

# Aiming High: Applying Goal Setting to Social and Emotional Learning Skills in the Elementary Classroom

Beyond Behavior  
2023, Vol. 32(1) 4–14  
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DOI: 10.1177/10742956221145692  
journals.sagepub.com/home/bbx  
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## Abstract

Goal setting is used to track progress on academic and behavioral outcomes. It can also be extremely effective in monitoring progress toward social and emotional learning (SEL) goals. In this article, we provide an overview of effective goal setting in the classroom to support SEL skill acquisition and development, and practical examples of how to implement goal setting with elementary students with and at risk of emotional and behavioral disorders. Examples of progress monitoring and ideas for how to intensify goal supports are described.

## Keywords

goal setting, emotional and behavioral disorders, social and emotional learning, intensification

The importance of the acquisition and development of social and emotional learning (SEL) skills within school has been well recognized by educators, school districts, and researchers alike (Eklund et al., 2018), with a recent renewed emphasis in the classroom on the heels of the COVID-19 pandemic (Cipriano et al., 2020). Social and emotional learning supports the attainment and application of knowledge and skills to support emotion management, personal development of one's sense of self, relationship building and management, and responsible decision-making (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2020a). Given this, SEL is a critical factor in short- and long-term student success both inside and outside the classroom.

The building of SEL skills has been connected with students' improved academic motivation and classroom success (Cipriano et al., 2020) and mental health and overall well-being (Corcoran et al., 2018). Teaching SEL skills also serves as a protective factor for students who have experienced trauma, mitigating negative experiences and effects, and reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety (Clarke et al., 2021). Integrating high-quality SEL instruction within a supportive, positive classroom environment can increase core SEL skills and improve overall student outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011). See Table 1 for additional SEL resources.

For students with and at risk of emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD), there is an increased emphasis on developing SEL skills. Students with and at risk of EBD frequently present with behavioral and social deficits that contribute to undesirable classroom behaviors and negatively affect adult and peer relationships (Ennis et al., 2018;

Maag, 2006). Such deficits highlight the need to integrate research- or evidence-based SEL practices to support skill acquisition and development, especially within the elementary classroom.

Specifically, students with and at risk of EBD may need additional modeling of SEL skills, increased opportunities for role-play of SEL skills, and increased scaffolded supports when practicing generalizing skills to other areas of school (Niesyn, 2009). Because of existing socio-emotional deficits, some students with and at risk of EBD may also require the reteaching of skills that their typically developing peers have already mastered or the combination of multiple research- or evidence-based strategies and practices to make adequate progress. By integrating practices and supports to improve SEL competencies in early grades, educators can take a proactive approach to instilling students with and at risk of EBD the social skills they need for success (Niesyn, 2009). A core component of supporting the development of SEL skills in the classroom is creating a positive classroom environment, with proactive, research- or evidence-based practices (CASEL, 2020a). One practice that creates a positive classroom environment and reinforces SEL components is goal setting.

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**Table 1.** Internet Resources for Social and Emotional Learning (SEL).

Website	Key features
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning <a href="https://casel.org">https://casel.org</a> Measuring SEL <a href="https://measuringSEL.casel.org/resources/">https://measuringSEL.casel.org/resources/</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides a commonly used SEL Framework</li> <li>• Users can access toolkits, publications, webinars, and other resources</li> <li>• Offers resources to support SEL growth and assessment</li> <li>• Educators can access reports and resources on how to assess SEL skills and interpret data</li> </ul>
Ecological Approaches to Social Emotional Learning (EASEL) Lab <a href="https://easel.gse.harvard.edu">https://easel.gse.harvard.edu</a> Explore SEL <a href="http://exploresel.gse.harvard.edu">http://exploresel.gse.harvard.edu</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focuses on investigating the impact of SEL interventions</li> <li>• Users can access program evaluations, professional development opportunities, and other resources</li> <li>• Allows educators to compare SEL frameworks</li> <li>• Includes other resources for school officials looking to incorporate SEL in the classroom</li> </ul>

## Goal Setting

Many students with and at risk of EBD can readily name their struggles. They get stuck trying to find a way to improve their academic, behavioral, or social performance, which fits the documented deficits in self-regulation students with EBD display (e.g., Ennis et al., 2019). This is an important area of focus because students who demonstrate self-regulation skills set goals, choose and implement strategies, and monitor their progress toward their goals (Arslan, 2014), which, in turn, support academic, social, and behavioral performance. One way to support the development of self-regulation skills is by teaching goal setting.

