NWEA Guidance on the Creation of Student Learning Objectives

Introduction

Over the past few years, federal and state education policies have shifted to require teachers to set student growth goals. This was intended, in part, to focus more attention on and strengthen accountability for improving student outcomes. These goals are typically part of a teacher evaluation process that combines a teacher's attainment of student growth goals with observations of the teacher's performance. Some evaluation systems also require teacher professional development goals. These policies then determine a teacher's rating based on a pre-determined combination of the student growth goals and the observations, while putting minimal (if any) weight on any professional development goals (CDE, 2014). Since the majority of teachers do not teach in subjects and grades where students are required to take state tests (Prince, 2009), these teachers are required to set student growth goals using other rigorous evidence of student growth. These goals are often referred to as Student Learning Objectives (SLOs).

As more states adopt policies on SLOs, various national organizations, including the US Department of Education (USDOE), have produced reports summarizing SLO features and best practices (Lacireno-Paquet et al., 2014). Although the specific definition of the SLO process varies across states, the USDOE report (2014) defines the SLO process as follows:

> A participatory method of setting measurable goals, or objectives, based on the specific assignment or class, such as the students taught, the subject matter taught, the baseline performance of the students, and the measurable gain in student performance during the course of instruction. (p. 1)

In 2014, Northwest Evaluation Association™ (NWEA™) published "NWEA Guidance on the Use of Student Assessment Data in Educator Evaluation Systems" (NWEA, 2014). That guidance was created in response to policy trends which call for an increasing emphasis on the role test results play in the evaluations for teachers. In the guidance, NWEA described some things educators should consider when student test results are used as a primary component of a teacher evaluation system. In support of SLOs, NWEA offered the following general guidance:

> We strongly encourage district leaders to work directly with their teachers to develop student learning objectives that do consider the actual subject taught by a teacher, and if appropriate, potentially include the use of grade or school-level measures of student improvement. If educators can actively collaborate in determining how test results are used, this should help make certain that evaluations are as fair as possible, and that student learning remains at the forefront of all decisions that are made. (p. 3)

Of course, creating meaningful SLOs is not a simple endeavor. In general, the creation of SLOs requires:

- An understanding of how setting goals can improve educator performance;
- A moderate level of assessment literacy for teachers and administrators;
- A commitment to collaborative discussions between teachers and principals within the SLO-setting process; and,
- A similar level of challenge across all the SLOs created, as well as similarity between the difficulty of SLOs and difficulty of achieving the results determined by other means (e.g., value-added ratings generated with state test data).

Not only do the definitions of SLOs vary across the country, the requirements for the content of SLOs vary as well, with some more aligned than others with the body of research on how goal setting can improve performance. This document focuses on the research, policies, and practices necessary for appropriate development and implementation of SLOs.

Research on Goal Setting

With the increased emphasis now placed on the use of SLOs in the evaluation of teacher performance, a question one might ask is: Should we expect a meaningful change in teacher performance, and therefore, improved rates of student learning simply because teachers set goals? The 45 years of research on this point is clear—teacher goal setting can measurably improve teacher performance and outcomes for students (Locke, 2013). However, the research is also clear that simply having goals will not result in a meaningful change in a teacher's performance. If implemented poorly, goal setting will not provide the benefits that research has shown are possible.

To understand the potential benefits of goal setting, there are a number of studies that offer interesting findings. For example, in 2004 the Community Training and Assistance Center (CTAC) found that a teacher setting what CTAC defined to be a high-quality goal was associated with higher average student achievement (we will define what research considers a "high-quality goal" in the next section). Further, a teacher setting and meeting goals was also associated with higher average student achievement. In a subsequent 2013 study, CTAC reported that the implementation of SLOs is associated with a 12% to 13% improvement in the achievement growth rate of students. This magnitude of improvement is consistent with the broader body of research on this topic (Locke, 2002; Locke, 2013; Wegge, 2013).

