RTI/MTSS Classroom Teacher Toolkit

Finding the Spark: Teacher Communication Tools to Battle Learned Helplessness & Engage the Unmotivated Student

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How To: Motivate Students Through Teacher Praise

As the majority of states across America adopt the Common Core Standards for reading and mathematics, teachers at all grade levels are eager to find tools that will encourage students to work harder to reach those ambitious outcome goals. Additionally, schools adopting Response to Intervention are seeking evidence-based strategies to motivate struggling students that can also be easily delivered in general-education classrooms.

Teacher praise is one tool that can be a powerful motivator for students. Surprisingly, research suggests that praise is underused in both general- and special-education classrooms (Brophy, 1981; Hawkins & Heflin, 2011; Kern, 2007).

Praise: What the Research Says

Effective teacher praise consists of two elements: (1) a description of noteworthy student academic performance or general behavior, and (2) a signal of teacher approval (Brophy, 1981; Burnett, 2001). The power of praise in changing student behavior is that it both indicates teacher approval and informs the student about how the praised academic performance or behavior conforms to teacher expectations (Burnett, 2001). As with any potential classroom reinforcer, praise has the ability to improve student academic or behavioral performance—but only if the student finds it reinforcing (Akin-Little et al., 2004). Here are several suggestions for shaping praise to increase its effectiveness:

- **Describe Noteworthy Student Behavior.** Praise statements that lack a specific account of student behavior in observable terms are compromised—as they fail to give students performance feedback to guide their learning. For example, a praise statement such as ‘Good job!’ is inadequate because it lacks a behavioral description (Hawkins & Heflin, 2011). However, such a statement becomes acceptable when expanded to include a behavioral element: "You located eight strong source documents for your essay. Good job!"

- **Praise Effort and Accomplishment, Not Ability.** There is some evidence that praise statements about general ability can actually reduce student appetite for risk-taking (Burnett, 2001). Therefore, teachers should generally steer clear of praise that includes assumptions about global student ability (e.g., "You are a really good math student!"); "I can tell from this essay that writing is no problem for you."). Praise should instead focus on specific examples of student effort or accomplishment (e.g., "It's obvious from your grade that you worked hard to prepare for this quiz. Great work!"). When praise singles out exertion and work-products, it can help students to see a direct link between the effort that they invest in a task and improved academic or behavioral performance.

- **Match the Method of Praise Delivery to Student Preferences.** Teachers can deliver praise in a variety of ways and contexts. For example, an instructor may choose to praise a student in front of a class or work group or may instead deliver that praise in a private conversation or as written feedback on the student's assignment. When possible, the teacher should determine and abide by a student's preferences for receiving individual praise. It is worth noting that, while most students in elementary grades may easily accept public praise, evidence suggests that middle and high-school students actually prefer private praise (Burnett, 2001). So, when in doubt with older students, deliver praise in private rather than in public.

Praise: Use in the Classroom

Praise is a powerful motivating tool because it allows the teacher to selectively encourage different aspects of student production or output. For example, the teacher may use praise to boost the student's performance, praising...
effort, accuracy, or speed on an assignment. Or the teacher may instead single out the student's work product and use praise to underscore how closely the actual product matches an external standard or goal set by the student. The table below presents descriptions of several types of praise-statements tied to various student goals:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Praise: Goal</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Student Performance: Effort.</strong> Learning a new skill requires that the student work hard and put forth considerable effort—while often not seeing immediate improvement.</td>
<td><em>Today in class, you wrote non-stop through the entire writing period. I appreciate your hard work.</em></td>
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For beginning learners, teacher praise can motivate and offer encouragement by focusing on effort ('seat-time') rather than on product (Daly et al., 2007).

**Student Performance: Accuracy.** When learning new academic material or behaviors, students move through distinct stages (Haring et al., 1978). Of these stages, the first and most challenging for struggling learners is acquisition. In the acquisition stage, the student is learning the rudiments of the skill and strives to respond correctly.

The teacher can provide encouragement to students in this first stage of learning by praising student growth in *accuracy* of responding.

