulate your big goals."

In their massive study of leadership across all sectors, Kouzes and Posner made this same observation: "What people really want to hear is not simply the leader's vision. They want to hear about their own aspirations. They want to hear how their dreams will come true and their hopes will be fulfilled. They want to see themselves in the picture of the future that the leader is painting. The very best leaders understand that their key task is inspiring shared vision, not selling their own idiosyncratic view of the world."³⁵

Katie Pierce, a successful teacher in New York City, shared with us a story about an experience with her students' families that showed her the importance of seeking the meaning behind her big goals. When one of her students' fathers articulated the value of his child's learning to him and his family, Ms. Pierce realized that all the benefits of big goals are magnified when the goal is closely tied to students' deepest aspirations:

“At the end of my first year I set up an awards ceremony for our “Academy of Scholars.” I wanted to recognize my ESL social studies students for meeting our big goal that all students would reach at least 80 percent mastery of the state social studies standards. I was also celebrating the students in my Spanish class (for Spanish speakers) who had scored 80 or higher on all ten of their writing projects.

My coteacher and I had invited the students' families, and we all had a fabulous potluck dinner before the awards ceremony. Our “decorating crew” of students had the school cafeteria just covered in streamers, the tables set with tablecloths and confetti, and a big

banner that read, “*Bienvenidos, estudiantes y familias.*” Families came bearing *pollo horneado* (baked chicken), *moro* (Dominican rice and beans dish), more *pollo horneado*, more rice and beans, *pozole mexicano*, salads and desserts. The students looked dashing in their dress clothes: Aiden in a three-piece suit; Sonali in a kid’s-sized evening gown with her shoulders absolutely smothered in gold glitter. We listened to music, ate dinner, and took photo after photo after photo, before heading into the auditorium for the awards ceremony and poetry recitation performance by the students.

During the ceremony, one of my students’ fathers asked if he could speak. He stood up and said, in Spanish, “I feel like so many people here look at us and think, ‘They don’t even speak English; they’ll probably just stay cutting fruit to sell on the street.’ And up until this year, I have always thought that my son would, like me, cut fruit for a living. But after this year, my son and I do not believe that. I believe that my son, and any child in this room, can go to any university he or she wishes to, and can become anyone he or she wishes to become. Thank you, teachers, for reminding us that our children’s education is our future.”

For me, that was the moment I started thinking of big goals as not just about meeting numerical targets but also about the reason for meeting those targets. I decided that what I really wanted the next year was for every parent to feel like that father did. I sat down to redesign my big goals so that by the end of the year, my students would deeply understand the connection between their education and whatever it is they want to become.

When teachers like Ms. Pierce and Ms. Love ask themselves, “Why are these accomplishments important?” they uncover context and meaning that actually shapes their vision of what must be accomplished, making the resulting big goal all the more powerful for their students. In the words of Kouzes and Posner about all successful leaders, “They liberate the vision that’s already in their constituents. They awaken dreams, breathe life into them, and arouse the belief that we can achieve something grand.”³⁶

The Qualities of Effective Big Goals in Action

When a teacher combines the urgency and focus of measurable outputs with the motivation of high expectations with the direct relevance of students’ interests and needs, the teacher creates a big goal that drives extraordinary accomplishments. The remainder of this chapter will revisit these ideas from the perspective of the highly effective teachers who are implementing them for the benefit of their students.

As a starting point for parsing and exploring those qualities as they play out in designing big goals, we will share how Gillette Eckler, a highly effective fourth-grade teacher in Brooklyn, approached the vision-setting process.

► INSIDE THE MIND OF AN EFFECTIVE GOAL SETTER

Ms. Eckler administered diagnostics to gauge her students' starting academic needs and strengths.