Goal setting involves setting a target (e.g., academic, behavior, or socio-emotional) that exceeds a student's current average performance. This goal serves as a targeted level of performance that the student can work toward. Reaching the goal ultimately improves a student's overall performance and level of functioning (Kumm & Maggin, 2021). Goal setting is a familiar concept in special education, with promising effects demonstrated in research over the past 40 years (e.g., Bruhn et al., 2016; Maher, 1981). Goal setting naturally supports both academic and behavioral progress (Covington, 2000). Goal setting has been evaluated in both academic and behavioral contexts and designated as a socially valid intervention by teachers and students with and at risk of EBD (Mazzotti et al., 2013).

Goal setting has been reviewed extensively (see Bruhn et al., 2015, 2016) and found to encourage academic and behavioral growth with elementary students with and at risk of EBD. Specifically, incorporating goal setting into academic and/or behavior intervention packages increased the efficacy and responsiveness to intervention with elementary-age students (Weeden et al., 2016). More recently, goal setting has been reported to reduce disruptive behavior of students with various disabilities, including sixth graders with and at risk of EBD (Bruhn et al., 2016).

Setting goals also increases engagement and motivation for students with and at risk of EBD as they set expectations

and monitor their own performance (Bruhn et al., 2016). Engagement has been identified as a crucial proactive support for both academic and behavioral performance as students disengage in negative behaviors when they are focused on the goal at hand (Covington, 2000). One means of increasing goal attainment and engagement for students with and at risk of EBD is to have them set their own goals, as opposed to using goals that were set for them by their teachers, individualized education program (IEP) team members, or other community stakeholders (Kumm & Maggin, 2021). Having students involved in the goal-setting process is more likely to increase their buy-in or effort toward goal attainment (Covington, 2000). Finally, students are more likely to continue setting goals after attaining one they previously set (Locke, 1996).

## Extending Goal Setting to Support Social and Emotional Learning Skills

Although goal setting is frequently used to support student growth in academics and behavior, its use can also be extended to support the development and growth of student SEL skills. Goal setting is frequently included as the topic of one or more lessons within SEL curriculums (e.g., Positive Action; Allred, 1995) as setting goals and monitoring goal progress is considered a core SEL competency related to self-management (CASEL, 2020a). In addition to teaching students how to set and monitor goals as a stand-alone lesson(s), goal setting can be integrated within the classroom to support other SEL skill acquisition and development.

There are a few benefits to embedding goal setting related to SEL skills within the classroom, particularly with students with and at risk of EBD. First, teaching students to set daily or weekly goals related to SEL is a cost-effective, resource-efficient strategy for teachers to integrate into current SEL lessons and curriculum (Kumm & Maggin, 2021). Furthermore, embedding goal setting as a daily classroom

practice can help develop a positive classroom environment where the classroom culture is to view areas of growth from a strength-based approach versus a deficit approach (Alderman & MacDonald, 2015). Finally, goal setting related to SEL skill growth can help teachers make data-based decisions related to instruction (Conley et al., 2019). Teachers and schools routinely track academic and behavioral data to see whether students are improving at an adequate rate and meeting goals so we know when to provide intensified supports. A similar process can be applied to SEL skill development.

*Mrs. Barnes is a second-grade teacher whose district has recently adopted a new SEL curriculum. Mrs. Barnes has also incorporated SEL supports such as warm welcomes and optimistic closures into her daily schedule. However, she notices that some of her students with EBD are still behind their peers in displaying SEL competencies and skills. One student in particular, Nick, has noticeable SEL deficits, which have begun to negatively affect his participation in the classroom and relationships with peers.*

*Mrs. Barnes is providing the accommodations listed in Nick's IEP, including using visual cues and directions, providing additional prompts prior to transitions, and allowing Nick breaks when requested. Even with these accommodations, Mrs. Barnes notes that Nick is easily distracted during independent work time, talks to peers during instruction, and interrupts instruction with off-topic questions and stories. Mrs. Barnes is looking for an additional low-intensity, research- or evidence-based practice to add to the existing Tier 1 SEL instruction the class is receiving. She remembers a professional development she recently attended where goal setting was introduced as a way to increase student response to an intervention. Mrs. Barnes decides to incorporate goal setting within the classroom to support Nick's acquisition of SEL competencies within the classroom.*

One way to construct student SEL goals is to link them back to SEL competencies. Some states (e.g., Kansas) have set SEL Grades K through 12 standards. Districts, too, have incorporated SEL competencies into other state standards (Dusenbury et al., 2014). Teachers can use these standards to identify the skills students should achieve by the end of each school year and then use goal setting to track student progress.