**Student Performance: Fluency.** When the student has progressed beyond the acquisition stage, the new goal may be to promote fluency (Haring et al., 1978).

Teacher praise can motivate the student to become more efficient on the academic task by emphasizing that learner's gains in *fluency* (a combination of accuracy and speed of responding).

**Work Product: Student Goal-Setting.** A motivating strategy for a reluctant learner is to have him or her set a goal before undertaking an academic task and then to report out at the conclusion of the task about whether the goal was reached.

The teacher can then increase the motivating power of student goal-setting by offering praise when the student successfully sets and attains a goal. The praise statement states the original student goal and describes how the product has met the goal.

**Work Product: Using External Standard.** Teacher praise often evaluates the student work product against some external standard.

Praise tied to an external standard reminds the student that objective expectations exist for academic or behavioral performance (e.g., Common Core State Standards in reading and mathematics) and provides information about how closely the student's current performance conforms to those expectations.

When comparing student work to an external standard, the teacher praise-statement identifies the external standard and describes how closely the student's work has come to meeting the standard.

**Praise: Troubleshooting**
One reason that praise is often underused in middle and high school classrooms may be that teachers find it very difficult both to deliver effective group instruction and to provide (and keep track of) praise to individual students. Here are several informal self-monitoring ideas to help teachers to use praise with greater frequency and consistency:

- **Keep Daily Score.** The teacher sets a goal of the number of praise-statements that he or she would like to deliver during a class period. During class, the teacher keeps a tally of praise statements delivered and compares that total to the goal.

- **Select Students for Praise: Goal-Setting and Checkup.** Before each class, the teacher jots down the names of 4-5 students to single out for praise. (This activity can be done routinely as an extension of lesson-planning.) After the class, the teacher engages in self-monitoring by returning to this list and placing a checkmark next to the names of those students whom he or she actually praised at least once during the class period.

- **Make It Habit-Forming: Tie Praise to Classroom Routines.** Like any other behavior, praise can be delivered more consistently when it becomes a habit. Here is an idea that takes advantage of the power of habit-formation by weaving praise into classroom routine: (1) The teacher first defines various typical classroom activities during which praise is to be delivered (e.g., large-group instruction; student cooperative-learning activities; independent seatwork, etc.). (2) For each type of activity, the teacher decides on a minimum number of group and/or individual praise statements that the instructor would like to deliver each day or class period as a part of the instructional routine (e.g., 'Large-group instruction: 5 praise-statements or more to the class or individual students', 'Independent seatwork: 4 praise-statements or more to individual students'). (3) The teacher initially monitors the number of praise-statements actually delivered during each activity and strives to bring those totals into alignment with the minimum levels previously established as goals. (4) As delivery of praise becomes associated with specific activities, the onset of a particular class activity such as large-group instruction serves as a reminder (trigger or stimulus) to deliver praise. In effect, praise becomes a habit embedded in classroom routine.

References


Mindsets: The Power to Help or Hinder Student Motivation

Motivation is central to student academic achievement. And research shows that there is one crucial factor that greatly impacts academic engagement and performance: whether a student has a ‘fixed’ or ‘open’ mindset (Dweck, 2006). Students with a fixed mindset view intelligence, or general ability, as having a fixed upward limit. Viewed from this perspective, accomplishments are explained largely by one's intellectual potential, with effort playing only a minor role. In contrast, students with a growth mindset see intelligence as ‘malleable’: they have faith that increased effort will result in more effective learning and accomplishment. When growth-mindset learners are challenged by academic tasks, they interpret these struggles as “an opportunity for growth, not a sign that a student is incapable of learning” (Paunesku et al., 2015; p. 785).

Why should teachers be concerned about students having a fixed mindset? When such students encounter difficulty or setbacks, they are likely to respond by becoming discouraged, withdrawing effort, or even giving up entirely. Of even more concern, a fixed mindset can result in learners 'disidentifying' with (i.e., disengaging from) those academic subjects or tasks that they find difficult. Research indicates that rates of cheating may also be higher among students with a fixed mindset (Blackwell, Trzesniewski & Dweck, 2007).

