



**School Improvement
Specialist Training Materials:
Performance Standards,
Improving Schools, and
Literature Review**

**Module 5—
Shared Goals for Learning**

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Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL)
at

EDVANTIA™

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The School Improvement Specialist Project prepared seven modules. School improvement specialists, as defined by the Appalachia Educational Laboratory at Edvantia, are change agents who work with schools to help them improve in the following areas so as to increase student achievement. These modules are intended to provide training materials for educators seeking professional development to prepare them for a new level of work.

Module 1—Shared Leadership

Module 2—Learning Culture

Module 3—School-Family-Community Connections

Module 4—Effective Teaching

Module 5—Shared Goals for Learning

Module 6—Aligned and Balanced Curriculum

Module 7—Purposeful Student Assessment

Each module has three sections:

1. Standards: Each set of content standards and performance indicators helps school improvement specialists assess their skills and knowledge related to each topic. The rubric format provides both a measurement for self-assessment and goals for self-improvement.
2. Improving Schools: These briefs provide research- and practice-based information to help school improvement specialists consider how they might address strengths and weaknesses in the schools where they work. The information contained in the briefs is often appropriate for sharing with teachers and principals; each includes information about strategies and practices that can be implemented in schools, resources to be consulted for more information, tools for facilitating thinking about and working on school issues, and real-life stories from school improvement specialists who offer their advice and experiences.
3. Literature Review: The reviews of research literature summarize the best available information about the topic of each module. They can be used by school improvement specialists to expand their knowledge base and shared with school staffs as part of professional development activities.

Shared Goals for Learning
Content Standards and Performance Indicators for School Improvement Specialists
Self-Assessment Tool

Sharing Goals for Learning: This matrix measures the extent to which a school improvement specialist has the knowledge and skills to assist a school in developing and sustaining shared goals for learning, as reflected by the following characteristics: (1) a community of learners with a shared vision, mission, and core beliefs; (2) a faculty that works in teams; (3) faculty and staff who effectively gather, organize, interpret, analyze, and apply data in the development, actualizing, and monitoring of shared goals; (4) stakeholder group representatives engaged in improvement planning; (5) school improvement plans; and (6) alignment between ongoing instruction and shared goals for learning contained in the school improvement plan.

Knowledge or Skill	Advanced	Proficient	Basic	Novice
1. Developing a community of learners with a shared vision, mission, and core beliefs	The school improvement specialist a. coaches school leaders in the creation of a learning community to support a shared vision, mission, and core beliefs b. mentors school leaders in the continuous renewal and use of a shared vision, mission, and core beliefs c. dialogues with school leaders about the link between shared vision, mission, and core beliefs and effective shared goals for learning	The school improvement specialist a. helps school staff understand the purpose and characteristics of a schoolwide learning community as a vehicle for developing and using a shared vision, mission, and core beliefs b. leads staff in the development of a shared vision, mission, and core beliefs c. facilitates staff understanding of how to move from a shared vision, mission, and core beliefs to the development and use of shared goals for learning	The school improvement specialist a. presents the concept of a learning community to school staff b. articulates to staff the need for a shared vision, mission, and core beliefs as a basis for a strong community c. helps staff understand the relationship between shared vision, mission, and core beliefs and viable shared goals for learning	The school improvement specialist a. understands the concept of a learning community as it relates to mobilizing school staff and the broader school community around a shared vision b. has a clear understanding of vision, mission, and core beliefs c. understands that a shared vision, mission, and core beliefs are prerequisite to the successful development and functioning of shared goals for learning

Knowledge or Skill	Advanced	Proficient	Basic	Novice
2. Building the capacity of staff members to effectively work in teams	The school improvement specialist a. coaches school leaders in the use of professional dialogue to promote effective team learning b. coaches school leaders in strategies to engage entire staff in professional dialogue during team meetings c. facilitates school leaders in the monitoring of team learning	The school improvement specialist a. articulates the importance of professional dialogue and reflection during team meetings b. models the reflection process as part of team meetings c. encourages professional dialogue during meetings with school leaders	The school improvement specialist a. shares strategies for team building with staff b. talks to faculty and staff about the value of professional dialogue and reflection c. participates with staff members at team meetings	The school improvement specialist a. understands the importance of professional dialogue and reflection b. is knowledgeable of the relationship between effective teams and successful schools
3. Building the capacity of staff members to analyze and use data in the development of shared goals	The school improvement specialist a. coaches the leadership team as they lead staff through the processes of collection and analysis of student data b. provides feedback to school leaders on their development, use, and monitoring of schoolwide shared goals c. guides school leaders in effective use of shared goals in classrooms	The school improvement specialist a. models for the staff strategies for gathering, organizing, interpreting, analyzing, and applying data b. facilitates the development, use, and monitoring of shared goals	The school improvement specialist a. collects and analyzes student achievement and other relevant data and provides the information to the principal b. ensures that the staff receive copies of current school data	The school improvement specialist a. knows how to collect, organize, disaggregate, and analyze data that inform development of shared goals b. understands the importance of developing and monitoring shared goals
4. Engaging stakeholders in school improvement planning	The school improvement specialist a. works with the school leadership team to institutionalize procedures for involving a broad range of stakeholders in the school improvement process b. coaches school leaders in ongoing assessment of the school's effectiveness in engaging representatives from a broad spectrum of different stakeholder groups in the planning processes	The school improvement specialist a. facilitates the involvement of teachers, school staff, parents, and community members in school improvement planning b. models the use of a range of strategies and techniques for involving various stakeholder groups	The school improvement specialist a. reinforces to the school's leadership team the importance of involving a broad base of stakeholders in school improvement planning b. shares a range of strategies and techniques for involving various stakeholder groups with the school leadership team	The school improvement specialist a. knows the value of engaging representatives from all stakeholder groups in school improvement planning b. knows a range of strategies and techniques to involve various stakeholder groups in the school improvement planning process