Another option for teachers is to use the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) SEL competencies. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, a national organization and leader in prompting and teaching SEL skills, is made up of educators, researchers, practitioners, and others involved in promoting child welfare. Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning has identified five interconnected SEL competencies: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020a).

Teachers can use these competencies to identify age-appropriate SEL skills and set goals for student progress within the skill. Table 2 includes examples of skills related to each CASEL competency.

*Mrs. Barnes decides to use the CASEL (2020b) competency framework to help her identify the SEL competencies where Nick needs the most support as a place to start embedding goal setting to support skill growth. After looking at the competencies, she identifies self-awareness (and the skill "Asking a Question") and self-management (and the skill "Ignoring Distractions") as two areas she wants to focus on with Nick. Mrs. Barnes spends a few days observing Nick and collecting data before determining that Nick's difficulty ignoring distractions during independent work time is the more significant concern as it is affecting both his academic performance and his relationships with peers.*

*Nick often becomes distracted during independent work, such as playing with his writing utensil, talking to his peers who are trying to work, or drawing pictures on his paper. As a result of Nick's lack of engagement during these classes, his academic progress, especially in mathematics, is stalling. Mrs. Barnes thinks his deficits in the self-management competency are contributing factors. In addition, Mrs. Barnes has noticed Nick's peers are increasingly annoyed with him when he interrupts their work time. While Nick's inability to ignore distractions in the classroom is the most severe for his classmates, Mrs. Barnes knows there are other students who could improve on this skill as well. She decides to teach a lesson on ignoring distraction for the entire class and then use goal setting to support student progress.*

## Goal-Setting Steps

Teachers should use a systematic process to help them implement goal setting of SEL skills with students (Kumm & Maggin, 2021). First, a teacher should identify and operationally define the SEL skill the student needs most or is currently being taught in whole-group and/or small-group instruction. The operational definition of the SEL skill should include specific examples and non-examples relevant to the student.

Next, the teacher should create a monitoring plan, detailing how the teacher and students will monitor progress toward the goal. An implementing teacher should consider what previous experience students have had with monitoring their own behavior or progress toward a group goal. In addition, it is important to consider student motivation related to learning the SEL skill and include reinforcement principles within the progress-monitoring plan. For example, students who seek adult attention often may benefit from sharing their progress or having lunch with a preferred adult in the building, once the goal has been accomplished. Previous research has found promising results when implementing

**Table 2.** Connecting Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) Competencies to Goals.

CASEL competency	Competency examples	Related classroom skills
Self-awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identifying emotions</li> <li>Linking feelings, values, and thoughts</li> <li>Having a growth mindset</li> <li>Acknowledging personal identities</li> <li>Developing self-efficacy</li> <li>Showing honesty</li> <li>Awareness of prejudices and biases</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identifying feelings</li> <li>Asking to talk</li> <li>Asking a question</li> <li>Appropriate voice tone</li> </ul>
Social awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Showing compassion and empathy</li> <li>Acknowledging others' perspectives</li> <li>Demonstrating empathy</li> <li>Recognizing situational demands/opportunities</li> <li>Understanding and showing gratitude</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Introducing yourself</li> <li>Saying "Thank You"</li> <li>Listening</li> <li>Waiting your turn</li> <li>Greeting others</li> <li>Offering to help</li> <li>Asking permission</li> </ul>
Self-management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Managing one's emotions</li> <li>Using organizational skills</li> <li>Making plans</li> <li>Using stress management skills</li> <li>Developing self-motivation</li> <li>Demonstrating self-discipline</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dealing with losing</li> <li>Reacting to failure</li> <li>Trying when it is hard</li> <li>Using a coping skill</li> <li>Accepting feedback</li> <li>Ignoring distractions</li> </ul>
Relationship skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Effective communication</li> <li>Growing positive relationships</li> <li>Using conflict resolution</li> <li>Resisting negative peer pressure</li> <li>Showing leadership</li> <li>Helping others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Asking for help</li> <li>Playing a game</li> <li>Asking someone to play</li> <li>Sharing</li> <li>Giving a compliment</li> <li>Answering a compliment</li> <li>Apologizing</li> <li>Working in a group</li> </ul>
Responsible decision-making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identifying solutions to problems</li> <li>Using critical thinking skills</li> <li>Making a decision based on data</li> <li>Self-reflection on personal actions</li> <li>Remaining open-minded</li> <li>Showing curiosity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Setting a goal</li> <li>Completing assignments</li> <li>Disagreeing appropriately</li> <li>Making changes to a plan</li> <li>Reflecting on performance</li> </ul>

Source. Adapted from Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (2020b).

function-based principles within self-management strategies such as goal setting (e.g., Ingram et al., 2005).

