

Title of Study: *Student Recognition and Goals: The Effects of Student Recognition and Goal Setting on Motivation and Achievement among At-Risk Opportunity School Students*

Dates of Study: *Spring 2015*

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Problem that was addressed: *Improving student performance through a Student Recognition and Goals Program among at-risk students*

Subjects (complete, as appropriate): *138 at-risk junior and senior high school students in an alternative opportunity school setting*

Sex: *82 male and 55 female*

Grade: *8 - 12*

Racial/Ethnic: *84% Hispanic, 10% African-American, 2% White, 2% Filipino, 1% Asian*

Hypothesis: *Student performance (measured by contract completion, mester points earned, and attendance) will be positively affected by student recognition of achievement, positive reinforcement of work habits and behavior, and having the students set individual personal best goals.*

Data that indicated a need existed: *Generally, opportunity school students have been unsuccessful in a traditional school. There is a high rate of student turnover with many students enrolling throughout the school year. Since July 2014, the school averaged 15 student withdrawals per month and approximately the same number of new students enrolled per month. The average attendance rate from July 2014 through March 2015 was 51%. Students work on a contract basis, earning points for each hour of work completed with a "C" or better. The average points per six-week mester for the 2013-2014 school year was 118 points, but for the mester immediately prior to the study, the points averaged was 42, a 64% decline.*

Intervention (describe what was done):

The Student Recognition and Goals Program was implemented and included incentives and an award ceremony to recognize students' achievements, positive reinforcement of work habits and behavior in the classroom, and an opportunity for students to set goals for themselves. A Personal Best Goals Mester Sheet and Weekly Worksheet were prepared for each student to set goals and track their progress. In order for students to be able to set goals that would reflect improvement on past performance, the mester goal sheet was merged to include past individual student data, such as last mester points and average points earned. The objective was for students to use the past performance data to set attainable goals for themselves.

At the end of each mester, students were recognized at an awards ceremony where they received their certificates and awards

- *Gold Club for earning 150 points or more toward their contracts*
- *Honor Roll for no "U's" in work habits and cooperation*

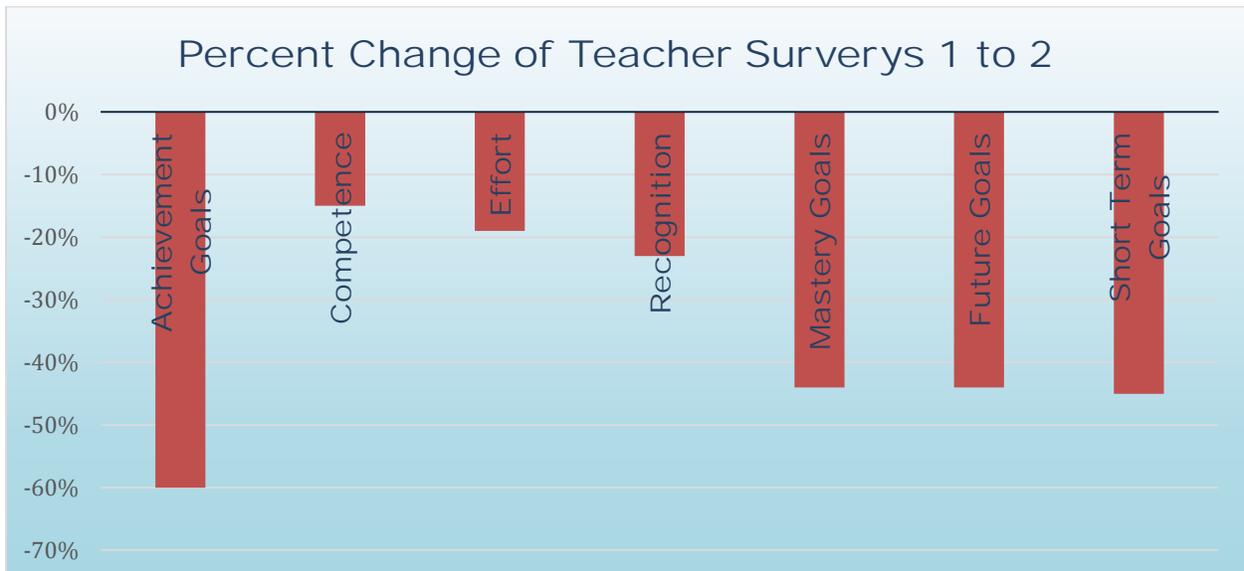
- Perfect attendance
- Honorable Mention for 100 points or more
- Special Recognition – chosen by teachers for improvement, progress and/or effort