WHEN GILLETTE ECKLER MET HER FOURTH GRADERS in Brooklyn on the first day of school, they were reading, on average, on a second-grade level. In math, her students were even further behind, unable to add and subtract numbers of more than one digit. According to state standards, they should have been learning multiple methods of multiplying two-digit numbers by two-digit numbers.³⁷

Shocked and disturbed by those realities, Ms. Eckler took some time to reflect on her students' potential and the challenges facing them. She played out in her mind what was going to happen to her children if they stayed on their current academic path. Without aggressive intervention, her students would contribute to the ugly statistics that drove her to teach in the first place.

Her thinking about her big goal is driven by her desire to have a meaningful impact in students' lives.

Ms. Eckler determined that her students must master the reading, writing, and math skills that would open opportunities down the road. So she set out to gain a thorough understanding of what academic skills her children needed and what skills they lacked. She studied her district's learning standards, as well as her students' diagnostic assessments and records of previous academic performance. Ms. Eckler reached out to veteran teachers who had had success with teaching literacy in her school.

She consults the standards and veteran teachers to gain an understanding of what would be ambitious for her students.

Ms. Eckler also recognized that while dramatic academic growth was a critical element of broadening her students' choices in life, it would not be enough if she wanted to put her students on a path to greater opportunities. She saw that her students and their families lacked knowledge of and access to the often complicated admissions processes for high-performing magnet, charter, and private schools that are available to students in wealthier neighborhoods. She was bothered by the reality that her students were not on track to attend special schools for visual arts, theater, music, dance, technology, mathematics, science, and other specific studies that students from other neighborhoods had access to. She saw that her students needed not only academic skills but bureaucratic and political access to the opportunities those skills could generate. In Ms. Eckler's words:

Ms. Eckler thinks about the particular pathways to opportunity in front of her students.

“My students deserve the best educational opportunities. . . . I want my students to make educated choices about furthering their schooling. These schools provide my students with challenging, hard-working, structured environments where they can pursue specific talents and interests or

► INSIDE THE MIND OF AN EFFECTIVE GOAL SETTER *(continued)*

determine what those talents and interests are and be on the college-bound track in life. They provide extracurricular activities such as drama clubs, choirs, orchestras, sports teams such as running and soccer clubs, robotics, filmmaking, and so on, to provide a well-rounded education that focuses on all aspects of student achievement. These are the schools that my students deserve to know about and have the chance to attend, the path on which they deserve to travel.

Her thinking about big goals is driven by her belief in their potential to succeed.

This vision of an alternate future for her students became Ms. Eckler's big goal. She committed to creating a new reality in which students would gain academic skills, the administrative knowledge and access, and the self-confidence and perseverance they needed to compete for prestigious middle schools. She set clear, measurable targets for her students' mastery of the state math standards. She determined that each student in her class would advance nine reading levels on the system her school used to calibrate reading passages (a gain that was the equivalent of well over two years of reading growth). She pledged that her students would have opportunities to attend excellent middle schools across the city.

She ensures that her students' growth toward the goal will be measurable and transparent.

With this vision in mind, Ms. Eckler entered her classroom energized, focused, and in a hurry. She laid out her vision to her students, investing them in the opportunities that would come with achieving those aims. Ms. Eckler recalls that while her students were inherently motivated by the idea of competing for admission to top middle schools, she was careful and methodical in developing each student's "nine levels growth" reading goal. During the first week, she individually diagnosed each child's skills and met with that child to set short-term goals for moving up one reading level. As students came to understand how the system worked and how much work was necessary to move up a level, she rallied them around the ambitious target of advancing nine levels. In time, her students became as fired up as she was.

Ms. Eckler taps into students' existing desire to attend top middle schools.

Not surprisingly, Ms. Eckler's clear vision of success for her students drove every decision and strategy in her classroom. She and her students created systems for tracking and celebrating their progress. She invested her students' families in the goals and the work it would take to achieve them. A palpable sense of urgency overtook her classroom.

She recognizes that students' families must be invested in the big goal.

