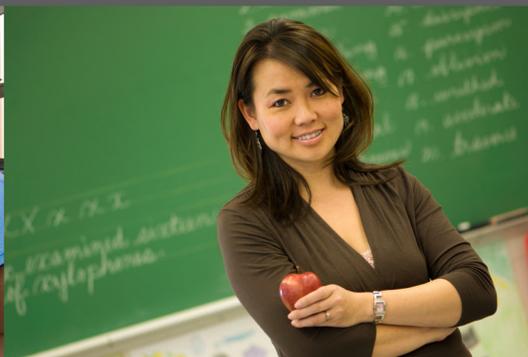


ON TARGET

A QUARTERLY report by Targeted Leadership Consulting

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Introduction

Dear Colleagues,

The Spring edition of our On Target Report looks at goal setting at one San Diego elementary school. Monterey Ridge Elementary School (MRES) in the Poway Unified School District employs four different levels of goal setting. This report will look at how MRES uses goal setting – from school-wide to individual student goals – to target student achievement and create a culture of shared leadership.

Following is a tool that your district or school may find useful in looking at goal setting. In addition to a series of guiding questions, you will find examples of four different goals which can be used to spark conversation.

Jeff Nelsen

Using Goal Setting To Build An Inclusive Learning Culture

By: Rich Newman, Ed.D.

My son's favorite pastime is one shared by many of today's youth - playing video games. Recently, we sat together as he played his newest video game, and as he maneuvered the character through a whole host of obstructions, he shared with me that he had set himself a goal of making it all the way through the current level. To accomplish this goal, according to him, he needed to improve his ability to fly the rocket through the roadblocks that were set up either to distract him from reaching his goal or to make him crash. He could recall his high score in the game, the improvements he had made in his skill level and his next steps toward improving his skills. More importantly, he could articulate which specific skills he was good at it, and which parts of the game were difficult for him. His excitement about his destination was not just about the end result of moving to a new level, but that he had control over achieving that result. His path for success was clear to him.

Setting goals that make a difference

Both districts and individual schools have a very clear set of goals and skills for their students to achieve and master. In fact, except in rare cases, districts and schools develop very detailed goals they wish to pursue. In most cases, unfortunately, only the teachers and staff at a particular school or district level office

are aware of the roadmap. And yet, we know that true transformation in schools can only happen when there is a clear target that is known *and* owned by those who are implementing the goal and to those who are striving to achieve it.

Goal setting also provides a very important strategy for building a culture of shared leadership. One of the core challenges at every school is determining how to meet each child's needs and who at the site makes that determination. Goal setting is about sharing leadership between the principal, teachers and students in determining one of the most important aspects of school – setting the goals that determine the roadmap for increasing student achievement. As Spillane (2004) suggests, developing a culture where leadership is shared or distributed “involves unpacking the interdependencies among leaders and followers in leadership practice” (p.5). What better way to do this than through setting goals based on the one area that connects everyone – curriculum.

To catalyze improvements in student learning, schools and districts focus on a variety of strategies and techniques. Mountains of data are reviewed, results from standardized tests are analyzed, goals are set and a course for success is determined. Once this arduous process is complete, what happens to the newly created set of goals is often a mystery. Who is responsible for achieving the goals? Who knows about them and checks on their progress? For some, the task of developing the goals becomes the goal itself, while for others, goals provide the fuel and oxygen needed to implement instructional strategies to help students achieve success.

“ Setting goals is a first step, not the last, in transforming the way teaching and learning occurs for students. ”

Setting goals is a first step, not the last, in transforming the way teaching and learning occurs for students. In fact, to develop goals that are usable and accessible for all stakeholders, especially students, we need to “begin with clear statements of the intended learning – clear and understandable to everyone, including students” (Chappuis, Chappuis and Stiggins, 2009). We also need to ensure that goals connect with our most important stakeholders – our students – and the work they are focused on learning.

Goal Setting at Multiple Levels

Monterey Ridge Elementary in San Diego, CA has embraced the use of goal setting across the school landscape. This elementary school employs four different levels of goal setting that connect from school-wide to individual student goals. This connection creates a synergy in all the work being done on campus. School-wide goals serve as barometers

to periodically check the progress of the school as a whole. These goals are checked after each trimester, just like the progress reports students take home to share with their parents, and provide an opportunity for the school to change course, readjust priorities, make modifications or target specific standards where necessary.