Knowledge or Skill	Advanced	Proficient	Basic	Novice
5. Creating school improvement plans	<p>The school improvement specialist</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. coaches school leaders as they engage the faculty in the collaborative development or revision of its school improvement plan b. focuses the group on a few high-priority goals and stresses program coherence c. coaches school leaders in the ongoing and collaborative monitoring and/or evaluation of the school improvement plan d. facilitates collaborative and strategic problem solving that is congruent with established goals 	<p>The school improvement specialist</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. has knowledge of district and state guidelines and engages the faculty in a collaborative process to develop or refine the school improvement plan b. helps to narrow the focus of the plan to high-priority goals c. helps school leadership team and faculty develop a plan for ongoing monitoring of implementation 	<p>The school improvement specialist</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. supports the school’s leadership team in the improvement planning process b. follows district or state guidelines with the goal of creating documents that are acceptable to all parties c. stresses the importance of monitoring the plan 	<p>The school improvement specialist</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. knows the state and district requirements for school improvement plans b. knows what an exemplary school improvement plan looks like c. knows the importance of ongoing monitoring of improvement plans
6. Aligning ongoing instruction and support services with the shared goals embodied in the improvement plan	<p>The school improvement specialist</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. coaches school leaders in strategies and techniques designed to keep the school’s shared goals for learning before faculty and staff as they engage in daily decision making and actions b. coaches grade-level or department chairs as they lead their colleagues in ongoing collaboration designed to promote attainment of shared goals for learning 	<p>The school improvement specialist</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. facilitates individual and team understanding of the value of aligning daily practice with the goals of their improvement plan b. helps faculty organize grade-level or department collaborative meetings that focus on shared goals for learning and instructional strategies that can assist students in attaining these academic goals 	<p>The school improvement specialist</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. talks with the school leadership team and individual faculty about the importance of communicating the goals and action steps included in the improvement plan to all members of the school community b. helps faculty and staff understand the implications of the goals contained within their school’s improvement for their daily practice 	<p>The school improvement specialist</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. knows the importance of making the school improvement plan a “living document,” embraced by all administrators, faculty, and staff b. knows how to translate goals included in the improvement plan into classroom practice

An Overview

Serving as “perceptual screens,” the mission and goals potentially help people decide what to attend to from the full array of demands, expectations, and information with which they come into contact.

—Leithwood, K, Aitken, R., and D. Jantzi,
Making Schools Smarter

Late buses. Field trips. Lost homework. New textbooks. Shortage of substitute teachers. Science fairs. Media attention. State assessments.

These are but a few examples of the stimuli that compete regularly for the attention of administrators, teachers and staff, students, and parents. Is it any wonder, then, that principals, teachers—and even students and parents—experience overload associated with burnout, dropout, and other undesirable consequences? Hence, the need for ‘perceptual screens,’ or filters, that help discriminate between and among the many environmental signals that assault a school community day in and day out—and oftentimes derail the efforts of even those most determined and committed to academic excellence. The first step toward creating such filters or screens is to give all stakeholders opportunities to understand and commit to a mission and goals focused on achievement for all students.

In his seminal work, *A Place Called School*, John Goodlad (1984) focused attention on the relationship between well-articulated academic goals and effective schools. Goodlad lamented the existence of what he called “the education gap: The distance between man’s most noble visions of what he might become and present levels of functioning” (p. 57). In Goodlad’s view, it was not the absence of goals that was at the root of the problem; rather, it was an excess of general, vague statements that did little to energize faculty or mobilize family and community support.

Nearly two decades later, Mike Schmoker offers virtually the same assessment of the status of educational goals in the first edition of *Results: The Key to Continuous School Improvement* (1999). He writes, “Even when schools establish goals, the goals tend to be too general,” thereby creating a “sense of false clarity” (p. 22). In making his case for the centrality of specific goals to successful reform, Schmoker quotes Rosenholtz (1989), who suggests the following benefits:

- Specific goals convey a message directly to teachers that they are capable of improvement.
- Specific goals provide a basis for rational decision making, for ways to organize and execute their instruction.
- Specific goals enable teachers to gauge their success.
- Specific goals promote professional dialogue. (Schmoker, p. 23)

Robert Marzano identifies “challenging goals and effective feedback” to be one of five school-level factors associated with student achievement. In his widely used book,

What Works in Schools, Marzano reports that his synthesis of research found that “the reported impact of setting goals on student achievement ranges from a low of 18 percentile points to a high of 41 percentile points” (p. 35).