(continued on next page)

► **INSIDE THE MIND OF AN EFFECTIVE GOAL SETTER** *(continued)*

In that goal-driven arena, Ms. Eckler's students exceeded all expectations. Not only did her fourth graders grow an average of over two years in reading in just one year, not only did every single student pass the English Language Arts New York State Exam, and not only did the students end the year with 90.08 percent mastery of state math objectives, but after Ms. Eckler convinced her principal to let her move with her students to the fifth grade, their rate of progress continued for another year, and many of her students left her classroom ahead of grade level. Meanwhile, true to her goal, Ms. Eckler became an expert on middle school admissions processes, shepherding each of her students through the Byzantine time lines and paperwork (and even obtaining extensions for her students when a key deadline for some schools was changed but communicated to her students' families on short notice).

Because Ms. Eckler developed a clear vision of success, her students were able to work toward and reach it. They went on to compete for and attend some of the most prestigious and demanding middle schools in New York, including the Academy of Arts and Letters, Philippa Schuyler Middle School, the Eagle Academy for Boys, and other Gifted and Talented and science and tech schools.

By methodically building a big goal that will have a meaningful impact on students' lives, Ms. Eckler illustrates the key issues that all highly effective teachers consider as they set a vision of student success. Powerful big goals that meet the criteria of measurability, ambitiousness, and meaning are developed by considering four questions (Figure 1.1):

1. What measurable academic progress should my students achieve?
2. What traits, mindsets, and skills will best serve my students?
3. What pathways to opportunity are in front of my students that should inform the big goal?
4. What student interests and motivations could shape the big goal?

While every highly effective teacher we have worked with has strong academic aims in his or her big goals (academic achievement is, after all, our definition of "highly effective"), the other three questions are more and less emphasized by different teachers in different contexts. The fundamental tenets of big goal setting (measurability, high expectations, constituents' interests) appear throughout highly effective teachers' engagement with these questions.

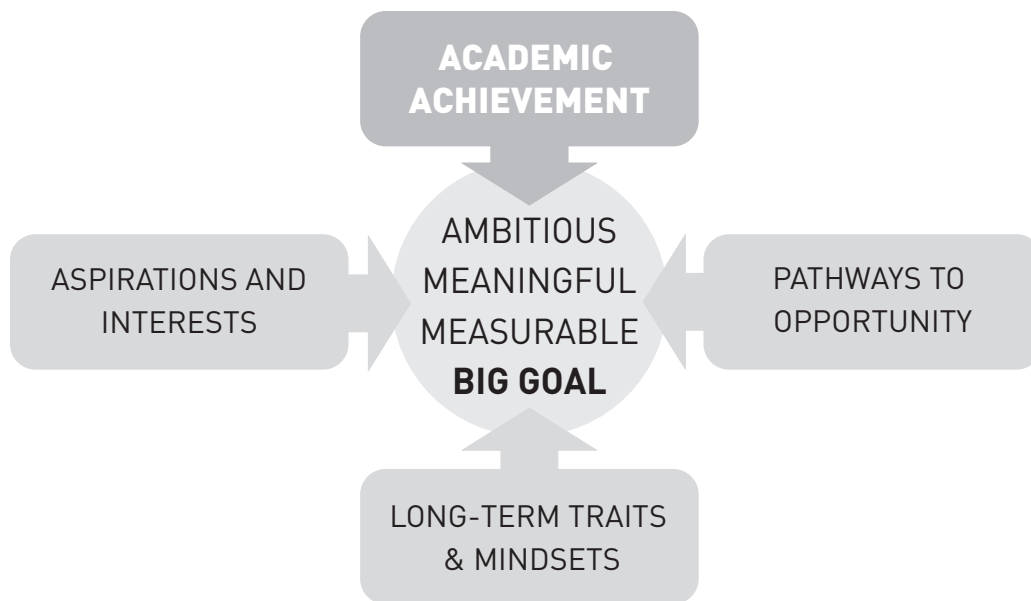


Figure 1.1 Considerations that Influence Big Goals

What Measurable Academic Progress Should My Students Achieve?

