Educational Leadership

SMART Goals, SMART Schools

Setting goals that connect to the classroom and focus on student learning helps educators see, learn from, and communicate their results.

Jan O'Neill

It is fall, the beginning of a new school year in Verona, Wisconsin, a suburban school district just outside Madison. The teachers from
February 2000

Stoner Prairie (a K–2 school) and Savanna Oaks (a 3-5 school) meet for the first time this year to talk about setting specific goals that are strategic, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, and timebound—SMART. Wisely, the principals of the two schools, knowing that teachers get anxious about using data to target improvement goals, have encouraged all staff to set goals that are meaningful to them—as long as they focus on improving student learning.

The two schools, which are within walking distance of each other, have a 20 percent free and reduced lunch population and a wide range of student readiness to learn. The staff often share staff development time because their school goals are the same and the schools share support staff. This morning, after teaching the group how to use some simple but powerful planning and data tools, I listen from the back of the room as the teaching teams return from their small-group work to share their goals with one another.

Sharing Goals

The kindergarten teaching team from Stoner Prairie has set a goal of improving upper- and lower-case letter recognition to 80 percent mastery. The team members' classroom-based assessment results show that fewer than half their students meet this goal for upper-case letter recognition and only 10 percent meet the goal for lower-case letters. They talk about how they might experiment with flex grouping and team teaching to differentiate instruction.

Next, teachers in the 1st grade team remark that their goal builds on the kindergarten team's goal. Their focus is to improve students' phonemic awareness to an average of 90 percent on a dictated-sentence assessment. The Title I and reading specialists suggest instructional and program materials for both the kindergarten and the 1st grade teams. They all decide to work together closely over the next six months.

I notice the positive buzz in the room and mark by my watch that it is 3:00—usually a low energy point in the day.

The 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grade teams present their goals, which focus on reading and writing. The core knowledge charter school team, a school within Savanna Oaks, shares its goal: increasing math automaticity.

The final academic team, the 5th grade teachers, shares its goal: to increase the percentage of students using complete sentences on a written retelling assessment by 10 percent. They present bar graphs that show each class's current scores, with a combined average score across all classes of 15.8 items correct out of 20. The rest of the group debates whether this is the "right" goal given that the students may have more important gaps in their writing. But the 5th grade team stays firm: "This year they must learn to do this."

A pupil services team, made up of a guidance counselor, a psychologist, and a social worker, sets a goal of increasing student attendance by 50 percent for students who had been absent for seven days or more since the beginning of the school year. The group nods appreciatively; attendance has been a problem. The physical education team focuses on improving upper-arm strength for girls because the assessment data show that this group and skill are the weakest from kindergarten through 5th grade.

An interesting debate arises when the art teachers relay their Art SMART Goal: "Increasing by 10 percent the number of 5th grade students who meet or exceed expectations for drawing a realistic hand." A few classroom teachers decry the "mechanization of art," claiming, "It destroys art as an aesthetic process!" One art teacher replies, "We teach skills, too. It's important that students and their parents see this growth."

We note how goals build on one another to support the whole child's learning. Because reading and writing are key academic areas in which students in both schools need significant help, I comment that this synchronicity in goals will be good for students and will focus the schools' energy and resources. We all know that focusing on a shared goal almost always results in some kind of improvement.

What happens in these schools is beginning to happen in many schools across the country: Teachers take collective responsibility for improving student learning, and principals take responsibility for establishing school cultures where this can happen.

SMART Goals

SMART goals are used in strategic planning by government, industry, consulting groups, small businesses, and nonprofit organizations, and now in education. "The introduction of specific, measurable goals is among the most promising yet underused strategies we can introduce into school improvement efforts," Mike Schmoker tells us in *Results: The Key to Continuous School Improvement* (1996, p. 18). His advice is based on a comprehensive review of educational and organizational research, including compelling findings from Goodlad, Katzenbach and Smith, Rosenholtz, Calhoun, and Fullan. Citing Rosenholtz, Schmoker says that "'clear, measurable goals are the center to the mystery of school's success, mediocrity, or failure'" (p. 18).

As teachers, my colleagues and I at Quantum Learning Dynamics are concerned with doing what's right for our students. We care deeply and passionately about their academic, social,

and emotional well-being. In our work with teachers throughout the Midwest, we hear again and again that the real power of setting SMART goals is in learning whether teachers make a difference in student learning. As one teacher told us, "Feedback keeps me wanting to learn more. It makes my expectations for myself higher.