Collecting baseline data on the identified SEL skill is the next step. Once baseline data are established, the teacher and student(s) should discuss and agree upon a goal. As elementary students may have varied, diverse experiences with goal setting, explicit instruction, modeling, and scaffolding will be important teaching practices to build in to implementation. For example, if students struggle writing the goal itself, teachers could consider providing explicit goal-writing instruction, such as writing SMART (i.e., specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound) goals (van Geel et al., 2016).

For students relatively new to goal setting, teachers should consider helping students write short-term goals that are feasible, given their current abilities, so that students can experience successfully meeting goals, thereby

building behavior momentum and motivation (Sanders et al., 2021). Including the student in the goal-setting step, even if the creation of the goal is guided by teacher suggestion, is another way to increase student buy-in, motivation, and overall growth in the skill (Kumm & Maggin, 2021).

One means of increasing student buy-in and motivation is reinforcing or rewarding meeting both short- and long-term goals. Teachers should consider identifying preferred reinforcers for students who need additional buy-in to pursuing the goal. For example, teachers can use preference assessments or forced-choice reinforcement surveys to determine appropriate reinforcers individualized for each student. Both assessment tools allow students to choose which reinforcer appeals to them, which hopefully increases their interest in accomplishing the goal. Students may also enjoy having a "menu" of reinforcers to choose from to reward meeting the short- or long-term goals to avoid

Goal-Setting Strategy Checklist

Student Name: Nick

Define the SEL Skill: Ignoring distractions during independent work time  
Looks like: not talking to peers during work time, looking at your own paper/work area  
Does not look like: talking to a peer, playing with a fidget, doodling

Progress Monitoring Plan: Student: self-monitor progress after each math class  
Teacher: ranking skill demonstration on a 5-point scale during math

Collect Baseline Data: Collect and graph 5 days of data

Student Goal: I will ignore distractions during independent work time so I  
I can finish my work and learn new things

Progress Monitoring of the Goal: Collect and graph 15 days of data

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Graph of Data

SEL Skill Score	5																																			
	4																																			
	3																																			
	2																																			
	1																																			
	0																																			
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	

Daily SEL Skill Progress Monitoring

Figure 1. Goal-Setting Fidelity of Implementation Checklist for Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Skills.

satiation or decreased interest in one specific reward. Finally, teachers should consider how principles of reinforcement (i.e., function, frequency, and magnitude) can affect student motivation and perseverance toward accomplishing long-term goals. Intensifying one of these principles can support students who are making little to no progress compared with their peers (Lo et al., 2010).

Once the goal is agreed upon by both the teacher and student(s), progress toward the goal should be monitored for a pre-identified period of time. As part of this progress monitoring, teachers might consider adding in short daily conferences to discuss goal progress to further support students with and at risk of EBD (Sanders et al., 2021). Furthermore, it is important to closely watch student data to determine whether increased frequency or magnitude of reinforcement is needed to support the student’s progress. Finally, the data should be reviewed to determine whether sufficient student progress is being made. Graphing the baseline data and the data collected after a goal is set is one

effective method for quickly examining student progress. An example of a fidelity of implementation checklist for following these goal-setting steps is found in Figure 1. (See Kumm & Maggin, 2021, for a more detailed description of the goal-setting steps.)

In addition to preparing lessons on how to ignore distractions, Mrs. Barnes outlines a plan to implement goal setting with Nick. She has identified Nick’s need to work on this skill (e.g., ignoring distractions) during independent work time. Next, she spends some time defining what it looks like in the classroom when students are not ignoring distractions (e.g., talking to a peer, playing with a fidget, and doodling during work time) and what it looks like to ignore distractions (e.g., not talking to peers during work time, looking at your own paper/work area).

