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Setting the Right Goals

An important early step in using incentives to accelerate learning is understanding the goals set for, and sometimes by, learners. Clear agreed-upon goals allow educators to concentrate on planning the best way to bring them about rather than deliberating about what they should be. America's cultural diversity and unique heritage make this difficult for conventional public schools.

What are the features of effective goals, who should choose them, and how do goals relate to aspects of learning that are best left unplanned and spontaneous?

Features of Effective Goals

Early learning is a social act that can involve parents, siblings, teachers, and others. Social incentives alone, however, are insufficient for keeping individuals engaged in many types of educational activities. Together with incentives, goals help students focus on the specific activities that help them succeed.[1] Incentives aligned with goals help learners choose the best options from an array of possible activities and direct their efforts toward attaining the most valuable outcomes.[2] Material and social incentives work well in some circumstances while some activities are self-reinforcing; the effort itself may be enjoyable and inspire sustained effort.[3]

In reviewing many studies of incentives in varied adult settings, University of Maryland psychologist Edwin Locke and his colleagues concluded that setting specific, challenging goals leads to higher performance than setting easy goals, "do your best" goals, or no goals.[4]

"Goals," they further concluded, "affect performance by directing attention, mobilizing effort, increasing persistence, and motivating strategy development. Goal setting is most likely to improve task performance when the goals are specific and sufficiently challenging ... feedback is provided ... the experimenter or manager is supportive, and the assigned goals are accepted by the individual."

Psychological research supports the view that effective goals are "SMART"; that is, Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time-bound.[5] Individuals guided by such goals are more likely to sustain a commitment to the tasks at hand. More broadly, goals allow people to imagine personal and social outcomes likely to emerge from sustained effort. Skilled goal-directed individuals can imagine the complexity of their task with some degree of accuracy and determine the sort of intermediate feedback that might foster successful attainment of the goal. They may fail to achieve their goals for a variety of reasons and may need to revise their goals, but in such situations incentives can encourage individuals to keep trying.

Who Should Set the Goals?

Children attending preschool and elementary schools are too young to decide on their own what they should learn since they lack sufficient understanding of the importance and consequences of their choices. Few would disagree that adults should take responsibility for setting young children's long- and short-term curriculum goals. Even so, controversy has emerged over who should set the goals, whether people can agree on them, and how to hold schools, educators, and students accountable for meeting them. This makes setting goals and incentives difficult not just for very young children but for all K–12 students.

Many Asian and European countries have national standards for schools that spare all but a small number of educators the time and difficulty of deciding the contents of K–12 curriculum. Such standardization facilitates the development of uniform textbooks and methods of teaching and testing and makes it more likely that all children in any given classroom have similar levels of knowledge and skills. Such standardization also allows policymakers and parents to hold schools accountable for results by having all students take the same or a similar set of achievement tests.

Though appealing, a national curriculum and centralized system of student testing is a poor fit for K–12 schools in the U.S. The small number

of decision-makers that may make the process seem efficient excludes stakeholders such as parents with strong interests and legally recognized rights to play a role in the education of children. The sheer size and cultural diversity of the country's population create a variety of deeply rooted and fiercely held views on what ought to be taught in schools. This disagreement is most plainly on display in controversies over the teaching of history, religion, ethics, and matters involving public policy, but it extends to ways of teaching reading (phonics versus whole word) and arithmetic (traditional versus "fuzzy math"). As the controversy over adoption of "Common Core" standards as part of the national "Race to the Top" federal initiative demonstrates,[6] there isn't one best curriculum for the U.S.

The lack of consensus on goals for K–12 education in the U.S. was addressed by the Founding Fathers by excluding education from the enumerated powers of the national government; the words "education" and "schools" do not appear in the Constitution. The authority to regulate schooling was delegated by the Tenth Amendment to the states. For nearly a century the states entrusted the private sector with operating schools. Later, compulsory attendance laws and the Common School movement of the mid-nineteenth century left education policy in the hands of cities and local communities. This accommodation has the virtue of allowing innovation and competition among cities and states, an essential condition for discovery and improvement. It also made it difficult for large state and national interest groups to gain control over school goals and curricula.

While the current system is far from perfect, there is little public support for giving the federal government more authority over schools. From 1973 to mid-2010, the percentage of Americans expressing "a great deal" or "a lot" of confidence in Congress declined from 42 percent to 11 percent, ranking it last among 16 familiar institutions including small business, the police, religious institutions, and the medical system.[7] Opportunities for improving goal-setting for K–12 schools, therefore, are most likely to be found at the state and local levels or outside of government altogether.

Parents and Goal-setting

Parents may be considered the most important part of the goal-setting team since they have a constitutionally protected right to control the education of their children.[8] The most notable of many Supreme Court decisions

establishing this right is the 1925 decision in *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* in which the court ruled "The child is not the mere creature of the state; those who nurture him and direct his destiny have the right, coupled with the high duty, to recognize and prepare him for additional obligations."