In our experience, this question about measurable academic progress leads teachers to inform themselves about students' academic proficiency at the beginning of the year, deeply engage learning standards, understand where students on the other end of the achievement gap are performing, and develop ambitious and measurable targets for academic performance by the end of the year.

For example, Katie Hill, the North Carolina teacher whose middle school students with cognitive learning disabilities improved their literacy skills dramatically, navigated a number of challenges before the school year even began to understand what accomplishments should define success for her students. She began by studying the state's alternative learning standards for children in special education. (These are standards for the very small fraction of students—1 to 2 percent of all students, or 10 to 20 percent of students with disabilities—who are exempt from state testing requirements. The vast majority of students with disabilities are held accountable to the same general education standards as their peers in general education.) Ms. Hill supplemented her understanding of those alternative standards with a deep engagement of the general education standards for pre-K through third grade, on the theory that her incoming students would probably be relatively low functioning in terms of literacy and math and she needed to understand how the foundational learning goals all fit together.

Once she met her students, Ms. Hill invested considerable time diagnosing their knowledge and skills. Given that students' disabilities can sometimes lead to inconsistent performance on assessments, she repeated all diagnostic assessments three times to ensure she was getting an accurate picture of proficiency. She found her students were reading on average at a kindergarten to first-grade reading level. Some knew the letters of the alphabet but could give the sounds of only about 70 percent of the letters. None of her students could rhyme words. None could tell time. Some were able to identify different coins, but none could compare their values. Most of her students did not understand the concept of subtraction. To prepare herself to design well-informed big goals, Ms. Hill met with the students' families to understand their sense of their children's strengths and needs and their wishes for their children's functional goals.

For Ms. Hill, the key to her success was not, however, all of this preparation. "I think the most important thing I did was walk into the school year with the assumption and expectation that my students could and would learn," she says. "Immediately, I could see that my students had strong work ethics and an incredible desire to learn and succeed. I could not let

► THREE WAYS TO MEASURE ACADEMIC PROGRESS

Academic growth. Improvement in student skills from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. This measurement is most appropriate when the learning standards call for skill development (for example, in reading or writing or math) that builds along a continuous spectrum of growth.

Learning goal mastery. Attainment of grade-level expectations (mastery of standard). For some classrooms, especially where discrete knowledge of content is being taught rather than a spectrum of fundamental skills, mastery of X percent of content objectives serves as a useful learning target. (Sometimes for students with special needs, IEP goal mastery is used for these benchmarks.)

Gap-Reduction Targets. This refers to reducing the difference between the performance level of your students and the students in high-performing schools ("distance to high performers"). Where available data lend themselves to these comparisons, you may be able to view your students' academic achievement as compared to the academic achievement occurring in better-resourced schools in higher-income communities.

them down by setting the bar too low for them. After looking over their files and speaking with their parents extensively, I got a sense of how much they had learned in the past, how quickly, and what strategies worked.”

With that information in mind, Ms. Hill was able to determine where her students fit on the broad continuum of learning outlined by the standards. And in the spirit of special education (and in a way that many highly effective teachers do in general education), she individualized students’ math and writing goals around the aim of growing approximately 1.5-grade levels. She set out to revise her students IEPs to make sure they were appropriate and ambitious for each student: “In order to do so, I used lower elementary standards and North Carolina’s Extended Content Standards to create a curriculum map that would allow me to place students on a spectrum of highly prioritized math and literacy standards that contribute to the future of my students’ long-term transitional goals of independent living and employment.”