After teaching the lesson on ignoring distractions, Mrs. Barnes and Nick meet to talk about the skill. She shares her definitions and examples for what ignoring and not ignoring distractions look like and Nick contributes other



examples more specific to himself. Once Mrs. Barnes and Nick agree upon the definitions, she guides Nick through setting a goal: “I will ignore distractions during independent work time so I can finish my work and learn new things.” Mrs. Barnes and Nick also identify some ways they can meet this goal: clearing his desk of distracting items (e.g., fidgets, extra pencils, and books), taking a deep breath, focusing his eyes on his work, asking classmates to stop talking, and using self-talk (e.g., “I am going to focus on my work”).

### Progress-Monitoring Goals

Progress monitoring is a critical component of the goal-setting process to gather the data necessary to make data-based instructional decisions (Kumm & Maggin, 2021). Teachers may choose to monitor student performance progress using a rating scale or collecting quantitative data (Conley et al., 2019). Some SEL skills, such as asking a question, identifying a feeling, or saying “thank you,” can be easily monitored using a frequency count. This can be done by tallying the number of times students engage in a particular skill, allowing teachers to track upward and downward trends in data. Some skills, such as ignoring distractions or sharing, may not be as easily tracked by data collection methods such as frequency counts, or teachers may also be interested in assessing the quality of the SEL competencies displayed by students. In these cases, teachers can use a Likert-type rating scale to assess the overall SEL competency (e.g., accepting compliments) as well as competency subskills (e.g., look at the person, say “thank you,” and use a nice voice). Whatever method teachers decide to use for progress monitoring, it is important to remember to choose a method that is easily incorporated into the daily classroom procedures (Conley et al., 2019). Figure 2 includes examples of progress-monitoring tracking forms.

### Self-Monitoring Goals

Teachers should also consider showing students how to self-monitor their progress toward their goal to maintain their engagement with the goal over time. Teaching students with and at risk of EBD how to self-monitor increases student self-regulatory skills, supports the development of the self-awareness SEL competency (CASEL, 2020a), increases student independence, and improves student motivation and self-efficacy (Ennis et al., 2018). The positive effects of self-monitoring when used with students with and at risk of EBD are well-documented (Bruhn et al., 2015).

Self-monitoring can be implemented as a Tier-2 support to intensify a classwide practice such as goal setting (Sanders et al., 2021). Furthermore, teachers can embed function-based principles to increase the effectiveness of the self-monitoring procedures that has previously shown

promise with elementary-school students (Hansen et al., 2014). When asking students to self-monitor their progress toward an SEL goal, teachers should provide explicit instruction, modeling, and scaffolding on how to self-monitor progress toward goals (Sanders et al., 2021). Figure 3 provides a sample self-monitoring form.

*Mrs. Barnes has decided to use a Likert-type scale rating system to monitor Nick’s progress toward his goal of ignoring distractions. She creates an Excel spreadsheet with the Likert-type rating scale and spends a few minutes at the end of every day rating Nick’s performance. Mrs. Barnes also decides to intensify the goal-setting process for Nick by having him self-monitor his progress toward his goal. Mrs. Barnes creates a self-monitoring sheet for Nick to use to evaluate his progress toward his goal. She decides that as Nick has the most difficulty ignoring distractions during mathematics class, she will introduce the self-monitoring of the goal during this class.*

*Before the next mathematics class, Mrs. Barnes conducts an individual conference with Nick. They review his goal to ignore distractions and the definitions and examples of ignoring distractions. Then, Mrs. Barnes shows him a self-monitoring sheet she has created, explaining that at the end of mathematics class, Nick will decide whether he (a) did not ignore distractions, (b) sometimes ignored distractions, or (c) almost always ignored distractions, and then shade the corresponding emoji that represents Nick’s evaluation of his progress toward his goal. She and Nick will then briefly talk about how well Nick ignored distractions.*

*Mrs. Barnes plans on providing praise to positively reinforce Nick’s progress toward his goal and corrective feedback and ideas for the next class if Nick is struggling to follow through on his goal. Mrs. Barnes decides to collect data for 2 weeks and then review Nick’s progress to evaluate the implementation of goal setting and identify any adaptations or intensifications that need to be made.*

### Intensification of Goal Setting

Once data toward the goal have been collected for the predetermined amount of time, the teacher should review the progress toward the goal to determine whether additional supports or intensifications are needed (Conley et al., 2019). Approaching changes to instruction based on data helps ensure teachers are targeting their time and resources to the students who need targeted supports (Kumm & Maggin, 2021). If students are not improving or are not improving at an acceptable rate, intensifications can provide the extra support needed for students to make adequate progress (D. Fuchs et al., 2014). There are several ways to intensify goal setting, which include adjusting aspects of the intervention related to (a) dosage, (b) attention to transfer, (c) comprehensiveness, and (d) behavioral supports (L. S. Fuchs et al., 2018; see Table 1). When choosing an intensification,

