

STRATEGIES FOR ACADEMIC SELF-DETERMINATION

Self-determination occurs when students reach their own autonomy, competence, and relatedness and begin forming intrinsically motivated goals and regulate their own behavior to meet those goals (Deci & Ryan, 2012).

EXAMPLES OF MICRO-CHANGES IN ROUTINES AND PRACTICES

ACADEMIC SELF-DETERMINATION

- Give students frequent practice, feedback, and direct instruction in setting goals, making decisions, solving problems, and self-evaluating their skills and behavior.
- Practice goal-setting by having students set a goal for mastering a task and make a plan to do at least one thing to improve their progress. Then, include a daily or weekly ‘check in’ during class when students chart their progress, post their progress onto a graph, decide how to change their plan, and celebrate their successes. One wall of the classroom could be used to post a class wide graph showing how close students are to achieving their goals.
- Teach students to use ‘stair steps’ to take on challenging goals. Draw 5 to 9 steps on a piece of paper. Write the student’s goal on the top step. On the bottom step, write what they are doing now. Then fill in the steps in between. Students should keep a calendar of the step that they are on each day, set a goal for moving to the next step, and do one thing each day to help them move up a step.
- Let students make frequent and varied choices: about where to sit, between two optional assignments, or which book to read.
- Model mastery self-talk in the classroom: “I need to finish this report, but making graphs is not my strong suit. I think I’ll sketch it out first and decide if it makes sense. Then, I’ll start entering the data into the spreadsheet. I’ll tell Mrs. Luther that I’m working on this, and see if I can ask her for help if I get stuck. If I do this one step at a time, I can do a good job.”
- Give students a checklist for good goals and let them self-rate their goals using the checklist: Good goals are clear (other people understand them). It is easy to tell whether or not you have met them. They can be met within 2 weeks. (Change the time to match students’ age and development.) They are important. And they are something that you want to be able to meet.

EVIDENCE-BASED INTERVENTIONS

- Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) Program (Greenberg, Kusche, and Mihalic, 1998). Evidence has demonstrated that this classwide program strengthens the self-determination of preschool and elementary children. The program includes 20-minute lessons taught three times each week self-control and interpersonal problem-solving skills.
- Strong Kids (Merrell, Gueldner, & Tran, 2008). The Strong Kids curricula script half-hour lessons on diverse topics related to social emotional learning. Some of these lessons teach goal-setting, decision-making, and becoming a self-determined student. Versions of the Strong Kids curricula are available for preschool, early elementary, late elementary and middle school grades. Evidence shows small but robust improvements in students’ social emotional competence.
- Positive Action Program (Flay, Allred, & Ordway, 2001). This is a wellness-oriented program that teaches students in kindergarten through twelfth grade to self-assess, set, and work towards goals to strengthen their learning and behavior. Some of the units foster students’ self-determination. At each grade level, there are scripted classroom units and a manualized intervention for school mental health professionals to use with students at greater risk. Evidence suggests that this program strengthens students’ self-regulation.