Grade level goals, one level down from school-wide goals, allow each grade to target efforts based on identified areas of growth. In the same vein, classroom level goals allow each classroom to set targets based on an analysis of their students' work. This also provides an opportunity for classrooms to target and calibrate within a grade how they are improving the skill levels of their respective students and how this contributes to the grade and school level goal. Both grade level and classroom goal setting provide an opportunity for teachers to rely on one another, share best practices and collaborate on planning next steps and lessons.

Finally, individual students set goals based on their own specific areas of need. At this level, and that of the classroom, students are intimately involved in helping determine what the needs of their class are and what they are personally striving to achieve. This process, which takes place in a discussion between student and teacher, ensures that the goals set across the school are tangible and known to the students.

These four levels of goal setting are powerful tools when used to connect the work of improving student achievement across the school. First, goal setting ties the school together by ensuring that the responsibility for learning does not belong to just one teacher, but rather to all teachers. This is

synonymous to building a culture of distributive leadership whereby all staff are engaged in making important decisions (Spillane, 2006; Spillane, Diamond, and Jita, 2003; Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond, 2004). It also ensures that the ownership for successes or setbacks belongs to the entire staff.

In California, like many states, annual high stakes state tests are administered only to grades second and above. This means that the work of kindergarten and first grade are often left out of the discussion on measurable improvement, and the responsibility for achieving at high levels, at least on the surface, remains on all other grades. Having goals that are shared and revisited as a whole staff ensures that everyone is not only part of the results discussion, but invested in the success of the school as a whole. Last, and perhaps most important, this level of goal setting ensures that all staff share ownership for both the learning that takes place on campus and determining the ensuing results.

Goal setting is one of the most important strategies and routines that can be put in place to fundamentally shape the practice of leadership in a school and more pointedly achieve results. James Spillane (2004) points out the fundamental importance of sharing ownership over the critical leadership aspects of the school.

"From a distributed perspective, tools and organizational routines along with other aspects of the situation are not simple accessories that allow leaders to practice more effectively or efficiently" (Spillane, 2004), but are also a way of making a school more successful and developing a strong connection between stakeholders.

Goal Setting Saves Time

On the surface, developing multiple levels of goals, especially goals that involve student participation, may appear to be a long and laborious process. One of the most common reasons given for not creating goals, ignoring them once completed, or not engaging students in the process, is a lack of time. Time is arguably one of the most precious resources at any school and is always in short supply. Finding ways to help develop the ability of both staff and students to focus on what is important to teach and learn, however, is one of the most powerful tools we have in our educational arsenal. Goal setting is about setting priorities and zeroing in on teaching and learning priorities. When viewed in this vein, goal setting is actually a time saving tool that helps place everyone in charge of their own learning.

Take, for example, a discussion that occurred in a second grade classroom between a teacher and student. The teacher sat with the student and reviewed the results of his current MAP (Measures of Academic Performance) test. The conversation begins by asking the student what areas he thinks he needs to improve in, and why. The student shares that he needs to improve his reading comprehension, and the teacher then engages the student in a discussion about strategies that would help him improve this skill. The strategies discussed include reading books in his appropriate lexile level, taking a reading counts test after completing each book, writing a summary after each chapter, completing an individualized web-based program

called Compass Learning that focuses on reading comprehension, writing a response to literature, or using a highlighter to mark particular passages and words that he needs help with or that are important to revisit for meaning.

“Goal setting is one of the most important strategies and routines that can be put in place to fundamentally shape the practice of leadership in a school and more pointedly achieve results.”

Once the student, with the guidance of his teacher, chooses two to three of the strategies he would like to incorporate into achieving his goals, he lists them on a goal sheet and then sets a goal of using these strategies to improve his reading comprehension. The completed goal sheet heads home to be reviewed with his parents. The student then tracks his reading and scores on the two computer-based programs mentioned above and works on choosing “just right” books at his lexile level. The whole process between student and teacher takes about 4-5 minutes. The powerful effects of setting these goals, however, will more than make up for the short expenditure

of teacher time because the student has now developed a clear path for success and is developing a level of ownership over his learning.

Just as important, this process helps the student set priorities, remain motivated and stay focused on specific skills while providing purpose and direction for both student and teacher. It also helps students recognize specific strengths and target areas to both improve and further develop. Setting and achieving goals also gives students and teachers a sense of ownership and pride over their work. It would have been very easy for this teacher to overlook the process of meeting with students to set goals. After all, her class size has increased by over 30% in just two years. She has learned from experience, however, that taking the time to set student-focused

goals provides direction and focus for both student and teacher.

