

# Goal Setting in WIA Youth Programs

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Setting goals is an important part of youth development and an essential part of developing an Individual Service Strategy (ISS) in Workforce Investment Act (WIA) youth programs. Learning how to set goals enables youth to make effective use of WIA programs and services and, ultimately, to set goals for themselves as they pursue adult responsibilities such as completing their education, finding employment, and becoming good citizens.

## What Is Goal Setting?

Goal setting is a technique for thinking about and acting on personal, professional, or group wants or needs. The purpose of goal setting is not to set goals; rather, it is to *achieve* goals. Goals provide vision, focus, and motivation that promote achievement.

Most goal-setting methods include the following elements.

- **Dream.** Goals must reflect a person's own desires and values and should be future oriented and long term.
- **Constructive.** Goals must promote a person's growth and development and should not be destructive to the individual or society.
- **Specific, measurable, and timed.** Goals must say exactly what is to be achieved in a way that makes it possible to say whether or not the goal has been met.
- **Correct difficulty.** Goals must be easy enough that they can be achieved and hard enough to be challenging.
- **Written down.** Writing down goals encourages commitment and provides a record of effort and achievement.
- **Review and evaluate.** Evaluating goals periodically enables a person to assess progress toward his or her goals and to revise goals that no longer reflect current desires or values.
- **Celebrate.** Ideally, achieving a goal is its own reward, but external recognition and incentives may also help to motivate a person to achieve more or larger goals.

All youth who participate in WIA youth programs are expected to set goals as part of developing an ISS.

Element	Tips for Goal Setting
Dream	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Administer interest and value inventories to help youth understand themselves better; use results to suggest goals that are compatible with the youth's interests and values.</li> <li>• Make sure that goals are compatible with each other; for instance, working in a day care center is probably incompatible with a goal of making \$100,000 per year.</li> <li>• Establish long-term, large goals first.</li> <li>• Don't dismiss goals that seem unrealistic; they can be modified later.</li> <li>• To maintain motivation, youth must be emotionally committed to their goals; they must really want to reach the goal.</li> <li>• Make sure that parents, peers, or teachers are not unduly influencing a youth's goals.</li> <li>• Develop goals in all areas of life.</li> <li>• Prioritize goals.</li> <li>• Help youth recognize their strengths and past successes and use this information to set goals.</li> </ul>

Element	Tips for Goal Setting
Constructive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help youth find alternatives to goals that may lead to illegal, dangerous, or destructive activities.</li> </ul>
Specific, Measurable, and Timed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Break down large goals into smaller goals, tasks, and subtasks.</li> <li>• Gather information about goals and tasks.</li> <li>• Set intermediate benchmarks for larger goals; successfully completing a benchmark or subtask encourages continued effort.</li> <li>• Goals should be under the control of the youth as much as possible; for instance, winning the lottery is not a good goal.</li> <li>• When a goal is to do more of something, consider showing improvement using a percentage or scale; for instance, a goal might be stated as 90% school attendance or 9 on a 10-point scale. This allows youth to set and evaluate their own progress.</li> <li>• State goals specifically and with full details, including start and end times.</li> <li>• Goals should include an action, a result, and a timeline, for example               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Action: <i>I will finish</i></li> <li>◦ Result: <i>5 chapters in my study guide</i></li> <li>◦ Timeline: <i>by next Friday</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>• Think about potential roadblocks and alternative routes to goals.</li> </ul>
Correct Difficulty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Goals should be difficult enough to stretch a youth's abilities and require effort.</li> <li>• Goals should be easy enough that youth will not get frustrated and lose motivation.</li> <li>• Set some small goals that can be achieved quickly.</li> <li>• Goals should be realistic and achievable; for instance, an average size youth may never be tall enough to rival LeBron James, but he or she <i>can</i> set a goal to be a better basketball player.</li> </ul>
Written Down	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write down goals using positive terms; they should be things youth are trying to achieve, not things that youth are escaping.</li> <li>• To increase urgency, it may be helpful to state goals as if they are happening in the present.</li> <li>• Writing down goals makes them more real, concrete, and sharable, but share goals only with people who will offer support and encouragement; avoid nay-sayers.</li> </ul>
Review and Evaluate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review goals frequently (daily or weekly) to maintain commitment and motivation.</li> <li>• Be prepared to revise and reprioritize goals and timelines.</li> <li>• Look back on past goals to learn from both successes and failures.</li> </ul>
Celebrate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internal rewards are important; a sense of accomplishment encourages further efforts.</li> <li>• Recognize progress toward, not just completion of goals.</li> <li>• Contests and competition related to self-set goals may be demotivating.</li> <li>• External rewards, incentives, and public recognition are also valuable; rewards may be tangible (gifts, certificates) or intangible (praise from a mentor, graduation ceremony).</li> </ul>

### Helping Youth Set Educational and Employment Goals

Most youth in WIA programs need to set goals in the areas of education and employment. Some educational goals are general, such as obtaining a high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) certificate, or employment related, such as completing an apprenticeship or occupational skills certificate. Employment-related educational goals should relate closely to employment goals.