"SMART goals help us educators test the effectiveness of our instructional process and our programs. Another teacher commented, "I can quantify direct results as well as see them qualitatively in the children I work with." The community observes the benefit of its resource investments, and parents have confidence that their schools and teachers are "doing right" by their children.

The teachers who are responsible for implementing SMART goals also develop the goals. Teachers must commit to their goals, and the data for establishing the targets come from their review of multiple assessments. In schools that are ready to focus on a schoolwide goal, we encourage teachers to look at data that show the most significant learning gaps across the entire school.
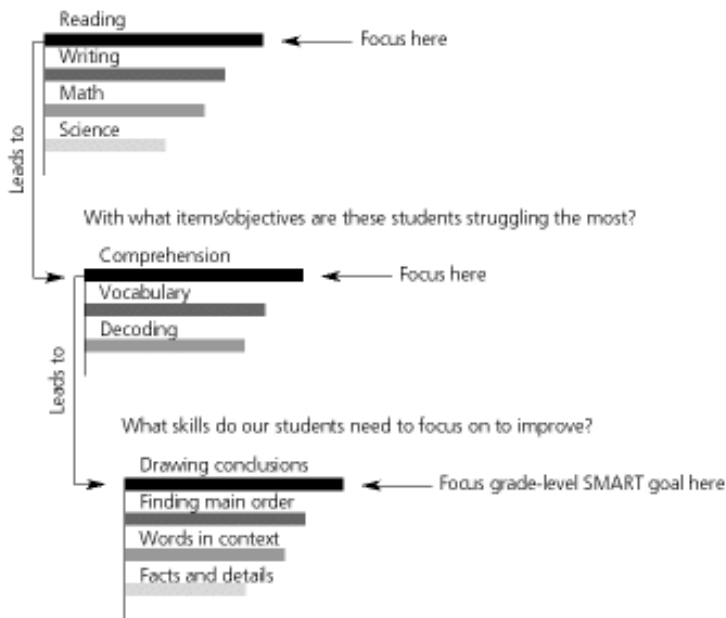
A useful tool is Pareto analysis (see fig. 1), which helps us focus on these gaps. The key is to break data into more specific parts in order of priority. Each category in a Pareto chart may be further analyzed and developed into its own Pareto chart. Action researcher Emily Calhoun (Sparks, 1999, p. 54) states, "I've seen as many as 11 goals in a school improvement plan. As a result, it's impossible for the school to achieve any of them."

Figure 1. An Example of a Pareto Analysis

An Example of a Pareto Analysis

In which academic areas are our students struggling the most?

Reading ← Focus here

Writing

Math

Science

Leads to

With what items/objectives are these students struggling the most?

Comprehension ← Focus here

Vocabulary

Decoding

Leads to

What skills do our students need to focus on to improve?

Drawing conclusions ← Focus grade-level SMART goal here

Finding main order

Words in context

Facts and details

By targeting the most problematic academic area and progressively breaking it into smaller elements, teachers can focus instruction where the most significant academic gains can occur.

The data from multiple measures can be narrowed with Pareto analysis so that a school can focus energies on just one or two learning improvement goals. When schools use Pareto analysis to narrow the goal choices, each individual grade, subject area, or department team can easily develop its own goals on the basis of student needs.

Setting Goals

Understanding the difference between process and results goals is important to setting learner-centered, effective SMART goals. Our field observations confirm what many educational researchers have found: Most school goals are process oriented—geared toward activities, programs, and instructional methods. Examples of process goals are developing a balanced literacy program for primary students, implementing an integrated math/science curriculum for incoming freshmen, and adopt a zero tolerance policy toward violence. We encourage placing these goals in the methods or strategies sections of action plans.

Results goals give us better feedback on how well we help students learn. Results goals are measured by a test score, a rubric system, or some other quantifiable tool or method. Examples include increasing numbers of students who are reading by the end of 3rd grade, reducing failure rate of incoming freshmen, and eliminating violent behavioral incidents.