Sharing Ownership Over Goals

In a video game, successfully passing one level creates the determination to try the next more difficult level. When my son is able to finish a level on his video game, he seems to become more optimistic about his success. He is also more likely to set an ambitious goal for the next one, and even appears to become more resilient in the face of failure. In part, perhaps, because he knows that with a bit of grit and determination he will eventually succeed. The same can be true of teachers and students if they have ownership over their own goals and a clear roadmap for both the

journey and destination.

One kindergarten class at Monterey Ridge highlights this idea well. As in many kindergarten classes, the teacher's lesson provides direct instruction on the elements of writing well-crafted sentences. Once students begin to write, it is obvious that they all have individual needs and strengths. If you look closely at the students' writing journals, you will find that each has an individual writing goal set with guidance from their teacher. As you sit with each child, they are able to articulate what they are working on to improve their writing. Some share their need to work on two finger spacing between words, others reveal that they are working on adding details to their stories, while others state that their

SYNERGY OF EFFORTS



goal is to use capital letters or punctuation where necessary. What becomes apparent is that the students are self-directed and taking ownership over their learning. They know what the end result is and what they need to do to succeed. They are beginning to learn to celebrate their own success rather than simply waiting for the praise of their teacher.

As you move up through the grades and goal setting increases in complexity, the students' ownership over their own learning remains consistently strong. One fourth grade student, for example, shared that his goal was to improve the voice in his writing. When pushed to clarify what that meant, he shared that in his writing he is "focused on adding details, adding my opinion, and connecting the piece I am writing to my real life." This is important not only because the student is able to articulate his goal and what is needed to succeed, but because the culture has shifted to allow our most important stakeholders - our students - to have ownership over their learning and see the end result.

One of the most intriguing and important cultural changes Monterey Ridge has seen with increased goal setting is the depth of conversation that takes place on all levels of curriculum and the way students are able to articulate what they are learning, what areas they need to improve in and why they are focused on a specific skill or subject. In fact, conversations between student and teacher, principal and teacher or student and principal are now very targeted and specific. Conversations have gone from six feet wide and six inches deep to six feet deep and six inches wide because everyone is speaking the same language and discussing specific skills.

This same level of depth can also be seen at grade level meetings. At these meetings teams discuss the results of their latest MAP testing, which is a formative assessment given each trimester. The results are used to guide instruction. At a fifth grade meeting, for example, each teacher shared their analysis of the goals they set and then the team calibrated how their respective classes did compared to one another. Throughout this discussion, they shared ideas and strategies that worked well or proved unsuccessful.

While next steps are plotted and goals are reassessed, teacher conversation is robust and guided by a sense of responsibility and ownership over all students. The importance of discussions such as this, and sharing goals both met and missed, is made even more complex and necessary by the fact that students switch between teachers for different subject areas across all grade levels. Goal setting and revisiting current goals has a strong influence on creating a school culture where teachers, as a whole, share responsibility for all students.

Communicating Results

Periodically connecting goal setting results is a critical element toward driving a connection across campus. Sharing results gives everyone at the school site - principals, teachers, students, and parents - a broader framework for understanding difficult problems and complex relationships within the school - thereby creating a culture of inclusiveness. By deepening everyone's understanding of the actual work being undertaken at the school site, including progress to date, the entire school com-

munity becomes better equipped to promote a stable and nurturing learning environment.

A midyear progress report shared with all staff, for instance, gives insights into how each grade level is progressing, but also allows grades to see connections between one another. A recent review of the midyear progress report at Monterey Ridge revealed that grade level math groupings have been very successful. In fact, each grade is on target to meet their year-end goal. Also revealed were the specific areas that needed additional support. This became a topic of conversation at a Professional Growth day thereby connecting and aligning the work within, and across, grade levels.

Additionally, as grade level teams tried new and innovative strategies, they were able to see and share their results on a timely basis. Consequently, goal setting has allowed for more innovation because of the ability to change course based on the results of current work, and progress towards the original goals.

Connecting Parents to Goals

We have all, at one point in time, had our child come home from school and answer the question "What did you learn at school today?" with an emphatic "Nothing!" Even worse is when that is followed with the question "What did you do at school today?" and the reply remains "Nothing!" Little can be more discouraging to a parent or teacher than hearing these words. In many ways, however, it makes sense

that students share these thoughts because often times the work they are doing does not feel connected to their real lives.

Ask any child playing a video game what they are doing, and they can probably tell you with intricate detail about the activity in which they are engaged, including the names of every character, obstacle and event in the game. The child knows exactly what he is trying to accomplish and where he is trying to go in the game. Similarly, once students set a goal directly connected to their current work, they know exactly where they are heading.