Likert Scale					
Ignoring Distractions					
	1 – Not Proficient	2 – Slightly Proficient	3 – Somewhat Proficient	4 – Proficient	5 – Highly Proficient
Student takes time to reset	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Student works through distractions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ignoring Distractions (overall rating)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Frequency Count					
Asking a Question Appropriately					
	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
# of time raised hand during class					

**Figure 2.** Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) progress-monitoring examples.

teachers should start with the least intense option, gradually choosing interventions with increasing intensity until the intervention meets student needs as evidenced by a positive change in the progress-monitoring data (McDaniel et al., 2015).

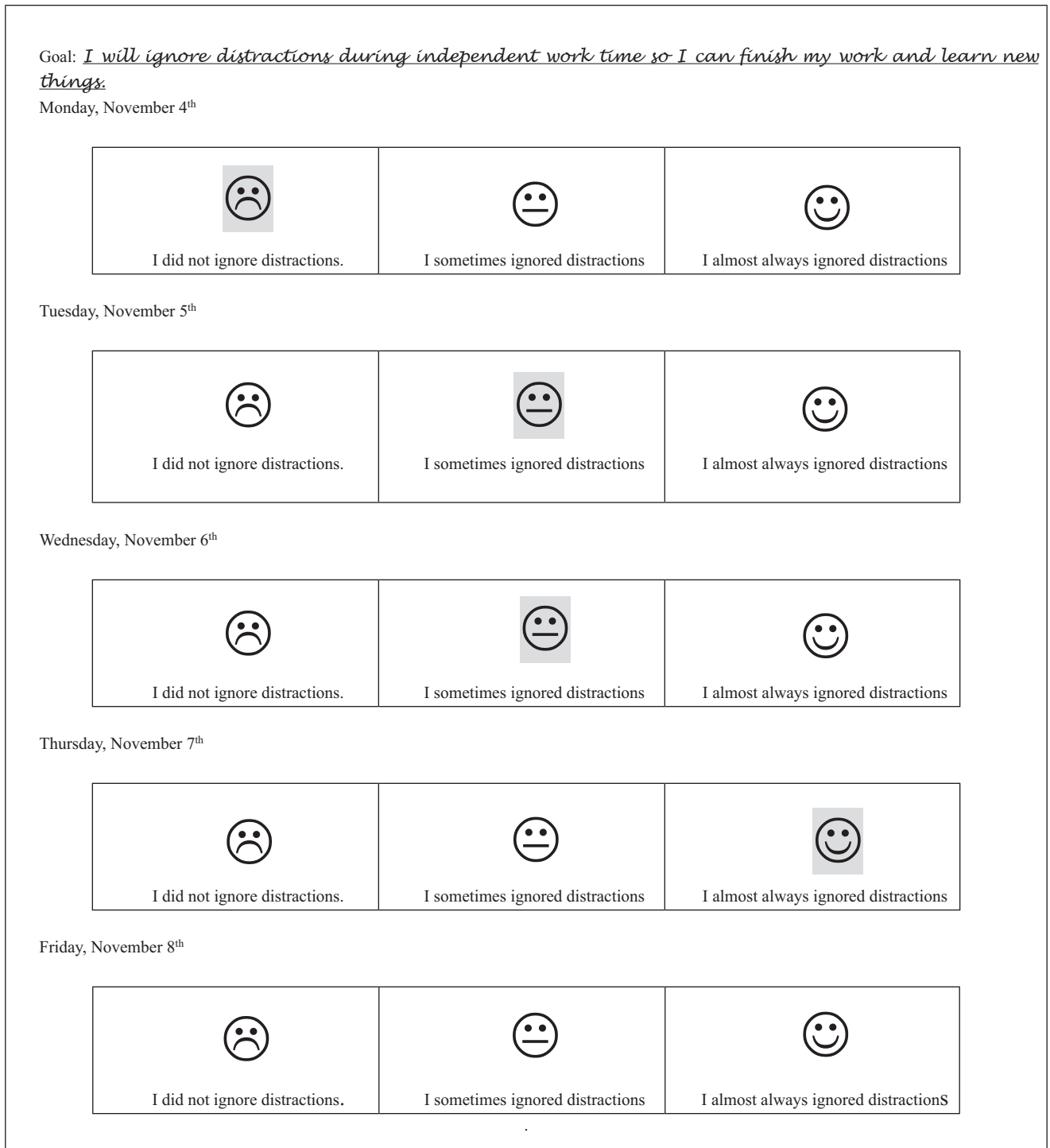
### Dosage

Dosage refers to the length and frequency spent on the intervention, including the number of minutes spent engaged within intervention, the number of times the intervention occurs, and how long the intervention is delivered. This is one of the most common ways interventions are initially intensified because it is one of the easiest ways to modify the intervention (D. Fuchs et al., 2014). To intensify goal setting of SEL skills, teachers could consider the number of minutes that students engage in goal setting per day, including the number of minutes the teacher spends conferencing with students on goal progress (e.g., increasing the student conference time from 3 min to 5 min) and/or the number of conferences throughout the day (e.g., after each whole-group activity).

Teachers might also consider increasing the number of times students self-monitor their progress toward a goal. Increasing the frequency of self-monitoring can increase the accuracy of a student's self-report as younger students may struggle to separate out sequential events that have occurred throughout the day and provide an accurate report of overall performance. In addition, increasing the frequency of when students self-monitor provides them additional opportunities to practice self-reflecting on goal progress, self-reinforcing performance of targeted behaviors, and resetting and refocusing whether they are not on track. Self-monitoring of goals could occur every hour, at the beginning, middle, and end of a class, or at a set interval (e.g., every 15 min) depending on the student's needs and progress toward the goal.

### Attention to Transfer

The term *attention to transfer* refers to how well a student is able to transfer and generalize skills from one setting to another. Goal setting and SEL skills are extremely transferable and can be used in multiple contexts (e.g., classroom,