To set goals, we suggest beginning with a discussion about what needs to be improved. If possible, teachers should reflect on data about student learning that show key gaps schoolwide. As an example, one school focused on critical-thinking skills because that was its

weakest area; another selected reading comprehension. If teachers aren't ready to plan schoolwide, they can set goals that focus on student learning in their particular area.

When we work with teachers, we talk about selecting goals that are informed—but not constrained—by data about how students currently perform. We suggest using item analysis of standardized tests or districtwide assessments, classroom assessments, and national research studies, coupled with good old-fashioned intuition and common sense.
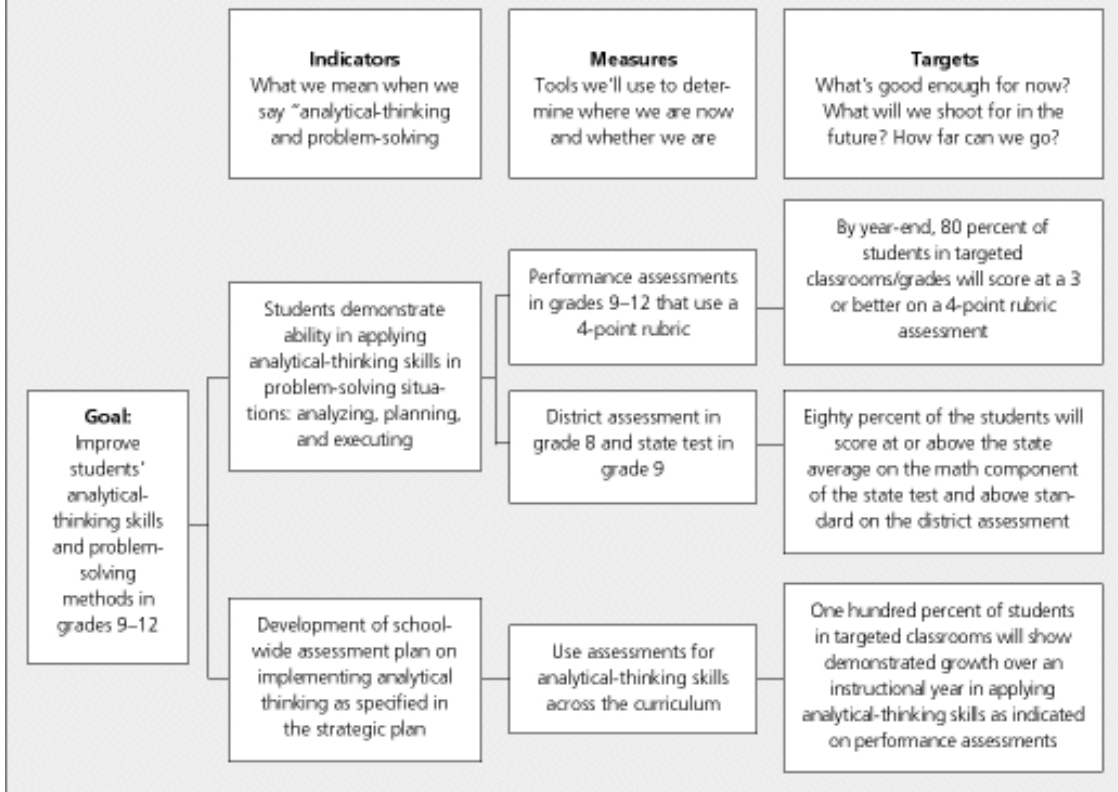
We encourage teachers to set specific targets that are both challenging and realistic, given time and resource constraints. In fact, there is great value in making rapid improvement through a series of attainable goals: Each time we achieve goals, we have new information that can lead to the next round of goal setting. Just as important, when we set goals that can be attained within a short period of time (three to six months), students, parents, and teachers reap the benefits of immediate feedback. For schools that are ready, involving students and parents in goal setting helps everyone feel ownership and pride in the goal's attainment, making celebrations of progress that much sweeter!

A tree diagram is useful for setting goals (see fig. 2). The results-oriented goal is in the far left-hand box. The next boxes are the indicators that the data will show when students achieve the goals. The measures boxes describe the assessment tools that teachers use to measure the indicators. Targets describe the specific amount of improvement needed. With the tree diagram, teachers ensure that goals are results-oriented, consider multiple indicators and measures, and establish specific targets for improvement. This planning tool helps us educators work through our thinking about a goal step-by-step.