Ask the same student in the kindergarten class mentioned above, whose goal was to use punctuation, to explain what he did toward achieving his writing goal, and you will get a very different answer than "Nothing!" In fact, he will likely be able to share with you the specific sentences he worked reworked. Students have specific targets that they feel connected to and about which they can share progress. Formulating goals changes the conversation not just within the school, but outside as well. Once parents are made aware of their children's goals, they become more engaged and able to help their child by asking questions that connect to their child's learning.

Finding the Right Path to Success

The path each school takes to the promised land of student achievement is often very different. One element, however, binds each school -- demystifying the work we undertake each and every day to ensure each child's success. By setting goals across the school and providing students and parents an invitation

to own a piece of the responsibility, we ensure a deeper level of understanding of the complex work that is taking place across the school community. Everyone knows where they are heading and can clearly see the path upon which they are about to embark.

Connecting the school community through the common language of goal setting provides a way to create a dialogue where the work becomes a collaborative process, and where the responsibility for learning belongs to all stakeholders.

Conclusion

Just as a staff needs to know what they are striving to achieve, so do students. We set goals in schools for a simple reason -- to know what we are trying to achieve, and to be explicitly clear about our path toward success. Surprisingly, video games offer us a few important strategies to think about in terms of learning. They give students information "on-demand" as the need to develop certain skill becomes necessary, and the information is given in the context of the game being played, where it applies directly to the player's purpose and goal, and makes sense for achieving success. While the immediacy of success in schools cannot be compared to that of a video game, nor would I attempt to do so, the fact that our students and staff need to be able to set tangible goals that connect to a related purpose is key. In fact, our students may need this compass even more as it is they who will ultimately be responsible for answering questions, taking tests, and retaining the skills and knowledge they learned in school to be productive citizens. ■

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About the Author

Rich Newman Ed.D, is currently the principal of Monterey Ridge Elementary School in the Poway Unified School District. He has worked at the school, district, university and national level and served as a program officer at The Wallace Foundation, where he helped lead a large scale education leadership initiative. Dr. Newman was recently awarded the prestigious Author E. Hughes Career Achievement Award from the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

School Level

Analyze your school level data and determine a specific area of focus. Guiding questions: What area across the school and/or within sub-groups should be the target? What data supports your decision? Choose an area that can be leveraged to improve student achievement.

Grade Level

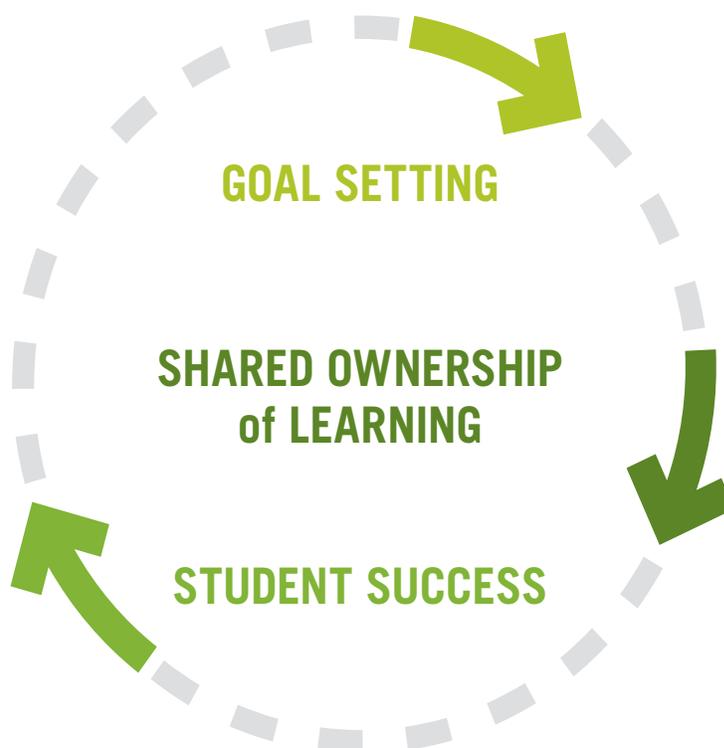
Think about how the focus of the grade level can best be leveraged to support the school-wide goal. Guiding questions: What specific content areas will be the focus? For example, if reading comprehension is the school-wide goal, determine if the grade level needs improvement in literal comprehension or interpretive comprehension. Make sure your goals are measurable.