Yet students with a growth mindset have a much more positive reaction to setbacks. When they experience difficulty with schoolwork, they respond by viewing the setback as an opportunity to learn, putting more effort into mastering the task, and analyzing where their work or study processes fall short and correcting them. It's no surprise, then, that—because growth-mindset learners remain optimistic and engaged in the challenging task— they are likely to be successful (Blackwell, Trzesniewski & Dweck, 2007).

Teachers have an important role to play in promoting a growth mindset among their students. First and foremost, instructors should take care not to use statements in their classrooms that reinforce a fixed-mindset. For example, a teacher who says "Excellent essay, Rebecca. You are a natural-born writer!" is implying that writing is an innate talent, immune to skill-building. Similarly, when an instructor responds to the student with a poor math-test grade, "That's OK. Not everyone is good at math", the educator has suggested that "math ability" is a fixed quantity that cannot expand much despite the learner's efforts.

On the other hand, when instructors structure their statements of praise, process feedback, and encouragement to reflect a growth-mindset attitude, even learners with a habitual negative fixed-mindset attitude can receive a boost of optimism and motivation. ‘Growth mindset’ statements can be as varied as the educators, students, and situations they address. However, they typically:

- lay out a specific process for moving forward.
- recognize difficulties or struggles to be faced and frame them as opportunities to learn.
- convey optimism that the student can and will move toward success if the learner puts in sufficient effort, follows the recommended process, and makes appropriate use of any 'help' resources.

In their day-to-day communication with students, instructors have many opportunities to craft statements according to growth-mindset principles. Below is a sampling of statements–praise, work-prompts, encouragement, introducing of assignments– that teachers can use to foster motivation in their classrooms:

Praise

Effective teacher praise has two elements: (1) a description of noteworthy student academic performance or general behavior, and (2) a signal of teacher (Hawkins & Hellin, 2011). Because this 'process praise' ties performance directly to effort, it reinforces a growth mindset in students who receive it. Here is an example of process praise:
"Your writing is improving a lot. The extra time you put in and your use of an outline has really paid off."

**Work-Prompt**

When students stop working during an independent assignment, the teacher can structure the "get-back-to-work" prompt to follow a growth-mindset format. An example of such a work prompt is:

"Sarah, please keep reading....you still have 10 minutes to work on the assignment. It's a challenging passage, so if you get stuck, be sure to use your reading fix-up skills. Remember, it's also OK to ask a neighbor or to come to me for help. Use your strategies and you WILL be successful!"

Note in this example how the teacher directs the student to resume the assignment, acknowledges the challenging nature of the work, reminds her to use her fix-up strategies and that she has the option to seek peer and teacher assistance, and ends by linking effort to a positive outcome.

**Encouragement**

Students can become discouraged if they are unsuccessful on an academic task or receive a low test or quiz grade. The teacher can respond with empathy, while also framing the situation as a learning opportunity, describing proactive steps to improve the situation, and expressing confidence in the learner. An example of growth-mindset encouragement is:

"I can see that you didn't do as well on this math test as you had hoped, Luis. Let's review ideas to help you to prepare for the next exam. If you are willing to put in the work, I know that you can raise your score."

**Introducing Assignments**

The teacher can make assignment directions motivating by giving them a growth-mindset spin—describing the challenge(s), offering a realistic appraisal of the effort that will be required, reminding learners of the strategies or steps to apply, and closing with a confident statement tying methodical effort to success. Here is an example:

"You should plan spend at least an hour on tonight's math homework. When you start the assignment, some problems might look like they are too difficult to solve. But if you give it your best and follow your problem-solving checklist, you should be able to answer them."

**Closing Thoughts: Use Growth-Mindset Statements Frequently.** Instructors who want to attain the full motivational benefit of growth-mindset statements should ensure that they use those statements often to promote an optimistic 'can-do' climate. In busy classrooms, teachers may feel so pressed to cover the demanding curriculum that they overlook the need to use growth-mindset statements as a daily motivational tool. They wrongly assume that all students are already adequately motivated to do the expected work. In fact, though, many learners have fallen into a pattern of 'learned helplessness' and choose to withdraw in the face of challenging academics (Sutherland & Singh, 2004).