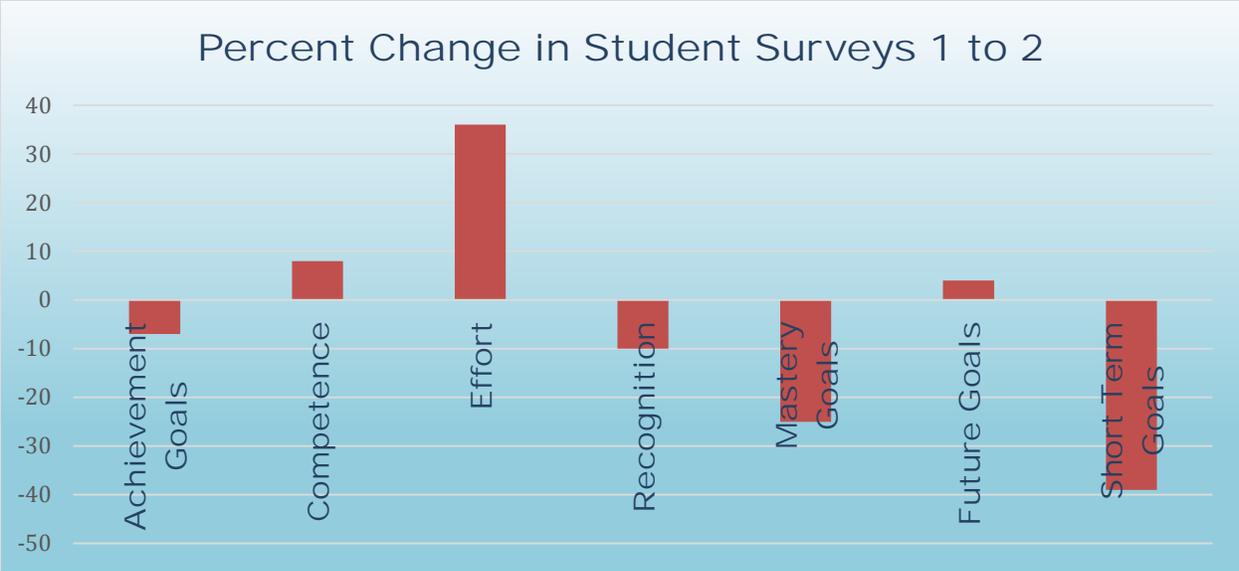
In addition, students earned a sucker for completing a contract and progress toward earning high school credits was tracked through a “horse race” posted in each room. At the awards ceremony the teachers explained why they chose their student for special recognition, such as improvement, progress, and/or effort.

To ensure triangulation in the research, I conducted classroom observations, interviews, and questionnaires. The purpose of the student and teacher interviews was to determine if there were any correlations in their perceptions of student competence, effort, and responsiveness to goals. The classroom observations and teacher surveys provided significant data to assess teachers’ willingness to offer consistent positive student recognition in the classroom, which was an important aspect of the research. A baseline was established by collecting data prior to the implementation of the Student Recognition and Goals Program. This included student performance data, student questionnaires, and teacher questionnaires. The baseline data was then compared and analyzed with the data collected at the end of two mesters or twelve weeks.