Classroom Level

After analyzing classroom data, focus on the following questions to support the grade level goal: What specific instructional activities do I need to put in place to ensure my students' success? How do I share the data in a student friendly way and engage students in developing a classroom goal? How will we know when we achieve it? How will we celebrate successes?

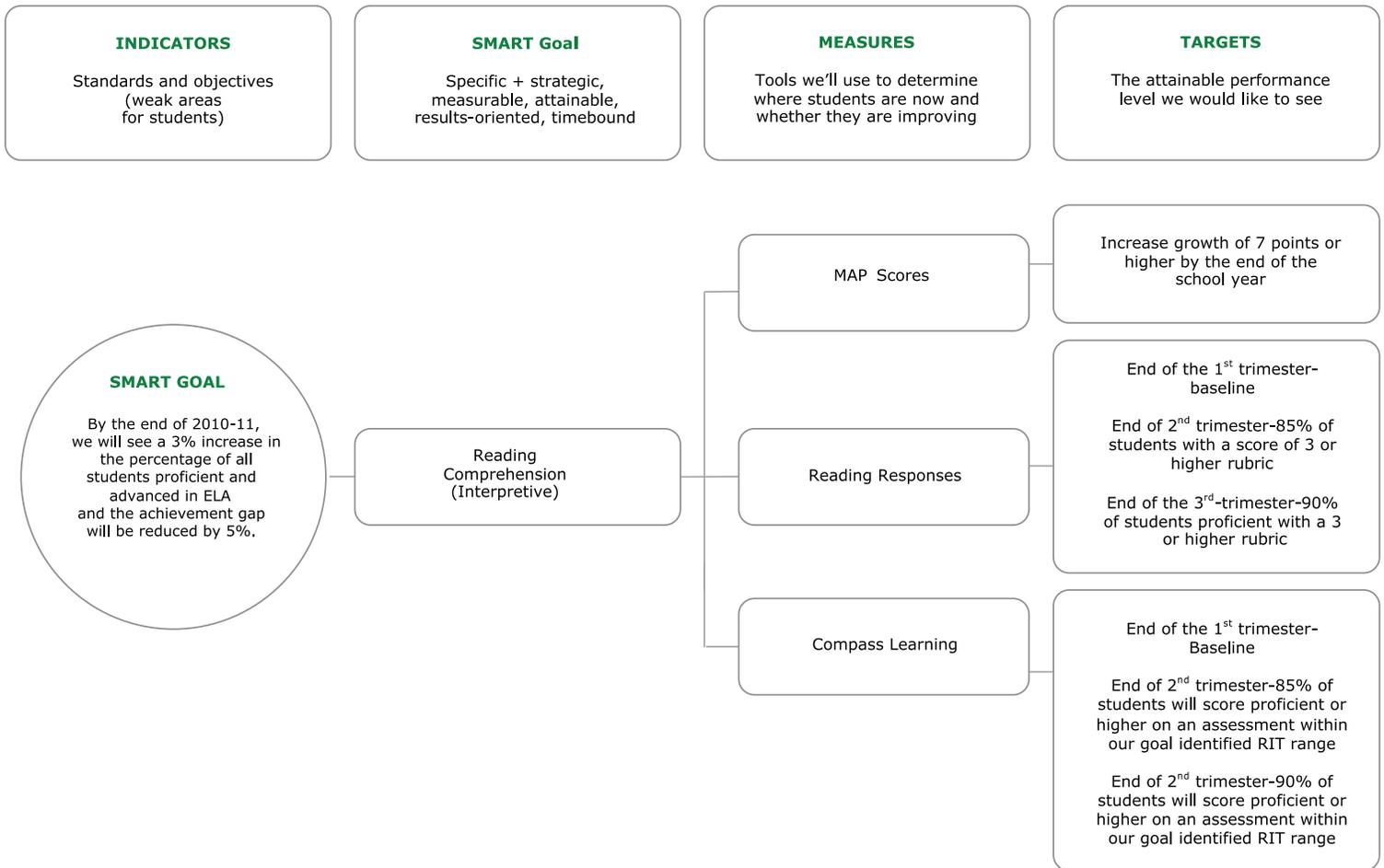
Student Level

Use the following questions to guide students in the development of their goals: What subject do I want to focus on? What do I need to do to improve my own learning in this area? What are the specific steps I must take to achieve my goal? How will I know when I am successful? Who will help and support me along this path?



A TOOL FOR LEADERS

Tree Diagram for SMART Reading Goal (K-5)



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