But the right teacher communication, if sustained, can motivate even students with negative, fixed mindsets to apply their best effort on an assignment or test. Yet research shows that process-praise is often dramatically underused in both general- and special-education classrooms—even though it is a prime means of shifting students toward an optimistic view of themselves as learner (Brophy, 1981; Hawkins & Heflin, 2011; Kern, 2007). So, as their own optimistic goal, teachers should adopt the regular use of a variety of growth-mindset statements to promote student achievement.

**References**


How to Help Students Accept Critical Academic Feedback: ‘Wise’ Feedback

Teachers of middle and high school students know that these learners sometimes require pointed critical feedback on academic assignments to shape their learning. The reason that most instructors put substantial effort into providing often-detailed performance feedback is clear: to benefit the student. But many students—particularly those at risk of academic underperformance or failure—may instead misinterpret critical instructional feedback as a sign that the teacher lacks confidence in and is negatively biased toward the learner.

A factor that can contribute to students’ negatively skewed view of instructional feedback is that it is often ambiguous, presented without an explicit context for understanding the intention behind it. This ambiguity leaves learners free to impose their own interpretations—for example, regarding a teacher’s written or verbal feedback about an assignment as a sign either of caring and commitment or a curt dismissal of the student’s abilities (Yeager et al., 2013). And, in fact, there is evidence that a tendency to construe teacher feedback in a negative light is more common among those students already sensitive to being stereotyped because of social characteristics such as race, gender, or economic class (Cohen, Steele, & Ross, 1999; Yeager et al., 2013). An African-American student, for example, might interpret a White teacher’s written feedback on how to improve her research-paper draft as picky, unfair, and driven by racial bias rather than as representing a genuine desire to help the learner advance her writing skills. As a result, the student fails to heed and apply that adult feedback.

Wise Feedback: Supplying a Proactive, Empowering Explanation. Teachers can reduce the tendency of at-risk students to discount evaluative statements as biased by formatting those statements as ‘wise’ feedback (Cohen, Steele, & Ross, 1999; Yeager et al., 2013). The teacher structures written or verbal feedback to include these 3 elements:

- **Feedback description.** The teacher describes the nature of the feedback being offered.
- **High standards.** The teacher emphasizes and explains the high standards used to evaluate the student work and generate the instructional feedback.
- **Assurance of student ability.** The teacher states explicitly that the student has the skills necessary to successfully meet those standards.

The wise-feedback strategy appears deceptively simple but is powerful in application. Wise feedback prevents the student from misconstruing teacher comments as negatively biased by proactively offering an alternative, positive explanation: the teacher is giving detailed, ambitious feedback because the standards of the course are high and the teacher is confident that the student has the skills and motivation to meet them.

Wise Feedback: Examples. Here are 3 examples of teacher critical feedback formatted as ‘wise’ feedback:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wise Feedback: Example 1: Research Paper with Written Feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Feedback description</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High standards</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assurance of student ability</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Wise Feedback: Example 2: PowerPoint Presentation with Oral Feedback

http://www.interventioncentral.org
Feedback description | Review the attached rubric and my notes evaluating your recent science PowerPoint presentation.
---|---
High standards | This PowerPoint is an adequate starting point, but can be made better. Remember the goal for this assignment is to create a presentation that showcases your communication skills to a potential employer.
Assurance of student ability | I know from examples in your work portfolio and contributions to class discussion that you will be able to implement my suggestions and increase the quality and persuasiveness of your PowerPoint.

Wise Feedback: Example 3: Opinion Survey with Written Feedback

Feedback description | I have looked over your sample survey form. It is going to need substantial revision, as you will see when you read my comments.
---|---
High standards | Your task is a challenging one: to develop a political survey that avoids leading questions and potentially biased language.
Assurance of student ability | From your previous drafts, I see that you understand the principles of survey development. As you will administer the final version of this survey to classmates, it is important that you use my feedback to polish it and then resubmit for my review.

