

Education and Career Goal Setting

Individual Plans of Study Tip Sheet

Regional
Educational
Laboratory Central

January 2025

Education and career goal setting can help students identify their future goals and plan for the steps needed to accomplish them. Goal setting can help students focus, seek academic challenges, and see how their current work helps prepare them for future accomplishments.^{1,2} People who set goals and track their progress are more likely to reach their desired outcomes than people who do not.³

Education and career goal setting can be most useful when students set SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timebound) goals for their academic and career interests.⁴ Goal setting enables students to track and reflect on their progress and make adjustments to their goals as needed.⁵ Research suggests it may be promising for helping increase students' academic engagement and self-efficacy.⁶ In addition, when paired with regular reviews of plans for attaining goals, goal setting can increase the odds that students complete a college preparatory curriculum, apply to college, and enroll in college.^{7,8}

Individual Plans of Study in Kansas

Kansas requires all middle and high school students to have an Individual Plan of Study (IPS). An IPS is a personalized plan students co-create with educators to align their interests and strengths with their college and career goals and how to achieve them.

Education and career goal setting is a key activity to help students make the most of their IPS. Other IPS activities are career exploration, student e-portfolios, and workforce competency and skill development.

REL Central created this tip sheet in collaboration with educators leading IPS implementation in several Kansas school districts, including Hesston USD 460, Hutchinson USD 308, Northeast USD 246, Piper USD 203, Shawnee Mission School District, and Wichita Public Schools. The tip sheet provides examples of how to use goal-setting classroom and school activities. It includes links to tools, documents, and resources that are not endorsed by IES, but which were provided by educators who participated in developing the tip sheet as examples that are currently used in Kansas.

////////////////////////////////////

REL Central has partnered with the Kansas State Department of Education and Kansas school districts to expand the use of promising IPS practices and increase student participation in them.

Why are educators implementing education and career goal setting?

Educators who partnered with REL Central to develop this tip sheet described interest in helping students set realistic goals and create a concrete plan for accomplishing their goals. One educator noted that through goal setting and progress tracking, students can see their accomplishments, which helps them increase their self-awareness and sense of self-worth.

"We want our students to be ready for their next step, whatever that next step is. You can't just say you want something without knowing how to get there."

Counselor, Piper USD 203

Education and career goal setting: Example activities from Kansas educators

Education and career goal setting can involve both short-term (for a class or semester) and long-term (over several years) academic, career, and extracurricular goals. Goal setting can occur during middle and high school grades, within classrooms, and as part of a

comprehensive, schoolwide approach. In Kansas, many IPS activities, including education and career goal setting, occur during students' non-academic periods, often known as advisory or seminar classes.

Aligning IPS activities to a district vision

In Piper USD 203, all IPS activities are centered on the district's [Portrait of a Graduate](#). The Portrait of a Graduate details the cognitive, personal, and interpersonal skills graduates should have, including critical thinking and problem solving; creativity and innovation; initiative and self-direction; resilience and social and emotional well-being; social, global, and cross-cultural skills; and communication.

Students' goals are based on their strengths and career interests and are typically accompanied by steps to achieve those goals. Students may use their IPS e-portfolios to record and track evidence of progress in reaching their goals. This evidence might include documentation of relevant courses, work-based learning or career exploration activities, and other activities students have completed to help them achieve their goals.

Below are goal-setting activities Kansas educators reported using in middle and high schools.

1. Middle school goal-setting activities

Schools and districts have taken steps to incorporate IPS goal-setting activities in the middle school grades. Shawnee Mission School District uses a process where **high school counselors visit the middle schools and help students create a four-year academic plan**. Through the process, students reflect on their current education and career interests and goals; learn about relevant courses, career and technical education pathways, and other opportunities in high school that align with their goals; and plot out a pathway for their high school years. Teachers in Northeast USD 246 use the [California SMART Goal Guide](#) to teach middle school students how to set effective goals.

"I feel the biggest thing that's really helped our students develop more in that realm [embracing IPS and goal setting] is just awareness and having students have to talk about it [their goals] to other people."

Teacher, Northeast USD 246

Other districts use a K-8 counseling curriculum in which counselors are assigned to groups of students. Middle school students set academic, social, and career academy goals and participate in student-led conferences twice a year with their advisory teacher and parent or guardian to review their goals and discuss their future path. Middle school students are required to take a high school preparation course where they learn about the district's career academies that provide instruction relevant for 24 career sectors. During the course, students learn about goal setting and identifying the steps needed to achieve one's goals. The course intends to "ignite their [students'] passions for academies and what happens within them."

Educators' tips for goal setting in middle school:

- **Invite high school students** to discuss opportunities available in higher grades that might align with middle school students' current career interests.
- Encourage students to **set short-, medium-, and long-term goals** and provide them opportunities to revise their goals on a regular basis.