Although she dramatically increased the rigor of all of her students’ IEP goals as part of this goal-setting process, all of her students met those goals by halfway through the year. Under Ms. Hill’s leadership, her students’ academic growth in their first semester rivaled all the literacy and math progress they had made previously in all their years of school. As Ms. Hill explains, this progress meant that “I have had to revamp my big goal to ensure that it remains an ambitious and relevant goal for my students. I have done so by changing my students’ IEP goals to move them further along the continuum and include more abstract math concepts, coupled with writing focused on content-specific subjects.” Ms. Hill’s approach reminds us that big goals serve as a target to drive urgency and focus, and if changing realities (like unprecedented student achievement) diminish the utility of the big goals in that regard, they may need to be adjusted.

Like Ms. Hill, but in the context of high school history, Mr. Delhagen also asked himself, “What academic achievement should define success for my students?” Facing the daunting reality that global history was usually taught over two years but that he was assigned to teach it in just one year, Mr. Delhagen set out to fully understand everything about the learning goals covered by the Regents Exam. After studying one copy of the exam, he recalls that his reaction was, “Whoa! This covers everything from the neolithic revolution to 9/11. This is a bus tour!” To help make sense of that massive breadth of history, Mr. Delhagen got his hands on fifteen past global history exams and made a spreadsheet to analyze the key ideas and themes of the course.

Mr. Delhagen made all of his investigation transparent to his students. Based on previous experience teaching and his consultations with his students, he decided that a goal of an 80 percent average and 100 percent passing on the exam would be challenging but realistic. He and his students called this goal the *quantitative goal*, and he discussed with them the benefits of having this hard target to “make it easy to see if we’re on track.”

► COMMON PITFALLS TO AVOID WITH BIG GOALS

“Set it and forget it”	Big goals influence student performance only if they are made a central element of the classroom experience. In particular, you need to establish systems that make transparent your students’ progress toward the big goal. (See Chapter Two.)
Reflexive adoption of others’ goals	While you should not have to “reinvent the wheel,” given all the considerations that inform big goals, you should bring your own thinking to whatever big goal models you borrow from others.
“X percent of students will”	Big goals must apply to all students. If your big goal gives you an incentive to underserve some fraction of the class, it is a bad big goal.

This academic achievement also was part of Mr. Delhagen’s consideration of his students’ pathways to opportunity, as every student wanted to graduate from high school, and, since a prerequisite for graduation was passing the Regents Exam, his students were inherently motivated by the goal of success on the exam.

What Traits and Mindsets Will Best Serve My Students?

Like all the other teachers featured in this chapter, Mr. Delhagen believed that his students needed and deserved even more than academic achievement. In his case, it was interactions with his students that sparked his commitment to add other trait and mindset goals to his determination that they would all pass the Regents Global History Exam.

As he studied the learning standards and assessments, Mr. Delhagen noticed a theme of the value of citizenship in human interactions and governance. That theme, he thought, was starkly juxtaposed with some of the behaviors and problems he was seeing in his school, especially among young men. Mr. Delhagen was particularly influenced by one student who came to him to discuss the disrespectful way some of his male classmates were acting toward female students. “That’s not how good citizens behave,” the student said.

Inspired by his students and the subject matter before him, Mr. Delhagen determined that his students would also learn to think, write, and speak like world citizens. Mr. Delhagen faced a Cleveland Orchestra problem. While on their face those aims were too vague to change student behavior and mindsets, Mr. Delhagen had in mind particular behaviors and mindsets he wanted to develop. He set out to involve his students in objectively defining them. Together he and his students designed an “accountable talk” rubric that delineated the qualities of world citizenship and offered specific indicators of students who are accountable to the learning community, to knowledge, and to rigorous thinking:

► ACCOUNTABLE TALK: HOW WE ARE TALKING TO EACH OTHER

Accountable to Learning Community	Accountable to Knowledge	Accountable to Rigorous Thinking
Students	Students	Students
Are engaged in talk	Make use of specific and accurate knowledge	Use rational strategies to present arguments and draw conclusions
Are listening attentively to one another	Provide evidence for claims and arguments	Construct explanations and test understanding of concepts
Elaborate and build on ideas and each other's contributions	Recognize the kind of knowledge or framework required to address a topic	Challenge the quality of each other's reasoning
Ask each other questions aimed at clarifying or expanding a proposition		

By evaluating and tracking students' progress on these indicators, Mr. Delhagen so infused these values in the classroom that classroom management was effectively taken over by students who would ask each other questions from the accountable talk rubric when they got off task.