Wise Feedback: Additional Considerations. Like all teacher communication tools, wise feedback has constraints attached to its use:

- **Do not pair grades with wise feedback.** When possible, teachers should avoid attaching grades to any student work that contains wise feedback. Students tend to view a summative number or letter grade as the ‘real’ evaluation of an assignment and are therefore likely to ignore comments that accompany them (Yeager et al., 2013). So grades can ‘short-circuit’ the positive impact of wise feedback. The reality, however, is that the assignment of grades is usually unavoidable in course work. One strategy to keep wise-feedback and grading separate on an assignment is to return the first draft of the assignment ungraded with wise feedback. The student is then directed to use the feedback to revise the assignment and submit for a grade.

- **Make student feedback ‘ambitious.’** In an attempt to bond with unmotivated students, the teacher may commit the errors of over-praising them for mediocre work or providing only easy suggestions for improving the assignment. Either strategy sets a low bar for performance and can backfire. When students sense that instructors have limited expectations of them, they can feel patronized and stereotyped, lose motivation, and further withdraw effort from academic tasks (Yeager et al., 2013). Instead, the teacher should praise work that truly deserves it and offer thoughtful critical feedback that, relative to students’ current abilities, taxes them to stretch and expand their skills in a meaningful way.

- **Use wise feedback with large groups.** Although wise feedback is an excellent tool to communicate teacher expectations to individual students, it is just as powerful (and much more efficient) when communicating with the entire class. For example, before handing back graded math tests containing detailed critical feedback, a middle-school math teacher prepares the class, saying:

  (High standards) “By grade 7, students are expected to have fully mastered the many math concepts and operations taught in the earlier grades.”
  (Feedback description) “When you look over this diagnostic math test that you took last week, you will see that I have written a number of comments highlighting where you made errors or failed to show or explain your work.”
  (Assurance of student ability) “Judging by past work that I have seen from each of you, I can see that you all
have the skills to be strong math students. My comments will point you to where you should put additional effort to ensure success in this course."

References


How to: Increase Motivation: Learning Contracts

Description. A learning contract is a voluntary, student-completed document that outlines actions the learner promises to take in a course to achieve academic success. This contract is signed by the student, the instructor, and (optionally) the parent. Benefits of all such contracts, however, are that they provide academic structure and support, motivate struggling learners by having them pledge publicly to engage in specific, positive study and learning behaviors, and serve as a vehicle to bring teachers and students to agreement on what course goals are important and how to achieve them (Frank & Scharff, 2013). NOTE: See the learning contract appearing later in this document as an example of how these contracts can be formatted.

Procedure: The learning contract is typically completed in a meeting between the student and instructor. (In middle and high schools, the parent may also be a participant.) While there are many possible variations on the learning contract, they often contain these components (Frank & Scharff, 2013; Greenwood & McCabe, 2008):

- **Statement of Purpose.** The contract opens with a statement presenting a rationale for why the contract is being implemented. A sample statement might be: *I am taking part in this learning contract because I want to improve my grades and pass this course.*

- **Student Actions.** The contract lists any actions that the student is pledging to complete to ensure success in the course. Suitable targets for learning contract items might include attendance, class participation, completion of classwork or homework, seeking of instructor help, etc. See Figure 1 for a listing of sample actions that might be written into a learning contract.

- **Teacher Actions.** The learning contract can be strengthened by adding a section detailing those actions that the instructor agrees to undertake to support the student. For example, the contract might state that the instructor will respond within 24 hours to course questions emailed by the student or will check weekly and alert the student to any missing course work. Listing teacher responsibilities on the contract emphasizes that success in the course is a shared endeavor and can prod the student to take advantage of instructor supports that might otherwise be overlooked.

- **Sign-Off.** Both student and teacher sign the learning contract. If the parent is participating in the development of the contract, he or she also signs the contract. Because this document is a kind of ‘promissory contract’ (Rousseau & Parks, 1993), the student signature in particular indicates a voluntary acceptance of the learning contract and a public pledge to follow through on its terms.

