Helping Middle School Readers Set Goals

Gretchen Taylor

The nagging numbness in my left hand continued to bother me on longer runs, and it was working its way down to the first mile of my workouts. Mile after mile, I'd shake out my arm, hoping to loosen up the pinch.

"Gretchen, do you know that you look like you're attacking a hill, even when you're not?" a running buddy asked me as I flung my arm awake. "It kind of looks painful!"

As a runner, I find that a supportive community is a huge part of my enjoyment and success.   Runners can experience a whole host of frustrating -- and in my case, weird -- issues that sometimes call on trusted running buddies to help resolve. Sure enough, after our run that day, my observant fellow runner sent me an article about posture, suggesting -- correctly, it turns out -- that perhaps my discomfort was the result of tightness in my shoulders. He knew that I needed help. Because I viewed him as a trusted member of my running community, I was willing to hear his honesty and consider his advice.

The most successful goal setters in my classroom are those who are comfortable with me; this requires taking the time to establish a non-threatening reading community. My students know that they need to read and be honest about their reading. Successful goal setters are

open with me about the goals they are willing to achieve (with some students, we start very small -- they admit to me that they've never finished reading a book), and they are also open about the steps they're willing to take to overcome obstacles.

As I search for ways to engage my middle schoolers, I've had to change my own thinking about authentic and acceptable reading goals. In the past, I focused primarily on the weekly minutes that I wanted them to read independently. However, as my readers failed to become more engaged, and I was spending way too much time trying to "catch" non-readers, I realized how unsatisfying I would find that approach as a reader myself. Now, students select monthly goals across a broad range of areas, including:

- ○ using and reflecting on their use of a reading strategy
- ○ embarking on an author study

- conducting a multi-genre investigation into a topic
- studying a genre
- completing a certain number of books

To prevent **Captain Underpants** over-read, we have careful discussions about setting "books completed" goals that consider rigor and variety of texts.

In addition to holding ongoing, need-based reading conferences with my students, I commit to monthly goal setting conferences with all of my students. This is definitely a challenge with a middle school roster load and schedules, and the conferences are rarely as deep as I'd like. It sometimes requires me to pull students during study hall time as well. Our school planner has a log and reflection for each month of the year, which is helpful because students become used to the routine of filling out their goals and reflections. Goal setting conferences run more smoothly as the year progresses.

Collaborative Problem Solving

"Mrs. Taylor, I can't do it. I have to study for social studies after school, then I have soccer and I don't get home from soccer 'til nine, so I don't have time to read before bed. Also, I don't have Study Center today," Addison screwed up her nose, perplexed about how I could possibly expect her fit reading time into her busy calendar.

I shared her concern with the rest of the class: "Is anyone else having a problem fitting in time to read?" Hands slowly and sheepishly crept into the air. "Okay, then we need to take a few minutes to problem solve this."

We take time mid-month either in small groups or as a whole reading community to discuss problems. One obstacle that comes up repeatedly is time. Many of my students are hyper-involved in travel teams and other extracurricular activities, so finding time to read is a topic that comes up time and time again. For avid readers, scheduling time to read feels like an undeserved luxury. For reluctant readers, taking time to read feels unnatural; it needs to be scheduled to eventually make it habit. We spend time brainstorming ways to find time to fit reading in to jam-packed middle school schedules. My students came up with this list of action steps:

- Write out your daily schedule and making appointments for reading
- Put away electronics and go to bed at a reasonable time - - spend 20-60 minutes before bed reading
- Always be prepared with reading material
- Get a book buddy and hold each other responsible for reading what is agreed upon, so you can talk about it
- Make more time on the weekends if your week is really busy

- ○   Get up earlier and read before school
- ○   Consider audiobooks as another reading option, especially for long car trips
- ○   Ask your parents/guardians to help you carve out time for reading

Some students also post on our class blog their daily and weekly schedules, and their classmates help them find time to read. Another benefit of the middle school reading community is that students love to tell each other what to do.

The Next Layer

I sometimes discover that time is actually an easy disguise for another underlying obstacle. Peeling back the first layer of excuse helps me discover those hidden obstacles. I spend extra time with students who struggle to develop and/or achieve their goals. Occasionally, this calls for including their parents in a reading goal setting conference. At these conferences, we make a reading goal plan, one element of which is a list of what all members of our team (reader, teacher, parent) will do to help support the goal setter.

As I've changed my thinking about independent reading accountability -- focusing on individual goals rather than reading log compliance -- I've eliminated most other homework from my class. I want students to spend the bulk of their time at home reading independently. Instead of spending time chasing down missing assignments (hallelujah!), I spend time sitting down with my students and jointly emailing or calling home about their independent reading. We discuss, celebrate, and if necessary, problem solve students' progress toward their goals. Here's a sample email I wrote when one honest young lady admitted to me that she needed parental and teacher accountability to stay on track:

Hi Bill and Liz,
Becca and I are sitting here together setting reading goals for the month, so we are writing you this email together. We decided that she should aim to finish two books.

I got her a book called **Ice Princess**, and I think that she will really like it if she dedicates time each night to reading it. I shared with her that I often find books boring when I don't read enough of them each day, because I keep forgetting what happened.

We decided that she should finish reading the book by next Monday, so after she reads tonight, she should think about how much time she needs to spend reading this week (I know she's busy with soccer, too!) in order to finish.

Please let me know how it goes, and tell me how I can help! Thanks

for all you do!

Gretchen

Taking the time to establish a trusting reading community centered around goal setting and problem solving has led to far more engaged, focused readers than I had in my homework-chasing days. My students, their parents, and I work together to stay on track, and when we veer off course, we trust the 25 creative brains around us to refocus on our goals.

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