What Pathways to Student Opportunity Should Inform My Big Goal?

Sometimes a particular academic milestone in a student's future influences the design of a big goal. Imagine that your students are scheduled to sit for an assessment that covers your class's subject matter and success on that assessment will influence students' educational opportunities. Most highly effective teachers would incorporate success on that assessment into their big goal design. For example, perhaps a certain score on a certain exam will make students competitive for high-performing middle schools (as was the case with Ms. Eckler's students), or perhaps achievement of certain ambitious language arts goals will move ESL students out of a remedial English track (as was the case with the students of Felicia Cuesta, an English teacher in Los Angeles), or perhaps high school sophomores' writing skills are not strong enough to write an exemplary college-level essay (as was the case in Eric Thomas's tenth-grade English class in Baltimore). These unique realities allow teachers to connect big goals to pathways of opportunity in their students' future.

Eric Scroggins led his eighth graders in the South Bronx to academic success that earned them high school credit and, for some students, scholarships to high-performing high schools.

He described his realization that the impact his students' learning could have on their future opportunities should shape his big goals:

“During the spring of my first year of teaching, I had dinner with the director of the science department for public schools in Scarsdale [a high-performing district in a well-resourced community] and learned that the eighth-grade science honor students there were expected to take the Earth Science Regents Exam at the end of the year. I knew that if those students did well on this test, they'd have different choices for high school, which would put them on a different track for college. I thought, “The kids on track to go to the best schools take the Earth Science Regents Exam in eighth grade, and that is what my kids will do.” It became clear to me that equality for my students in the Bronx meant the opportunity to take this exam for high school credit.”

While these landmark hurdles are less frequent in elementary school, the same idea applies. For example, some elementary teachers see that their students will be tracked into regular or honors classes starting in sixth grade. Or they see that their students with disabilities, or who are learning English as a Second Language, can earn their way onto different tracks with certain levels of performance. These teachers therefore look carefully at what level of performance is necessary for that particular trajectory and aim for it.

What Student Interests and Motivations Could Shape the Big Goal?

Another implication of thinking about making big goals meaningful to students is considering what lights a fire for our students. Is there a way to connect our vision of ambitious achievement to students' desires so that we can instantly excite students about the big goal? (If so, the big goal will give you a jump-start on investing students in working hard toward accomplishing it, as discussed in Chapter Two.)

Some elementary school teachers leverage their students' intense, inherent desire to be thought of as “big kids.” For Ms. Jones, a conversation with her students inspired this strategy.

Ms. Jones remembers thinking to herself that she wanted a big goal “that sounded a little crazy.” She wanted to shake up her students and their families and inspire them to a big and meaningful achievement. Her first idea was to aim for one-and-a-half years of growth for each student, but as she talked to her students about that goal, she knew that *she* was excited about it but her students had no idea what she was talking about. She wanted a goal they could understand and own themselves, and that really excited them.

A few weeks into school, she hosted a “town hall” meeting with her students.

“We’re going to talk about all of the amazing things we are going to learn this year, but first I want to hear from you all. So tell me, how smart do you all want to get this year?” she asked her first graders.

One girl stood up beside her desk, put her hands on her hips, and announced, “I want to be a third grader!”

The rest of the class erupted with oohs and aahs. Every head in the room was nodding excitedly.

“Why?” Ms. Jones asked. “Why do you want to be third graders?”

The whole class began to speak at once. It turns out that many of her students had older siblings, and all of her students watched the older kids with great admiration and envy. One student, who had a sister in third grade, explained, “Upstairs [where the third grade is] they read books, and they do math.”