Tips for Use. Here are additional ideas for using learning contracts:
• **Contracts and Whole-Group instruction.** If a number of students in a class would benefit from learning contracts as a motivational tool, teachers can incorporate them into whole-group instruction. For example, an instructor may write a series of learning-contract goals on the board (similar to the list appearing in Figure 1) and direct each student to select 3 or 4 to include in his or her own contract. The teacher would collect copies of all learning contracts and hold every student accountable for their use.

• **Contracts & Enrichment.** Learning contracts can also be a convenient way to document individualized plans for enriched instructional activities. Advanced students can fill out contracts detailing their ambitious, self-directed learning goals; these contracts can also describe extra credit or other forms of recognition that students will earn for these enrichment activities.

**References**


Troy Blue's Learning Contract

I am taking part in this learning contract because the strategies listed here will help me to learn the material and perform well in this course.

Student Responsibilities

I have chosen to complete the following actions:

1. I will be on-time for class.

2. I will turn in at least 80% of assigned homework, with all work completed.

3. I will spend a minimum of 1 hour per day reviewing notes and working on assignments.

4. I will check in with the instructor during his free period at least once per week and bring any questions from current work.

Teacher Responsibilities

My teacher will help me to achieve success in this course through these actions/supports:

1. Answer questions and offer help during weekly free-period check-ins.
2. Remind Troy weekly about any missing assignments.
3. Supply review copy of class notes each period.

Length of Contract

The terms of this contract will continue until:

My Algebra course grade rises to 75 or higher.

Sign-Offs

Mr. Frank Smith
Teacher

Troy Blue
Student

Diane Blue
Parent
How to: Conduct a Student-Centered Problem-Solving Meeting

When a teacher has a student who struggles with classroom academics or behavior, that instructor may invite the student (and perhaps the parents) to a conference. The intention of this meeting typically is to understand the cause(s) of the student's difficulties and to put together an action plan to address them. However, the actual meeting often unfolds quite differently.

It is not unusual for educators to open these meetings with a stern warning to the student about his or her poor performance and dire predictions of what negative outcomes will occur if that student does not improve. In response, the student then becomes defensive or withdrawn. Adults (sometimes including the parent) then gang up on the student, redoubling their efforts to convince the learner of the need to make positive changes. This cycle continues until the meeting adjourns, with a sullen student who now feels coerced and is thus unlikely to participate in any action plan.

This student-conference scenario -- lecturing adults, disaffected student, failed action plan-- is quite common. The puzzle is why. Educators, after all, are usually genuinely concerned about underperforming or misbehaving students and really do want them to be successful. And while students may sometimes be ambivalent about school, they often have at least some desire to improve their school standing and performance. So why does conflict emerge when all parties share the same goal?

One potential and powerful explanation is that the caring adults, teachers and even parents, cause the conflict-- with the best of intentions. Let's investigate why.

When students experience school difficulties they commonly respond with mixed emotions. On the one hand, they may experience frustration and a desire to escape the situation; on the other, they may recognize the value of putting more effort into their classwork or behavior. When students at a problem-solving meeting experience this oscillation between negative and positive impulses, a crucial factor that can swing that learner toward motivated change or obstinate stasis is the interactive style of the adults (Miller & Rollnick, 2004). When a teacher or counselor or assistant principal speaks in authoritarian terms, telling the student what he or she 'must' do, that student predictably can shut down. Conversely, when the same adult instead actively listens and helps the student to articulate goals for change, odds increase that the student will be motivated to follow through with this plan (Bundy, 2004).

The educator who wants to conclude a conference with a motivated student ready to implement a change plan should follow these two pieces of advice.

- Do not get into an argument with the student! As the saying goes, it takes two to argue. By avoiding a lecturing or authoritarian style and using respectful language and tone of voice, the educator keeps the lines of communication open.