If youth don't already have educational goals, WIA staff can help develop them for inclusion in their ISS.

- Administer or review results from a basic skills achievement test such as the Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE) or other appropriate test to determine educational level.
- Offer tutoring, study skills, mentoring, or other services as needed to address basic skills needs.
- Provide information about the educational requirements of careers that youth are exploring.
- Make sure youth understand the academic preparation, time, and effort that may be needed to achieve their educational or employment goals.
- Consider planning for educational advancement in smaller steps in conjunction with a career lattice or career pathways model.

Basic skills gains for out-of-school youth are reported annually under Common Measures. To get credit for a gain, a youth must advance at least 1 Educational Functioning Level (EFL) in math, reading, writing, or English language proficiency. Setting intermediate goals throughout the year will help youth to successfully advance that level.

### 3 Helping youth select a career path and envision a future is also an important part of ISS development.

- Administer inventories to help determine what careers fit a youth's interests and values; remember that youth need not select one of the suggested careers.
- Ask questions that help youth focus on the work environment of careers they are considering.
  - *What do you enjoy doing?*
  - *What do you dislike doing?*
  - *What interests you about this career?*
  - *Do you have skills or abilities that would help you do this job?*
  - *What else do you need to know to decide about this career?*
- Expose youth to information about a wide variety of careers.
- Provide opportunities for summer employment opportunities linked to academic and occupational learning.
- Provide opportunities for paid or unpaid work experience, including job shadowing and internships.
- If a youth is committed to what appears to be an unrealistic goal, continue to review his or her goal regularly to see if it changes as the youth gains more work-related knowledge and experience. The goal may prove more realistic than you thought, or the youth may be willing to pursue what he or she recognizes is a long shot.
- Make sure that educational and employment goals are aligned.

### Barriers to Youth Goal Setting

Poverty, dysfunctional families, violence, crime, and drugs can make short-term survival a priority for youth and make it difficult for them to envision long-term goals. Negotiating this difficult environment may encourage coping skills and values at odds with the values of the wider society. WIA staff need to understand and address these barriers to youth goal setting.

- **School culture.** Youth may be unwilling to conform to school rules and work for grades because they don't see school learning as valuable to their perceived future.
- **Fighting and confrontation.** Being "strong and tough" can be a survival skill in some neighborhoods and may be encouraged by parents and peers.
- **Dysfunctional families.** Family life that involves physical or sexual abuse, conflict, or parental alcohol or drug abuse leads youth to regard adults with suspicion, resist authority, and have difficulty maintaining positive adult and peer relationships.
- **Fear of making choices.** Youth may be unwilling to select a goal or strategy to reach a goal because of a mindset that assumes their own inability to succeed or the belief that success in a goal would change nothing.

### What Can WIA Youth Programs Do to Reduce Barriers?

- **Demonstrate commitment.** In order to overcome institutional inertia, youth distrust and resistance, and societal indifference, be in it for the long haul. Youth must believe that staff, mentors, and other adults will not abandon them.
  - Assign case managers, mentors, and tutors to youth for the duration of their participation whenever possible.
  - Bureaucratic behaviors will discourage many youth; keep form filling and routine or repetitive questioning to a minimum.
  - Train and expect all staff, including secretaries and janitors, to make youth their first concern; reward staff who do and discipline staff who don't.
- **Manage expectations.** Prevent staff burnout by not expecting major turnarounds in youth behavior; celebrate successes, however small. Some youth will benefit from participation in the program and your efforts even if you never know about it.
  - Remind your staff – and yourself – that you are planting seeds, some of which may grow years after the youth's participation in your program ends.
  - Remember that youth are often undergoing many challenges simultaneously; your support may be making a positive difference in their lives even if you see little change.
  - Value and celebrate even small successes, like getting a youth to wear a suit and tie to a job interview.
  - Celebrate and savor the large successes, like a gang member going to college or starting his or her own business; encourage your successes to stay involved with your program and mentor or encourage others.
- **Create an alternate environment.** A positive environment with opportunities for youth to make choices creates a good climate for goal-setting activities. A positive climate should be developed for both individual and group activities.
  - Treat youth – their culture, their voices, their individuality, their capacity for decision-making – with respect.
  - Expect youth to respect the rights and feelings of others as a condition for participation.

- o Teach how to solve conflicts peacefully.
- o Emphasize self-control, self-direction, self-motivation, and follow-through.
- o Promote caring about others in the context of a group or team.
- o Encourage transference of skills from the protected environment to other environments.

Remember that youth who have taken the trouble to come to a WIA program are there because they already have a goal that they hope the program can help them achieve. Learning goal-setting skills can empower youth to reach beyond their current limits and environment to achieve their dreams.

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