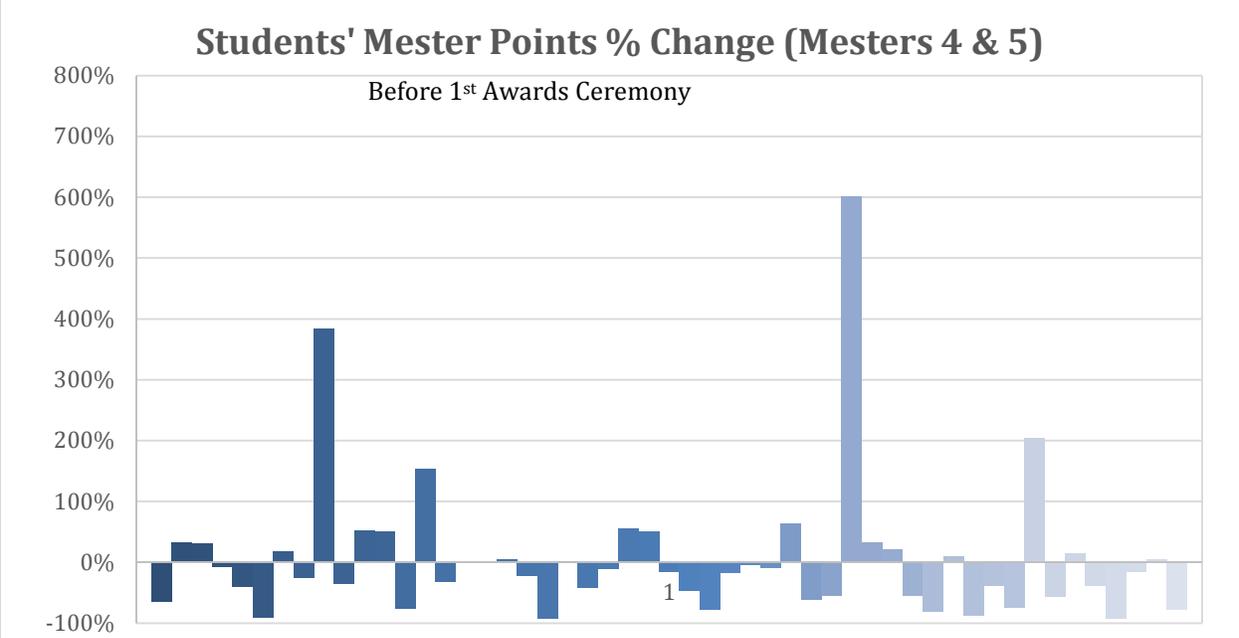
Results (data based):