Again, the room erupted with excited affirmation of that assessment. These children desperately wanted to be like those older kids.

Reflecting on that conversation, Ms. Jones realized that her “crazy” goal could be to turn her first graders into third graders. But she had a lot of questions to answer first. What do students have to be able to do to begin third grade? What are the reading, writing, and math skills that indicate students are “third graders”? Ms. Jones dug into the Georgia state performance standards for first and second grades. She huddled with her teaching coach and other veteran teachers. She asked for a meeting with an excellent third-grade teacher at her school, who agreed to advise Ms. Jones on how to alter her teaching materials so they prepared students for third grade. She obtained and studied the state assessments for second and third grades.

Ultimately, Ms. Jones learned that getting students to a third-grade level—instead of merely a second-grade level—usually meant increased depth on a discrete list of skills, rather than teaching additional skills. That is, instead of just teaching number sense to the tens place, she would need to go to the thousandths place. Instead of teaching students to write sentences, she would need to teach them to write a series of sentences to make paragraphs. For each of the concepts in her first-grade curriculum, she looked at the second- and third-grade versions and pushed her planning further.

Through this exploration, Ms. Jones came to believe that a big goal around getting her children, most of whom were performing below first-grade level, ready for third grade was in fact “crazy.” But she also became convinced that that vision was in fact possible. It was going to require very hard work, but she found the idea intensely motivating for herself, not to mention the students. When she unveiled this new big goal to the children, they were overwhelmed with excited pride. They were inspired to do whatever Ms. Jones asked if she could make them third graders.

We see similar patterns among other strong teachers in all grade levels and subject matter. Some secondary teachers work with their students’ inclination to respond to peer pressure, using both a sense of team and a sense of competition (perhaps with a well-resourced rival school, for example) to frame academic achievement. One high school teacher, Chris Ott, established a “competition” with eighth graders’ performance in the United Kingdom. Some special education teachers hook into a student’s interest in an inclusion or mainstream setting, connecting academic accomplishment

The Teaching As Leadership rubric (see Appendix A) describes the specific teacher actions that indicate a teacher is setting big goals.

to opportunities for autonomy and responsibility. Those are just a few of many examples of ways that teachers draw on the inherent motivations of their students to shape their big goals.

Conclusion: Key Ideas and Next Questions

Key Ideas

In our experience, highly effective teachers believe these key ideas are a foundation for leading students to overcome great odds and make dramatic academic achievement:

- Effective big goals draw on three principles of strong leadership: an insistence on measurable outcomes, expecting the best of those around you, and informing your vision with the aspirations of your constituents.
- Big goals maximize student learning by aligning the effort of the teacher, students, and their families and by bringing urgency and focus to learning. Well-designed big goals can be inspiring and motivating to teachers and students.
- Effective big goals are measurable, ambitious, and meaningful to students' lives.
- The core academic element of any big goal must be aligned with rigorous learning standards.
- Highly effective teachers develop their big goals by asking themselves several questions:
 - What measurable academic progress should my students achieve?
 - What measurable traits, mindsets, and skills will best serve my students?
 - What pathways to opportunity are in front of my students that should inform the big goal?
 - What student interests and motivations could shape the big goal?



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The Teaching As Leadership rubric articulates indicators of effective goal setting. More guidance on how to develop big goals is available online, including:

- Additional specific indicators of strong big goals
- Annotated examples of effective big goals from a variety of grades and subject matter
- Common pitfalls that often trip up new teachers as they are designing big goals

Next Questions

With these ideas in mind, you are ready to consider a whole range of critically important questions for the benefit of your students:

- How can I access and digest the learning standards that apply to my students, and how do those standards shape my vision for my students' success?
- What are the concrete connections between my students' academic achievement and broadened opportunities, and how should those connections inform my goal setting?
- How should I evaluate or design assessments that will ensure my students have met the big goal? How can I ensure that my assessments are rigorous and reflect the full extent of my students' progress? (See Chapter Three.)
- What sorts of big goals have teachers in my grade and subject area used with success, and how might those be applicable or not applicable for my students?
- How can I ensure that each of my students individually feels the benefits (in terms of urgency, focus, inspiration, clarity) of my classwide big goals?