Another notable finding is that when goal setting is done well, it can lead to a cycle of continuous improvement for teachers. By successfully attaining goals, most teachers feel rewarded, which leads them to believe they can accomplish more with their students. With this strengthened belief in themselves, teachers are more willing to commit to new and more difficult goals, and the cycle of improvement begins again (Locke, 2013).

Attributes of High-Quality Goals

Research shows that high-quality goals have two defining characteristics: their **specificity** and their **difficulty**. Specificity refers to how specific the goal is as well as what the goal is specifying, and difficulty addresses a combination of what a teacher's target is and how long the teacher has to achieve it. To the first point, having a specific goal that clearly states what is to be achieved is more likely to lead to positive results than an ambivalent goal that simply says "do your best." For simple tasks, goals specifying measurable outcomes like "increase the average number of widgets you make in one day" can be effective. However, teaching is not a simple task, in part due to the level of control a teacher has over student learning outcomes. For instance, in some settings like manufacturing, an employee may have significant control over the factors that can improve efficiency. In education, the teacher can strive to establish optimal learning conditions and supports to enable learning, but it is ultimately the students who are in control of their own learning.

As tasks become more complex, *learning goals* are significantly better at improving performance than goals specifying outcome targets (Locke, 2013). A learning goal is a specific goal for a person to learn how to do something new or better that will result in a better outcome. Locke also shows, with complex tasks, goals that only specify outcome targets and goals that simply say "Do your best" are associated with approximately the same low level of performance improvement. A specific learning goal might be: "*By June 1, the teacher will implement ten new formative assessment techniques that were modeled in our school's professional development program.*" Learning goals are not only significantly more effective at improving teacher and principal performance, they also help improve overall school performance as well. (Porter, 2013; Sinnema, 2012). Learning goals are usually more closely aligned with professional development goals than the Student Learning Objectives that always require student outcome measures.

With education policies requiring student outcome based SLOs, a bridge is needed between student outcome measures and teacher learning goals – collaborative inquiry can be one such bridge. A collaborative inquiry process progresses through various stages and tasks including: identifying a student learning problem and goal, verifying causes, generating solutions, and taking action and monitoring results (Love, 2008). It is through such a process that a teacher can create a learning goal whose achievement should influence attainment of student outcome goals. By establishing both the required SLO and an aligned learning goal, and focusing primarily on the attainment of the learning goal, the effectiveness of the teacher should improve and the SLO will have a greater likelihood of being met.

The difficulty of a goal matters for two reasons: 1) to improve the performance of the teacher, and 2) to ensure fair and equitable evaluations across teachers. When considering the difficulty of a goal in the context of improving a teacher's performance, difficulty is not on an absolute scale, but is determined by the perception of each individual teacher. Research has not provided a precise way to define the optimal difficulty, but we can envision using peer performance or historical data to determine whether a goal is too easy or too difficult to attain over a given period of time. As an example, if a teacher sets a goal to learn four new formative assessment techniques over the entire school year, and the historical performance of all teachers in the school indicates that 95% of teachers who participated in formative assessment professional development surpassed this target, then it is reasonable to think that this goal may be too easy.

Another way to think about goal difficulty is to ask the question, "Can the teacher envision a plan to achieve this goal?" If a teacher struggles to identify how he or she can accomplish a goal, then the goal may be too difficult. With that said, care should be taken to ensure there is not too much consideration to individual teacher circumstances when determining difficulty. For example, a poor past track record of results for a teacher is not necessarily a circumstance that deserves significant consideration in setting goals. More emphasis should be placed on classroom and student circumstances and less on the teacher themselves other than if they are an early career teacher. When multiple goals are written so that they encompass both student outcomes and learning goals, it's the overall difficulty of the goal combination that matters. Teachers must believe that the attainment of the goals is a challenge but not overwhelming if performance is to benefit (Masuda, 2014).