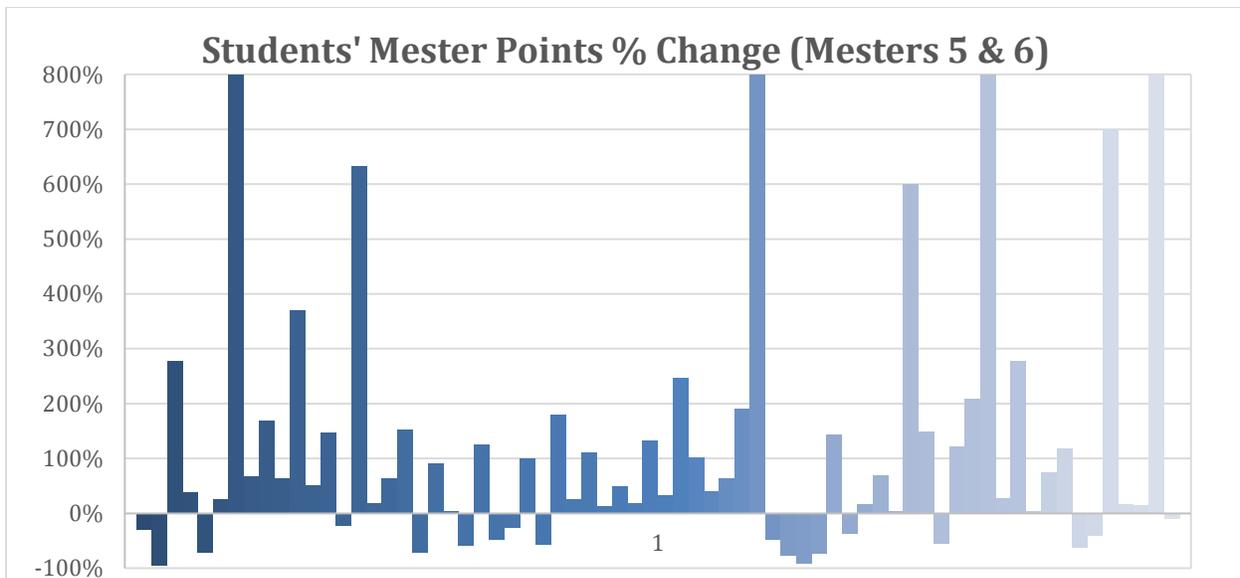
Based on the questionnaires, the teachers did not believe that the action research project had any impact on their students. Overall, there was a negative shift from the first survey to the second in all variables as shown below. However, the student responses showed positive shifts in future goals (4%), competence (8%) and effort (36%). The students’ perceptions of having increased their effort is the most significant change since the last survey. This may have been affected by the fact that fewer students participated in the survey (seven compared to seventeen). However, when these students were asked the open-ended question “How did ...the program influence your work habits?” responses included “I want to work harder to be successful in life,” “I started to do more work,” and one was influenced because “they mentioned my hard work in front of others.”





The following graphs give a visual representation of the percentage change in student performance of contract points earned for each student from mesters 4 to 5 and from mesters 5 to 6. There is a substantial increase in student performance after the first awards ceremony as shown in the second graph.





In the first mester (5) after the start of the program, there was a significant increase in the percentage of students (40%) who improved their performance, even though the overall performance decreased 9%. After the first awards ceremony, the change from mesters 5 to 6 was more dramatic with 74% of the students improving their performance for an average point increase of 148% per student.

Conclusions:

In analyzing the various variables of recognition, competence, effort, achievement goals, mastery goals, future goals, and short-term goals through the questionnaires, the most significant change was in students' perceptions of the increased effort they put forth in their work. This represents a favorable response to the Student Recognition and Goals Program. This is validated by the improvement in student performance. Yet, the most essential question is: What caused the increase in effort? Because the greatest increase occurred after the first awards ceremony, the data strongly suggests that public student recognition motivated students to increase the effort they put forth in their work. The awards were tied to achievement goals, which was the variable that ranked the highest in both student surveys, with 88% and 85% responses in agreement respectively.

What worked?

Overall, the program resulted in dramatic performance increases as shown by the 74% of students who improved their performance in earning contract points. The data suggests that public student recognition at an awards ceremony was the driving force in the positive change. The number of students who met the program's achievement goals more than doubled after the first awards ceremony. As a matter of fact, if only those who earned Gold Club or Honor Roll are considered (4 students in mester five to 12 students in mester six), there was actually a 300% increase in award recipients.

All students who earned an award exhibited a sense of pride in their achievement. Based on student comments, the award that students seemed to value the most was the Special Recognition Award. For this award, each teacher chose one student who showed the most improvement or progress during the mester. When the teachers presented the award, they talked

about why that student was chosen. This award seemed to make the greatest impression, especially on the students who received them. For example, one of the three students went from 95 contract points to 234 points after he earned that recognition.

What did not work?

Another aspect of this study included personal best goals. The data showed that the students were not interested in keeping a record of their own weekly goals and performance. Based on teachers' feedback, this was too much work for them. More of them completed the mester goal sheets, which were less complicated and more direct. The third component of the Student Recognition and Goals Program included positive reinforcement in the classroom. In my classroom observations and my frequent, but brief visits performing errands in the classrooms, I did not observe any evidence of positive reinforcement directed toward individual students.