Parents are better positioned than teachers, school board members, or members of Congress to know their children's specific needs, interests, and talents.[9] They are least likely to have a conflict of interest – where their private interests might conflict with the interests of the child – since they are not paid for their services nor are they running for election or reelection based on claims or promises made about the education of other people's children. Parents' future well-being is tied to the ability of their children to become self-supporting and law-abiding adults.[10]

About 90 percent of the time in a child's first 18 years of life is spent outside schools under the responsibility of parents, including the parental surrogates and others they may choose for their children. Parents teach many of the most important lessons in life including manners, attitudes toward school and learning, and the all-important first language. Homework by definition is done at home and is influenced by parents. For these reasons, it is important for parents to know and embrace the broad goals of their children's schools and for schools in turn to reflect the concerns and interests of parents.

Good teachers should play a role in setting academic goals for students, but they face conflicts of interest. Margaret Diane LeCompte and Anthony Gary Dworkin, who self-identify as "progressive" educators, nevertheless observe, "teachers generally do not believe that parents will provide adequate support for their children's learning at home. Further, many teachers – whether consciously or not – act in ways that sabotage efforts by parents to help their children."[11] They observe "most teachers" withhold information from parents when their children are doing poorly, "even when it is apparent that they are," in order to discourage complaints or requests for help that might involve spending more time with struggling students or their parents. Teachers may do this unconsciously: "Because many parents have unrealistically optimistic perceptions of their children's progress, they do not seek help for them. By failing to ask for help, they demonstrate to teachers their 'lack of interest.'"[12] But regardless of the reason behind the teachers' failure to communicate, their silence inflicts serious harm on children, leaving them unprepared for work at the next grade level or even, in some cases, forcing them to go through the shame of having to repeat a

grade.

The need to align parents' interests and values with those of schools, combined with the recognition that conflicts of interest afflict even well-meaning and dedicated teachers, makes a compelling case for allowing schools to offer a diversity of curricula and education philosophies and for enabling parents to be free to choose schools they believe are best for their children.[13]

State and Local Goal-setting

Second to parents, state and local officials play the most important roles in setting goals for K–12 learning. Governors, other state elected officials, and state and local school board members spend countless hours planning and overseeing public schools, a massive public enterprise that cost taxpayers at least $571 billion for the 2012–13 school year.[14] Over time, control over public education has been concentrated in fewer and fewer hands: the number of districts shrank from about 117,000 in 1940 to 15,000 in 2000, while the average enrollment in a district rose from 217 children to more than 3,000 children.[15]

On the matter of goal-setting, state and local officials have attempted to set high and uniform achievement goals combined with top-down accountability systems requiring that only the approved curriculum is taught and students advance at an acceptable pace.[16] In some states, teachers who fail to teach the approved curriculum or whose students don't advance fast enough receive training, face disciplinary action, or receive financial incentives to improve their performance. Schools that repeatedly fail to meet the standards are subject to top-down reorganization by state authorities. "Turnaround" and "transformation" are two kinds of reorganization prescribed by Race to the Top, the national school legislation adopted in 2009.[17]

The turnaround model requires a local school district to "replace the principal and grant the new principal sufficient operational flexibility (including in staffing, calendars/time, and budgeting) to implement a comprehensive approach in order to substantially improve student achievement outcomes and increase high-school graduation rates." The new approach includes screening existing staff, rehiring no more than 50 percent of them, hiring a "turnaround leader," and promoting "the continuous use of student data (such as from formative, interim, and summative assessments) to inform and differentiate instruction in order to meet the

academic needs of individual students."[18]

The transformation model is similar to the turnaround model but adds a dozen additional reform options such as "conducting periodic reviews to ensure that the curriculum is being implemented with fidelity, is having the intended impact on student achievement, and is modified if ineffective" and "increasing rigor by offering opportunities for students to enroll in advanced coursework (such as Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate; or science, technology, engineering, and mathematics courses, especially those that incorporate rigorous and relevant project-, inquiry-, or design-based contextual learning opportunities), early-college high schools, dual enrollment programs, or thematic learning academies that prepare students for college and careers, including by providing appropriate supports designed to ensure that low achieving students can take advantage of these programs and course work."[19]

Turnaround and transformation seem to be tough-minded and business-like approaches to the task of setting goals and achieving results. They are the current state-of-the-art of the public school reform industry. But do they work? Experience with turnaround efforts suggests they do little to increase student achievement and parent satisfaction with schools.[20] For example, a U.S. Department of Education evaluation of schools that spent $4.6 billion on transformations or turnarounds found only a quarter of them experienced significant math or reading gains while three-quarters made little or no progress.[21]

Turnaround and transformation efforts often fail because they leave in place the centralized district authority and bureaucracy that have pushed parents out of their children's education, reducing their involvement and consequently reducing their children's academic achievement. For the most part the efforts don't change the incentives that currently distract and frustrate good teachers and administrators. They repeat the top-down and one-size-fits-all reform prescriptions that large bureaucracies use in lieu of having to compete with other providers for customers. Consequently, these reforms will be implemented slowly and imperfectly, if at all, and teachers and administrators will find ways to evade and circumvent the new rules ... sometimes to hide their incompetence, and at other times to do what parents and students actually want and need.