- Listen for 'change talk' (Miller & Rollnick, 2004)-- that is, student statements that express hope, interest in making positive changes, a willingness to try new strategies, or other positive attitudes. Often elements of student change talk are intermixed with expressions of uncertainty, frustration, and doubt. By listening carefully, however, the educator can draw attention to that change talk, reinforce it, have the student elaborate on it, and thus increase that learner's optimism and confidence (Miller & Rollnick, 2004).
The remainder of this article includes resources that can assist any teacher, support staff member, or administrator to engineer positive student-centered problem-solving conferences that result in a workable and motivating change plan.

The *Student-Centered Problem-Solving Meeting: Teacher's Guide* provides a 5-step agenda for conferences that is optimized to promote student accountability and motivation. It also includes a set of 'Introductory Talking Points' to be used to start off the meeting.

*Communication Tools to Motivate and Engage the Reluctant Student* inventories simple methods for drawing out the student and highlighting elements of change talk--while avoiding falling into the argument trap.
Student-Centered Problem-Solving Meeting: Teacher's Guide

**STEP 1: INTRODUCE THE PROBLEM-SOLVING PROCESS.** At the start of the meeting, the teacher opens with a brief set of talking points that state the purpose of the discussion, lay out the agenda, and emphasize the student's role as full participant who retains control over the creation and content of a change-plan. (See sample Student-Centered Problem-Solving Meeting: Introductory Talking Points later in this document.) These talking points are key to effective meetings, as they establish the outcome goal as the creation of a change-plan and encourage the student to take an active and participatory role.

You are ready to move to the next meeting stage when the student understands the purpose and agenda of the meeting and the active role he or she is to play in it.

**STEP 2: IDENTIFY TARGET FOR CHANGE.** In this step, teacher and student agree on a current problem that is to be the target of discussion and a change plan. (Generally, a single problem is recommended, to keep the scope of the final change plan manageable.) Examples of suitable problems are limited homework completion; low test, quiz, or course grades; and poor class attendance.

While the conference is student-centered, as the teacher, you can take the lead at this stage of the meeting in naming the problem that most concerns you (e.g., "Rick, we are here because we need to find a way to improve your class attendance."). After all, attendance, grades, and homework completion are not negotiable problems, since poor performance on any one of these can lead to course failure and other negative outcomes.

Also, when data are available, the teacher and/or student should quantify and record the magnitude of the target problem. Here are examples: "I have not turned in 30% of my homework assignments; I have missed 10 of 24 possible class sessions"; "I have a class grade average of 50").

If the student has several candidates for target problems, you can decide together which problem should be selected for immediate action, with the understanding that you can meet again at a future time to create further action plans for the additional student challenges.

You are ready to move to the next meeting stage when you and the student have chosen, written down, and (when possible) adequately quantified the target problem.

**STEP 3: ESTABLISH THE CHANGE GOAL.** Having established what the target problem is, you and the student will next set the goal that the student wishes to accomplish—the 'change goal'.

In most instances, the general change goal is obvious, as it is the solution to the target problem chosen in the previous step. For a student with poor class attendance, for example, the logical change goal is consistently to show up to class on time.

It is recommended that the change goal be stated in clear and specific terms that will allow an observer to verify it as accomplished (‘yes’) or not accomplished (‘no’). A class-attendance change goal for Rick, for example, may be worded as: "I will miss no more than one class session in the next 5 weeks of school." Stated in this way, there will be no doubt at the end of 5 weeks whether the student's attendance goal has been successfully met.

You are ready to move to the next meeting stage when the student has selected an appropriate change goal and that goal is worded to allow for a 'yes/no' judgment about completion.
STEP 4: VISUALIZE THE CHANGE GOAL. Research shows that we increase our motivation to reach a goal when we actively visualize—even briefly—the benefits that this future accomplishment will bring us (Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2010). Once a change goal has been set, the teacher directs the student to take a moment to (1) imagine that the student has attained the change goal; and (2) describe and write down how his or her situation would improve as a result.

The student Rick, for example, may envision benefits of improving his attendance as, “I will get better grades; kids won't tease me about skipping; I won't have to keep meeting with my teacher and the counselor; my mom won't get so many phone calls; I can pass the course and graduate on time.”

You are ready to move to the next meeting stage when the student has made a genuine effort to visualize, describe, and record tangible benefits of reaching the change goal.