The perceived difficulty of the goal itself is also impacted by how far into the future the goal is focused. If accomplishing the goal will take a substantial amount of time, short-term goals are also needed. Of course, what is considered "substantial" and how "short-term" the goals should be is a judgment call, since research is not conclusive in these areas (Locke, 2013). However, it is reasonable to structure these short-term goals so that they are supportive of the attainment of the overall goal while still being appropriately challenging (Masuda, 2014). In our example learning goal of implementing ten new formative assessment techniques stated above, if that goal was established at the beginning of the school year, a short-term goal that could be established in support of the year-long goal could be something like, "*By December 15, the teacher will implement four new formative assessment techniques as modeled in our school's professional development program.*" With goals such as these, teachers should be able to understand exactly what is expected of them (**specificity**), and should feel challenged and reasonably confident that they can attain these goals with focused effort for an established period of time (**difficulty**).

A second aspect of difficulty also must be considered since SLOs are used as part of a high stakes, formal teacher evaluation process: the perceived and actual fairness of the evaluation process across teachers. The SLO goal setting process should not produce results that hold some teachers (particularly those evaluated by value-added measures on the state test) more accountable than other teachers. It can be problematic if some teachers within a building and grade have goals whose difficulty are substantively different from their peers. A value-added process is statistically designed to distribute the ratings of teachers and identify teachers at the high and low ends of performance. There is nothing inherent in the SLO process that does the same thing. It is the difficulty of the goal, along with the courage of the evaluator to differentiate the ratings that provides the similar distribution and therefore the fairness and equity for all.

Participatory Process

The impact a goal has on improving performance is also impacted by the level of commitment a teacher has to his or her goals. If the teacher trusts the principal and if there is a perception of fairness in the goal-setting and evaluation processes, then participation by the teacher in setting the goal improves the teacher's commitment to the goal (Sholihin, 2011). Recall, the USDOE definition stressed the importance of involving teachers in the goal setting process, noting that the SLO process should be "participatory." However, in practice, this may not always be the case.

For example, district administrators may require all teachers to have the same goal, or principals may choose to evaluate all teachers on a school-wide student improvement goal. In both cases, there may be limited participation by teachers and therefore their commitment to attaining the goal will be less than if they were actively involved in the goal-setting process. School-wide goals also don't consider the difficulty level that is optimal or appropriate for individual teachers and their students, and do not ensure fairness across all teachers. We can, however, envision a grade level or teacher team process where there is enough participation and appropriate differentiation of goal difficulty to reap the benefits that come with goal setting.

Another approach to improving overall grade or school performance is to set goals tailored to each teacher as part of their evaluation, and set very challenging goals for a grade or a school as "stretch goals" outside of the evaluation process. The term "stretch goals" was coined by Jack Welch during his time as CEO of General Electric. His intent was to spur innovation and creativity within groups of employees; as a result stretch goals generally are not used in education to determine an employee's summative evaluation. This use of stretch goals in this way in schools is consistent with its original use and provides direction and focus without a fear of significant negative consequences should the stretch goals be missed (Locke, 2013).

It is the teacher's participation with their evaluator in setting challenging goals that are appropriate for their context that make the use of SLOs beneficial and fair. Without this opportunity to adjust for specific or unique circumstances faced by each teacher, the full power of goal setting will not be harnessed, and the overall evaluation system will miss an opportunity to help teachers enter into a cycle of continuous improvement based on their own success.

Setting Challenging Goals Requires Assessment Knowledge

There are four key assessment-related areas that require consideration when using assessment data as part of a teacher evaluation process (NWEA, 2014):

1. Test Selection
2. Proficiency vs. Growth
3. Alignment of Content Assessed and Content Taught
4. Context in Goal Setting

All of these are necessary considerations when setting a SLO that includes specific student growth targets. Both the teacher and his or her administrator approving the SLO require an appropriate level of assessment knowledge so that together they are able to appropriately consider all four of

these areas during the SLO development process. Particularly important in determining specific student growth targets as required by many SLO policies is the appropriate utilization of context. NWEA describes types of context that should be considered as (2014):

1. Historical – How have my students improved in prior years?
2. Similar Students – What level of growth have I observed for students similar to mine?
3. Classroom/School – What challenges or issues are present in my classroom or school that may impact the amount of improvement shown?
4. Track record established by peers within the school or district.