Goals and Spontaneous Order

People in academia and government often assume "experts" uninvolved in

the daily life of others can best set goals for them.[22] This model may sometimes prove successful if the goal setter possesses extensive experience with unchanging goals and knowledge of the circumstances and experiences of others, but more typically a single person or organization lacks the information required for seeing and pursuing someone else's goals.[23] Some degree of spontaneity rather than complete pre-ordering of options can cultivate innovative thought or new ways of looking at problems.[24]

Some prominent Chinese citizens voice concern about their country's highly structured education system. They worry that too much planning crushes natural instincts for innovation and creativity necessary for a vibrant culture and economy.[25] Some South Koreans express similar concerns about their education system, which has a substantially longer year and longer school days than the U.S. school system. Their culture focuses so exclusively on academic achievement that some South Korean parents choose to exempt their children from the pressure by sending them to American schools in Korea. These parents say students at American schools have more opportunities to explore extracurricular activities and develop outside interests.[26] Some balance between planning and spontaneity, or strict and open-ended goals, is needed. That balance varies among countries, schools, families, and students.

As students grow older they begin taking control of their learning progress. A competitive and thriving marketplace of ideas, even in classrooms, may help students learn to evaluate new ideas that may not be found in textbooks. Surfing the Internet confronts young learners with new and potentially false ideas and claims that deserve consideration and evaluation, which is good practice since judging the veracity of information is an important life skill. Not all judgments and decisions can be taught or reduced to methodical textbook recipes.[27]

Without this freedom to explore, some learners set goals that limit their ability to learn new ways of evaluating ideas, while others continually seek these skills and thereby improve their understanding and functioning in the world.[28] Too little structure or guidance, though, can lead some learners to become so anxious and self-conscious in the face of uncertainty that they cannot concentrate on evaluating unanticipated parts of the task at hand.[29] Well-planned goals and rewards help learners avoid distractions and achieve what they wish as well as evaluate new ideas and, if necessary, redirect their efforts.

Another problem of top-down goal-setting is unpredictable events that

slow down or even terminate complex projects. Supervisors, for example, often incorrectly estimate difficulty and how long it will take to complete tasks.[30] Information technology professionals sometimes joke that planners should make the best estimate of the time required to finish a project and multiply it by three – five if computers are involved. Many complex projects go unfinished because time, resources, and patience are depleted or a superior technology eclipses what was envisioned.[31]

Public education is certainly a complex project. Policymakers spend years debating and approving curricula and other school policies that are obsolete by the time they reach classrooms. Teacher contracts and laws governing schools and school finance can reach the size of phone books, making even small changes at the level of individual schools difficult and time-consuming to make.[32] The digital revolution is occurring outside traditional public schools, which trail far behind the cutting edge.[33]

Education today is, in short, an enterprise that seems particularly ill-suited to top-down goal-setting even if there were agreement on what the goals should be, which there manifestly is not. This is a fundamental problem in public education that needs to be solved before effective reward programs can be widely adopted.

Conclusion

The right goals must be chosen before incentives can be used effectively in education, but setting goals for individual learners is more difficult than many people realize. America's unique political heritage means there are deep differences of opinion on what should be taught in K–12 schools beyond basic agreement on the three Rs. These disagreements are not primarily between people who understand complex subjects and those who do not; they are rooted in cultures, experiences, and belief systems that are accepted and celebrated as part of the American Way, or rather the American Ways.

One implication of our cultural diversity and enthusiastic embrace of the same is that the federal government has only a small role to play in setting goals for K–12 education. Responsibility rests primarily with parents, state and local governments, and school boards. This choice has both advantages – there is more innovation, competition, and freedom to choose thanks to decentralization – and disadvantages – more time spent debating goals and teaching practices, and a lack of uniform textbooks and uniform tests with which to hold educators and students accountable to a

single standard. This is not to say, however, that parents should be denied accurate information on what their children are learning and where they stand in relation to their peers on important subjects such as English, American history, mathematics, and science.

Goal-setting should not be viewed as a straitjacket, preventing learners from exploring new ideas or altering goals over time. Adults, even parents, cannot know everything going on in a child's mind. While adults have essential roles to play in goal-setting for young children, their roles evolve as children grow older. As discussed in earlier chapters, goals and incentives need to change to reflect the learner's increased maturity and thinking skills.

In light of all this, perhaps the best that can be hoped for is that educators, parents, and students themselves will have a hand in goal-setting and creating incentive systems. It can be a difficult balancing act requiring the best efforts of everyone involved.

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