2. High school goal-setting activities

Several districts in Kansas implement comprehensive, schoolwide goal-setting activities in their high schools. Students set goals twice a year, identify the steps they need to accomplish those goals, and track their progress during the school year. They set **short-term academic goals** (for example, math or reading goals, classes they want to take, attendance goals) for a semester or school year and **long-term career goals**. They also identify the steps or education requirements needed to achieve their post-high school or career goals and use this information to identify high school classes and other learning opportunities that can help prepare them (such as work-based learning). Students may also set **non-academic goals** they would like to achieve, such as participating in clubs or other extracurricular activities.

"Prior to the Portrait of a Graduate, we were asking students to set goals without an anchor. Now, we have a framework for future-ready goal setting."

Counselor, Piper USD 203

SMART goals

Northeast USD 246 developed an IPS scope and sequence that breaks down IPS activities by week and grade ([Northeast IPS Scope and Sequence](#); [10th Grade IPS Mapping](#)). Classroom teachers train students to

develop SMART goals with assistance from a video and follow-up discussion, often using this resource to guide discussion. Students use IPS career interest inventories to help them set SMART goals. Teachers ensure that students' goals are timebound and realistic.

Student-led conferences

Two districts reported having students prepare a presentation for student-led conferences with their advisor, advocacy or advisory teacher, and parent or guardian either at the end of each semester or school year. In Piper USD 203, students work on the presentation throughout the school year during their advocacy class. They use the presentation to **track their progress in attaining their education and career goals and to document their participation in and reflections** from IPS and career exploration activities. During the conferences, students share their current and future goals and how those goals align to their interests and the district's Portrait of a Graduate. In some other districts, students review and update their education and career goals before the conferences. For the conference, students prepare a presentation about their grades, course enrollment, results from career interest inventories, short- and long-term goals, steps they have taken to achieve their goals, and any changes they may have made to their goals. Parents, guardians, and teachers provide feedback to students, who then reflect on the conference and update their goals based on the feedback ([Student-Led Conference Reflection](#)).

Educator's tips for student-led conferences:

- **Involve family members and other adults** with whom students can discuss their progress toward their goals and who can provide feedback and recommendations.
- **Record or make available a student's PowerPoint presentation** for significant adults who are not able to attend the conference.

Recommendations from the field

Educators interested in implementing education and career goal setting in their classrooms and schools do not need to start from scratch. Educators interviewed for this IPS tip sheet provided recommendations for others who might be considering adopting these practices.

General IPS and goal-setting recommendations for your classroom or school from educators

- **If possible, have a school or district leader with devoted IPS and goal-setting time** to connect key activities to IPS goals, develop goal-setting training materials and resources, and provide supporting materials.
 - » **Break the activity schedule down by grade and week** so it's clear to teachers what the next activities are. This way teachers don't have to spend time planning.
- **Start small** by adding one goal-setting activity at a time to avoid overwhelming students and teachers.

Strategies for generating buy-in

- **Get parents involved in the process** by sharing students' career interest inventory results, IPS e-portfolios, and education and career goals (for example, through student-led conferences). Involving parents in students' goal setting may generate student buy-in as well.
- **Use incentives**, like allowing high school students to leave school early (such as during an open period) if they have completed their scheduled IPS and goal-setting activities.
- **Have students present on progress toward their goals** to different people in different settings. Having students repeat their accomplishments (or challenges) in multiple ways can be motivating.
- **Consider implementing a student leadership team** that can provide recommendations that pertain to students and increase student voice.

Endnotes

- ¹ Nordengren, C. (2022). Transform your school's culture: Use student goal setting to create a new culture of learning. *Principal Leadership*. <https://www.nassp.org/publication/principal-leadership/volume-22-2021-2022/principal-leadershipmay-2022/transform-your-schools-culture>
- ² Stronge, J. H., & Grant, L. W. (2014). *Student achievement goal setting*. Taylor & Francis.
- ³ Friedman, B. A., & Mandel, R. G. (2009). The prediction of college student academic performance and retention: Application of expectancy and goal setting theories. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*, 11(2), 227-246. <https://doi.org/10.2190/CS.11.2.d>
- ⁴ Solberg, V. S., Wills, J., Redmond, K., & Skaff, L. (2014). *Use of individualized learning plans: A promising practice for driving college and career efforts. Findings and recommendations from a multi-method, multi-study effort*. National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED588651.pdf>
- ⁵ Midwest Comprehensive Center. (2018). *Student goal setting: An evidence-based practice*. American Institutes for Research. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED589978>
- ⁶ Plasman, J. (2017). Career/education plans and student engagement in secondary school. *American Journal of Education*, 124(2). <https://doi.org/10.1086/695608>
- ⁷ Gibney, T., & Rauner, M. (2021). *Education and career planning in high school: A national study of school and student characteristics and college-going behaviors* (REL 2022-127). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory West.
- ⁸ Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest. (2017). *Ask a REL: What does the research say about the relationship between student goal setting in grades 6-12 related to academic and career planning and academic and deeper learning outcomes?*