“WHY DO PEOPLE SET BIG GOALS?”



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An excerpt from Ms. Lora's Story, a case study in Teaching As Leadership, available online at www.teachingasleadership.org.

“Lourdes, would you mind sharing what you wrote in your journal this morning?”

As she often did, Lourdes raised her hand even though she had just been called on. She then lowered her hand and read quietly, “My goal is to be a doctor or a dancer. My sister’s goal is to be a police but not mine.”

“Thank you, Lourdes. Chris, would you share your journal entry with us?”

Ms. Lora tried to alternate between stronger and weaker writers.

“My goal is to be a boxer. I made my goal already, but I want to be a real boxer. I will practice a lot and will training-box with my uncle this summer.”

Ms. Lora elicited several other examples. Beto’s goal was to “play soccer so good I get paid.” Tanya, standing by her desk and in a voice much louder than necessary, offered that her goal was to be a veterinarian.

After a few minutes, as she had promised, Ms. Lora read her own entry to the class. The students listened intently. They were naturally hungry for information about their teacher’s personal interests.

“My goal is to become a student again,” Ms. Lora read from her own tattered spiral notebook. “I would like to return to school to learn about being a principal, like Dr. Werner, or a superintendent, like Dr. Page. A principal is a boss of teachers, and a superintendent is a boss of principals. I think my biggest goal is to be a student at Harvard University. Harvard is a college in Massachusetts. In high school, I always dreamed of going to Harvard, but I lacked confidence and never did apply. Now I regret that I did not try to go there. Even if I had not gotten into Harvard, I wish I had tried. After I have been a teacher for a few years, I might apply to Harvard or some other school to learn to become a principal or a superintendent.”

After briefly entertaining several questions from the students about Harvard (“Is it far away?” “Does it have a football team?” “What do people eat there?”), Ms. Lora began what she had come to consider the most important conversation in each of her years of teaching. Over the course of several weeks at the beginning of the school year, she discussed with the students the importance of setting and working toward goals. And she had discovered that it was vitally

“WHY DO PEOPLE SET BIG GOALS?” *(continued)*

important, and immensely rewarding, to actually teach those ideas—just like any other difficult academic objective.

“Can anyone tell me why he or she thinks people set goals?” she asked. Several hands slowly rose. “Yes, Jasmine. What do you think? Why do people set goals?”

For the next fifteen minutes, and each day during the next few weeks, Ms. Lora would start the long road to indoctrinating her students into a goal-oriented mindset. She moved slowly and stopped frequently at concrete examples, but she kept her students’ minds thinking about ideas like tracking their progress toward a goal, pacing that progress, and working hard every day to reach that goal. Drawing on the students’ own examples, she emphasized the hard work and focus that it would take to become a doctor, a dancer, a boxer, a lawyer, a soccer player, a firefighter, and a teacher. Students drew “challenge maps” to articulate the obstacles they might encounter on the way to reaching their goals. They added the words *ambitious*, *realistic*, and *persistence* to the class word wall. Hilario offered that the Blair Elementary Learner’s Creed was a kind of goal that you set every day. The excitement about setting and achieving goals gradually built, stoked by Ms. Lora’s excited anticipation for the day when, as a class and individually, they would set their own academic goals for the year.

This morning, Ms. Lora’s objective was just to plant the seed of need. She wanted her students to start to feel that without a clear goal, they would be lost.

“That’s great thinking, Jasmine,” she said. “You’re right. Some people set goals so they can know when they are finished. Let’s think of some examples of that idea. Can anyone tell me about a situation in which people might like to have a clear goal so they know when they are finished working hard?”

