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Hello, everyone, this is Katie Novak, and you're listening to the education Table, a micro podcast where we answer your questions about inclusive education in ten minutes or less. In today's episode, we're discussing the importance of firm goals. I'll share a story about the challenges of navigating without clear destination. Dive into the stats on the impact of grade level standards and high expectations, and offer strategies for setting firm goals in your learning environment. Let's get started. So imagine being on a leisurely hike in the woods without a clear destination. That was me once, along with my husband, Lon, and our sweet little cocker spaniel, Dixon. We started our hike thinking we would just explore and then see where the path took us. But as the day went on, we realized that we were totally lost. We had no map, no cell service, no destination.

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We started to get a little worried, and then the sun started setting and we only had a granola bar. And I was starting to think that we would have to be like an episode of *Alone* and that we were going to stay in there overnight. And it was really stressful. But obviously we got out. But it taught me the importance of having a really clear goal and a destination, even when you're talking about something as simple as a hike. So the importance of firm goals is really well documented in education. There's a lot of research that indicates that students who have access to really firm goals aligned to grade level standards and are held to really high expectations for those goals show significant improvements in their achievement.

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According to a study by the Education Trust, students who are exposed to grade level assignments and high expectations are more likely to accelerate and make really substantial academic gains. And there's this really cool study that found that schools where kids were consistently challenged and engaged with grade level content saw an increase in proficiency rates by 40% 40% growth by having really clear objectives aligned to grade level standards. There's another report from the National center for Education Statistics that highlights that students who are held to high expectations are much more likely to graduate on time and go on to pursue higher education. Specifically, when students are in schools with a really strong focus on grade level standards, graduation rates were 15% higher than schools that didn't really focus on high expectations in alignment with those grade level standards.

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So we know how important it is to have firm goals for students, but ultimately, how do we implement instruction that's effectively aligned to those goals? So it's going to be really important that when you're looking at grade level standards, first you separate them into content standards and methods standards and so here are some strategies that you can implement right away. One really great strategy is to identify the verb in the standard. Start by actually looking at the verb. For example, if the standard starts with explain, there's lots of different ways that students can explain. They could share their explanation in writing or in a presentation or using multimedia. The same approach can be applied to standards that start with words like analyze, describe, communicate, because these are really ambiguous verbs.

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And when we have words like analyze or explain, those are content standards, and we need really flexible methods for content standards. So once you know which of your standards are content standards, that means that the explanation is non negotiable. But the methods that students use to learn or share what they're learning can be really flexible. It's a little bit different when you have a method standard. So if a standard requires students to write, all students have to produce writing. But there are many ways to support students in preparing to write organizing their writing or drafting their work. All students, however, must ultimately produce a piece of writing. The same principle applies when you're solving problems in math. Students, of course, can use different methods and tools as they arrive at some solution and communicate how they solved it and what the solution is.

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But the end goal remains the same. So, again, the first strategy is determine if you're working with content standards or method standards, and that will determine how flexible your means can be. The next is to always use diagnostic assessments. When you start with a diagnostic assessment, it will help you to understand the variability in your classroom, but it also helps students in setting much more realistic goals so they understand what they're starting points are, and then they can make responsible choices about the pathways that they're really going to need to be supported and challenged. And sometimes you have all of this data and you're not quite sure what to do with it, feed it into artificial intelligence and say, this is the variability of my class. This is the firm goal.

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What sort of options and choices and pathways might students need to work towards those grade level standards? The last strategy is to leverage blended learning models. Blended learning is essentially a balance of really great teacher explicit instruction, online learning where students have access to these adaptive, flexible, transformative tools, and then in person learning, where they're working with manipulatives, and they're building relationships and they're communicating with each other. And one of the great models for this is station rotation. And what you can do is you can set up different stations where students are engaging in various activities. So one station might feature digital adaptive tools that allow students to kind of work at their own pace as they work towards the goal. Another might be focused on collaborative projects where students are working together, they're having discussions, they're building those future ready skills.

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And then you have a teacher led station where you can provide really targeted feedback and differentiated instruction for students whom are not at grade level mastery yet, those who are at grade level mastery, and then those who have already exceeded grade level mastery. And so in this, you're universally designing instruction. All of the stations are focused on the same standard, but students have all of these opportunities to leverage the best of what is available. And it's important, regardless of the strategies that we use, that we're always monitoring progress and adjusting the feedback that we provide to students and the pathways that we provide so that students can work towards those goals as needed. And this means that all students are working towards or past grade level standards in a way that allows them to be really successful.

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So to wrap things up, having firm goals is essential for guiding students toward success. By setting clear, achievable goals and providing flexible methods for reaching those firm goals, we can ensure that every single student has the pathways they need to be successful. The evidence is so clear, high expectations and grade level standards significantly boost student achievement, and they need to be driving universally designed instruction. Thank you so much for joining me at the education table. Be sure to check out the show notes for more resources on setting firm goals and flexible means. Until next time onward.