**Figure 3.** Example of the Self-Monitoring of a Goal.

lunchroom, or playground). However, students with and at risk of EBD may struggle to transfer skill use from one setting to another without additional instruction and support. Embedding goal setting across different settings can support this transfer and increase the student’s ability to generalize a skill from one setting to another.

For example, if a student has demonstrated an improved ability to successfully play a game with peers in the classroom but is still struggling to play games on the playground, it can be helpful to extend goal setting and/or self-monitoring to the playground. To support the transfer of skills, the teacher may have a brief conference with the student at the beginning



of each recess, reviewing the student's goal and the skill steps for achieving their goal. Then, the teacher can prompt the student to self-monitor their performance on the way in from recess. This intensification of goal setting can support the transfer of the skill across settings.

### Comprehensiveness

Comprehensiveness refers to the amount of explicit instruction provided to students. Often when intensifying an intervention, other research- or evidence-based practices may be combined. One of ways to intensify goal is to incorporate reinforcers when a goal is met. It may be ideal to think that students are intrinsically motivated to achieve a goal, but for students with and at risk of EBD, temporarily offering external reinforcers can provide the additional motivation to meet the identified expectations (Niesyn, 2009). Teachers can use tangible reinforcers (e.g., candy, small toys) or non-tangible reinforcers (e.g., time with a preferred staff member, time on the computer) to positively reinforce students once a preestablished criterion within the goal is met (Sanders et al., 2021).

Another practice that can be combined with goal setting is group contingency reinforcement. Teachers can use a few different types of group contingencies. The first, known as an interdependent group contingency, occurs when the teacher sets a goal and a criterion for all students in the class. That is, when all students meet the goal, the entire class is reinforced. Another version of group contingency is a dependent group contingency. In this case, the class receives a reward when the targeted student meets the pre-set expectations to criterion (e.g., John does not interrupt the teacher during class, so the entire class gets 5 extra minutes at recess). When used correctly, dependent group contingencies can allow students who typically struggle in class the opportunity to be the hero. Effective implementation can also help improve peer relationships. Group contingencies have been identified as an effective practice for students with EBD (Little et al., 2015) and can be particularly powerful if the targeted student's function of behavior is peer attention.