STEP 5: IDENTIFY OBSTACLES TO THE CHANGE GOAL AND DEVELOP AN ACTION PLAN. The gap that the student must close to reach his or her change goal can be considerable, and numerous obstacles can interfere with success. Ideally, the student will retain a sense of optimism when working toward a change goal. The odds for success increase considerably, however, when the student has also anticipated and brainstormed solutions for difficulties that will inevitably arise along the way (Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2010).

With the student primed by the just-completed exercise of envisioning a successful change goal, the teacher now directs that student to think about the contrast between the desired goal and his or her current situation. Next, the student is asked to list any obstacles that might prevent him or her from moving from the current situation to the change goal. Once this list of obstacles has been generated, the student comes up with and records one or more ideas to overcome each obstacle. When completed, the list of obstacles and corresponding solutions serves as the student's action plan for attaining the change goal.

The student Rick, for example, may identify two primary obstacles that could interfere with the change goal of getting to class on time: (1) He notes that he often oversleeps; and (2) he admits that sometimes he intentionally skips class because his homework is not done.

- To address the obstacle of oversleeping, Rick identifies the strategies of getting to bed earlier and setting an alarm.

- To ensure that he completes homework for the course, Rick settles on the solutions of scheduling a fixed time each night for doing homework and giving priority to completing any homework for the course in which he has poor attendance.

This list of obstacles and their solutions is Rick's action plan to achieve the change goal of "missing no more than one class session in the next 5 weeks of school."

You and the student have finished this Student-Centered Problem-Solving Meeting when the student has identified a target problem to fix, articulated a change goal, and created an action plan (consisting of potential obstacles and matching solutions) to reach the change goal.
Student-Centered Problem-Solving Meeting: Introductory Talking Points

Welcome. We are meeting today to talk about how to [insert the reason for the problem-solving conference: e.g., "get your missing assignments turned in"; "improve your course grade"].

Our purpose is to come up with a plan that will help you to be successful.

If you agree to develop an action plan today and then are able to follow through with it, I am confident that you will achieve your goals and be successful in this class.

In our meeting, we will:

- identify one or more challenges to work on, and
- set goal(s) to overcome those challenges.

If you agree, we will then:

- design an action plan for you to reach your goals.

I can help with this action plan. But it's up to you to decide whether to create the plan and--if so--what will go into it.

Throughout the meeting, please be as honest as you can in telling me what is interfering with your success in the classroom, how I or others in our school can help you, and what other supports you might need.

Let's begin!

Statement of Purpose. The opening segment states the meeting focus.

The concluding statement in this section is patterned as a 'growth mindset' statement (Dweck, 2006).

Agenda. The teacher briefly sketches out the 3 meeting stages: (1) problem identification; (2) goals for improvement; and (3) [optionally] creation of an individualized 'change plan'.

Rules of Engagement. The student is encouraged to be a full participant in the problem-solving meeting.

Note that the script emphasizes the student's discretion in deciding whether to participate in a change plan.
Student-Centered Problem-Solving Meeting:
Recording Form

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<tr>
<th>Meeting Information</th>
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<tr>
<td>Student:</td>
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<td>Meeting Participants:</td>
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<td>Meeting Date:</td>
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</table>

**Identify Your Target for Change.** Select the target problem that you want to be the focus of this change plan. (When possible, use data to describe the problem more clearly.)

**Target:** Write a description of your target problem:

**Establish Your Change Goal.** Come up with your change goal to resolve the target problem. State the change goal in clear, specific terms to allow an observer to verify whether it has been accomplished ('yes') or not accomplished ('no':

**Goal:** Write in the goal that you plan to work toward:

**Visualize Your Change Goal.** Imagine that you have accomplished your change goal. Write down what improvements or benefits would result:

**Visualize:** Write down benefits you can imagine experiencing if you meet your goal:
Develop Your Action Plan. Imagine likely obstacles that might interfere with your success in reaching your goal. Then plan for how to overcome each obstacle:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Obstacles</th>
<th>Solutions</th>
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References