Recommendations:

Moving forward, the one area, which requires more consistent application is the positive reinforcement of students in the classroom. This classroom management technique can be a powerful tool in motivating students, as well as maintaining optimum behavior standards in the classroom. This means that each teacher must actively and continually interact with students to provide feedback on their progress, whether it be assistance, support, or positive reinforcement. This does not preclude the use of consequences, when necessary. According to Canter and Canter (1993), many students "want attention - good or bad, planned or unplanned...It's up to you to plan to give the maximum amount of positive attention in the shortest amount of time, so the need for negative consequences (attention) comes only as a last resort."

I will dispense with the weekly goals and have the students continue to set mester goals. This will require more support by the teachers, who must distribute the forms and make sure they collect one from each student. Students will still need to be taught how to set challenging, yet achievable, goals for themselves. As they begin to attain their own goals, they will develop a greater sense of accomplishment, and thus improve their self-efficacy.

Another component of the original design of the program was recognizing students for exemplary work, such as artwork, essays, or athletic talents by publishing their accomplishments. This was not included in the program at this time because the website was still in the process of being developed, but can be revisited in the future. Publishing students' accomplishments is a powerful way to recognize students' talents and encourage high quality work.

Research base

With the exception of the Gold Club and earning a sucker for completing a contract, all other awards were in the form of certificates. This validates the study conducted by Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001), which concluded that abstract recognition, such as verbal praise, is more effective than tangible rewards, such as candy or money. In the Marzano, et al. (2001) research, reinforcing effort and student recognition yielded a 29 percentile gain in student achievement. Percentile gains were not available at the time of this study. However, although the overall contract points per student increased by an average of only 15 points,

74% of the students improved their performance after the first awards ceremony. This confirms the substantial impact of student recognition on performance.

According to Dweck (2007), students with mastery-based goals are focused on mastering a skill or concept, while those who are focused on performance-based goals are concerned about how they compare with other students. Throughout this research study, there was no evidence of performance-based goals where students compared themselves with other students, but mastery goal responses did decrease by 25% from the first survey. This may be a result of the emphasis the program had on achievement goals. Notwithstanding, the students' performance still showed a marked improvement.

The students' focus in this study was on future goals and achievement goals. Mansfield's (2010) data showed 85% of the students concerned with "future goals, such as having a good job, earning a good wage, having materialistic possessions or pursuing a particular career." This study's data confirmed those results with approximately 80% of the students attentive to future goals. Achievement goals were viewed favorably by approximately 87% of the students participating in the survey. It may be that students considered achievement goals not as a way to compare themselves with other students, but rather viewed them as mastery goals and were motivated to rise to the challenge.

Many motivation theories include the dimension of competence, particularly Bandura's self-efficacy theory (as cited in Usher & Kober, 2012), which suggests that students' motivation is based solely on whether they feel capable of performing the task. Many of our at-risk students exhibit behaviors, which Seifert (as cited in Usher & Kober, 2012) attributed to "performance-goal" mindsets, such as work avoidant, failure avoidant or learned helplessness behaviors. However, according to student responses in the surveys, none mentioned comparing themselves with other students. As a matter of fact, an average of 72% of all the students taking the surveys agreed with statements indicating feelings of competence in completing their work. According to the data in this study, students felt confident in their ability to perform the required tasks, but simply chose not to work. Based on the survey responses, this view is also shared by the teachers. Students may not be willing to admit that they struggle with the work, or they may simply lack the motivation or reason to perform.

Continued future data will be able to confirm the conclusions drawn in this study and will be able to establish the long-term effects of the program. In addition, further study may possibly determine, if Marzano, et al. (2001) concluded accurately when they stated that "providing rewards for the successful attainment of specific performance goals actually enhances intrinsic motivation."