### Behavioral Supports

Finally, interventions such as goal setting can be intensified with the addition of behavioral supports. Low-intensity behavioral strategies are a group of behavioral supports that are commonly used in combination with other interventions and practices. Named for the ease in which they are incorporated into the classroom, they include strategies such as precorrection and behavior-specific praise (Lane et al., 2018). Teachers can match the needs of the student to the low-intensity behavior strategy. For example, if the student

struggles to follow the goal-setting procedure or the self-monitoring procedures, a teacher might consider using precorrection to review the expectations ahead of time and practice the expected behaviors (e.g., self-monitoring performance) ahead of time (Crosby et al., 2006). If students are having a difficult time connecting behaviors in class that support their goal (e.g., raising their hand before speaking, waiting to be called on before talking), the teacher might use behavior-specific praise to positively reinforce the expectations that students are meeting (e.g., "Laci, thank you for raising your hand to let me know you have something to say"). Both precorrection and behavior-specific praise, as well as other low-intensity behavior strategies, are effective practices for students with EBD (Lane et al., 2018) and should be considered as potential intensifications to goal setting.

*After 2 weeks, Mrs. Barnes sits down to review the data on student progress toward their goal of ignoring distractions in the classroom. She is pleased to see that on a 5-point Likert-type scale (see Figure 2), most of her students are performing at the proficient (4) or highly proficient (5) rating. In reviewing Nick's data, she notes that she is routinely rating Nick at somewhat proficient (3). When she looks at Nick's self-monitoring sheets (see Figure 3), she notices that he is scoring himself similarly, mostly self-reporting that he sometimes ignores distractions. Although this is an improvement from where Nick was performing, Mrs. Barnes feels there's still room for Nick to improve.*

*As she considers different methods to intensify the goal setting, she notes that Nick struggles with ignoring distractions at the beginning of independent work. After a few prompts from her, his focus typically improves and he can ignore distractions and focus on his work. Mrs. Barnes decides to intensify the goal setting by adding precorrection as a behavioral support. She decides that, prior to the independent work in mathematics class, Mrs. Barnes and Nick will briefly review the expectations and his goal of ignoring distractions. Mrs. Barnes plans to continue collecting data on Nick's progress toward his goal for another 2 weeks before reviewing the data to make additional decisions. Overall, she is pleased with Nick's response to goal setting, and she is encouraged with his SEL growth related to self-management. She plans to add goal setting to her list of go-to strategies to support SEL skill acquisition and development and a positive classroom environment (see Table 3).*

### Conclusion

As we recalibrate following the experiences and challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus on SEL skills within our schools will likely remain. The immediate shift to virtual learning, changes in instructional delivery, and interruptions of typical in-person interactions may have a lasting impact

**Table 3.** Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Goal-Setting Intensifications.

Intensification type	Intensification example
Dosage: The amount of time spent on the intervention. This includes both the number of minutes per sessions and the number of sessions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase the number of minutes spent on goal setting</li> <li>• Increase the number of times students self-monitor their goal</li> <li>• Increase the number of times teacher and student conference about their goal</li> </ul>
Attention to transfer: How well the intervention supports the transfer of skills to other settings and contexts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explicit instruction on goal setting of SEL skill in different settings (e.g., on the playground, at physical education class)</li> <li>• Self-monitoring the SEL skill in different settings (e.g., on the playground, at physical education class)</li> </ul>
Comprehensiveness: How many opportunities for explicit instruction within the intervention; additional research- or evidence-based practices can be incorporated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incorporate the SEL goal setting into check-in/check-out interventions</li> <li>• Incorporate a tangible reinforcer</li> <li>• Incorporate a group contingency; once all students in class meet the goal, everyone is reinforced</li> </ul>
Behavioral support: Inclusion of behavioral principles to support student learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incorporate behavior-specific praise when the student is meeting the goal in the classroom</li> <li>• Incorporate pre-correction prior to an opportunity for students to practice the SEL skill</li> <li>• Incorporate self-monitoring (if not already using)</li> <li>• Including more targeted feedback to students, both when they meet goals and do not meet goals</li> </ul>

Note. Intensification types described more in depth in L. S. Fuchs et al. (2018).

on students. Providing strong SEL instruction and support may help serve as a protective factor for students (Cipriano et al., 2020). Teachers will also need to be prepared to provide additional supports for students with and at risk of EBD, who may need more than classwide SEL instruction. Goal setting is one effective intervention for supporting the growth of students with and at risk of EBD (Mazzotti et al., 2013). Although goal setting is most often used to support the growth of academic and behavior skills, we believe that its adaptability and versatility also make it an ideal way to support SEL skill acquisition and development.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

This article was supported, in part, by the U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, Grant R324A180220, awarded to The University of Alabama. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent the views of the institute or the U.S. Department of Education.

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