Figure 2. SMART Goal: Tree Diagram

SMART Goal: Tree Diagram

Indicators	Measures	Targets
What we mean when we say "analytical-thinking and problem-solving	Tools we'll use to determine where we are now and whether we are	What's good enough for now? What will we shoot for in the future? How far can we go?

Goal: Improve students' analytical-thinking skills and problem-solving methods in grades 9–12

Students demonstrate ability in applying analytical-thinking skills in problem-solving situations: analyzing, planning, and executing

Performance assessments in grades 9–12 that use a 4-point rubric

By year-end, 80 percent of students in targeted classrooms/grades will score at a 3 or better on a 4-point rubric assessment

District assessment in grade 8 and state test in grade 9

Eighty percent of the students will score at or above the state average on the math component of the state test and above standard on the district assessment

Development of school-wide assessment plan on implementing analytical thinking as specified in the strategic plan

Use assessments for analytical-thinking skills across the curriculum

One hundred percent of students in targeted classrooms will show demonstrated growth over an instructional year in applying analytical-thinking skills as indicated on performance assessments

Goals Results

What happened to the teachers at the Verona schools? Last spring, I was invited back, along with parents and community members, to hear what teachers had learned. Each team, one after another, proudly presented its results with bar charts, histograms, Pareto diagrams, and other tools. In each case, the results were powerful, but the shared reflections spoke louder about the maturation of this professional learning community over the year.

The kindergarten team. By spring, 84 percent of students mastered all upper-case letters, and 73 percent mastered all lower-case letters. In the fall, the teachers had projected that younger children would score more poorly than older children, but they were surprised to discover that this was not the case. They did find, however, that their assessment tool needed improvement (*i*, *j*, and *k* were not differentiated well). Their final summary was, "We were never quite sure we were reaching everyone. Now we're feeling successful with *all* the kids!"

The 1st grade team. By spring, the average phonemic awareness score improved to 92 percent —a 35 percent gain. The teachers told the group that the goal approach showed them that both higher-achieving and struggling students could improve. One teacher commented that she felt responsible for the other teachers' students as well as for her own: "This is our safety net; we support one another." Another teacher said, "We chose this goal, worked on it together, and learned from one another."

The 5th grade team. All students showed improvement, but learning disabled (LD) students

made the greatest advancement. The teachers all agreed that having seen the results from their work, they felt "more hope" because their students made progress. They also wondered whether LD students simply had more to gain or whether "the LD teachers have some techniques and strategies they can teach us."

The teachers with lower overall class scores admitted that they had not emphasized writing skills as much as they could have and vowed to be more focused next time. The team decided that next year, teachers will use students' scores on multiple measures to select a goal on the basis of the greatest need.

The pupil services team. The team worked throughout the year with six groups of K–5 students, meeting with them daily to stress the importance of good attendance, helping them organize themselves to come to school, implementing check-ins at school, and conducting periodic home visits. The results: Students who had missed eight days at the beginning of the year missed only five more; students who had missed 21.5 days missed only 9.5 more; students who had missed 15 days missed only 3.5 more by the end of the year.

"It felt good to see these results," the team members said. One parent in the audience commented, "My daughter really looked forward to check-ins in the morning." A teacher said, "I noticed that parents were checking in more frequently with me." The team told the group that it will continue this program next year and share methods and results with the rest of the district schools.

The Art SMART team. The teachers shared before and after rubrics that showed drawings of hands and noted whether they did not meet, met, or exceeded expectations for realistic hand drawing. The postinstruction drawings for the 5th grade class showed 50 percent fewer students in the *does not meet* category and a 19 percent increase in the *exceeds expectations* category. The art teachers smiled as they shared these results, stressing the skills involved in realistic drawing. The group gave them a round of applause.

Learning From Goals

The use of SMART goals in a school community that honors learning and experimentation can be exciting for all involved. Staff, students, parents, community members, and administrators use data-driven goals that challenge existing paradigms, generate lively discussions, and result in improved teaching and learning.

Many educators would be the first to say that setting specific, strategic, measurable goals was new to their practice and took them out of their comfort zone. But they also said that knowing whether their practices are truly making a difference for their students makes the process worthwhile. As one teacher told us, "I may not always like the results, but I am learning. And each time I get better, so will my students."

References

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