Here are some examples of the depth of understanding required: One metric often used by NWEA partners in their SLOs is the percent of students meeting or exceeding their growth projections. These projections are based on means in our student growth norms so on average, approximately half of all students are going to show more growth than their growth projections, and the other half are going to show less growth. Said another way, since the student growth projections are set at the average for similar students, one would roughly expect the typical teacher working with typical students in a typical setting to have approximately 50% of students meeting their growth projections.

We have worked with districts that have identified 75% or more of students meeting or exceeding their growth projection as the district's uniform benchmark for what is considered "effective" teacher performance. Often that percentage was chosen without any consideration for the prior performance of students in the district as a "one-size-fits-all" approach. While this 75% benchmark might be appropriate for some groups of students (and for some teachers), it likely isn't going to be appropriate for all students and all teachers (Jensen, 2013).

Some states require teachers to set goals for each student in their class with the teacher's rating dependent on the percentage of students who meet their individual goals. Metrics like the growth index and the conditional growth percentile can assist in setting individual student level goals. Since student growth across the country is normally distributed, 50% of students grow between the 25th and 75th percentile. Since teacher ratings are substantially normative, meaning that teacher ratings compare one teacher to another, growing students within a range where the bulk of student's grow is one way to view typical teacher performance.

When setting a student learning goal, learning in both an overall subject and in one area may be warranted. If there is a clear need to improve the ability to manipulate fractions, goals should be set to improve in both fractions and mathematics. If a goal is set for fractions alone, performance in other areas of mathematics may suffer due to an increased focus of time and energy on fractions. By having a goal on overall mathematics as well, the tendency to sacrifice other areas to attain the fractions goal is balanced.

Recommendations

Based on the existing research, NWEA has three broad recommendations educators should consider in the development of SLOs:

1. **Keep student learning as the priority.** Rather than creating goals solely containing measured student growth as the outcome target, use the amount of desired student growth as a starting point for formative and collaborative conversations about what a teacher needs to learn or do differently to achieve that target. From these conversations, establish both outcome and learning goals and focus primarily on the attainment of the learning goal. The administrators should then offer the supports and provide the feedback needed for the teacher to reach their goals. If as much emphasis as possible is placed on the learning goals while still complying with state regulations, teacher performance will improve and students will benefit.
2. **Ensure teachers and administrators have adequate assessment knowledge.** Choosing the appropriate measures and metrics within a context can be somewhat complex. Making sure both teachers and administrators have adequate knowledge about these issues through professional development or other supports is needed to ensure that the choices that are made reinforce the focus on improving student outcomes while maintaining fairness to teachers.
3. **Treat each classroom situation uniquely, while recognizing the need to have similar expectations for all teachers.** Allow for flexibility in the goals that are set based on a variety of contextual variables including the students that the teacher will teach, the teacher's past results, the results of other similar students and teachers, how long the teacher has been in the classroom, and characteristics of the school itself. At the same time the difficulty of each goal needs to be reasonably consistent across all teachers so that there is a fair and equitable process to determining a teacher's rating. This allows each teacher to be challenged, to grow, to succeed, and to continue to improve while working in a high stakes context.

By implementing this guidance, the SLOs created and used as a portion of a teacher's evaluation will be fairer to teachers, will yield overall improvement in teacher performance, and will ultimately have a greater likelihood of improving the rate of learning for the teachers' students.

Need help setting challenging yet attainable SLOs? Our coaches are ready to support you!

Are you using Measures of Academic Progress® (MAP®) data in your SLOs? Our coaches can join you onsite to help staff build local capacity in using the most appropriate data given your context. Participants will have a chance to consider local factors and practice using MAP reports to pull out the data they need for their SLOs. Coaches can also focus on boosting staff assessment literacy, improving goal-focused planning protocols, or exploring any other data topic. To learn more and discuss your needs, get in touch with your account manager by email or call 866-654-3246.

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