Given their unrealized potential for increasing student and adult performance in many underachieving schools, promoting shared goals for learning can be powerful leverage for the work of school improvement specialists. A school improvement specialist can perform the critically important function of “bringing focus” through working with school leaders to actualize the sharing of goals across all segments of the school community. In this issue of *Improving Schools*, we offer tools, insights, and resources to prompt your thinking about how best to approach this challenge in schools where you work.

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Inspiration and contributions for Improving Schools came from Edvantia staff and school improvement specialists with whom we work. These resources have been created to support school improvement specialists and the schools they assist.

“We Want It All”—but “Less Is More”

“We Want It All” is the title of a chapter in John Goodlad’s classic, *A Place Called School*. In this book, Goodlad reports the results of A Study of Schooling, a large-scale research study of more than 1,000 classrooms. One of Goodlad’s conclusions from the analysis of goals in school districts across all 50 states was this: Most schools adopt more goals than can be reasonably addressed with available resources.

Goodlad theorizes that schools adopt a plethora of goals in their attempts to satisfy all stakeholders (e.g., federal policymakers and funding agencies, state legislatures, local boards of education and the communities they represent, district office administrators, and the faculty and staff at the school level).

Although Goodlad's study predates the current wave of high-stakes accountability, including No Child Left Behind, most schools continue to include more goals in their improvement plans than can reasonably be accomplished given time and resource constraints. And, as Michael Fullan and Andy Hargreaves write: "Overload is perhaps the greatest enemy of improvement" (1996, p. 4).

So how many goals are too many? The answer to this question depends on local context. Having said this, we defer to Mike Schmoker's suggested range of three to five goals for any given school year. Because, as Schmoker writes, "time is arguably a school's most precious and scarce commodity, we cannot afford to waste it on too many goals. Improvement requires time for planning, training, and constructive dialogue (1999, p. 31). And, Michael Fullan concludes from his research that attempting too many initiatives at one time can result in "massive failure."

Reflection

- Speculate as to why "less is more" with regard to school improvement goals.
- How can you go about convincing a school or district that they need to limit the number of goals in their plan?

When Does a Goal Really Work? When It's SMART!

We worked for years before we learned that the right definition of "goals" was central to success: to have any impact on instruction, they had to be simple, measurable statements linked to student assessments—not commitments to offer workshops or implemented programs.

—Mike Schmoker, *Tipping Point*

In this quote, Mike Schmoker echoes the sentiments of many students of education reform. For example, Carl Glickman (1993) laments that "one of the great difficulties in educational renewal is the tendency to view school goals and objectives as innovations to be implemented" (p. 49). Glickman reports that administrators and teachers offer the following responses to his queries about their school's goals: technology, cooperative learning, whole-language instruction, interdisciplinary instruction, and so on. The problem with these conceptions of goals is that they treat innovations as ends in and of themselves, not as means to the end of increased student achievement.

What tool can you offer school leaders who are struggling to formulate goals that work? Schmoker (1999) offers the following criteria for effective goals:

- Measurable
- Annual: reflecting an increase over the previous year

- Based on the percentage of students achieving mastery—usually in a subject area
- Focused, with occasional exceptions, on student achievement
- Linked to a year-end assessment or other standards-based means of determining if students have reached an established level of performance
- Written in language that can be understood by almost any audience

Schmoker's criteria for effective goals are strikingly similar to the SMART framework advocated by the Hope Foundation in its videotape series and, more recently, a book by the same title, *Failure Is Not an Option* (2004). This SMART acronym suggests that viable goals are

- **Specific.** They are very precise in defining or describing the desired result or outcome.
- **Measurable.** They use objective criteria—often quantitative—to define what success will look like.
- **Attainable.** They are realistic, communicating to all stakeholders that the goal is possible.
- **Results-oriented.** They define desired behaviors and usually focus on student achievement.
- **Time-bound.** They stipulate when the hoped-for result will be accomplished.

Here are a template and examples of SMART goals that focus on specific content areas.

- The percentage of students scoring at or above the standard for proficiency in _____ [subject matter or area] will increase from _____% at the end of the 2004-2005 school year to _____% at the end of the 2005-2006 school year as reported on the _____ [state assessment].
- The percentage of students scoring proficient or above on the mathematics section of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills will increase from 55% on the 2005 administration to 60% on the 2006 test.
- The percentage of students scoring proficient or above on the state writing assessment will increase from 75% on the 2005 assessment to 80% on the 2006 assessment.

Reflection

- Why do you think educators tend to focus on implementation of programs or innovations rather than on shared goals?
- What steps might you take as a school improvement specialist to assist a school or district in embracing the concept of SMART goals?

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The Relationship Between Goals and Program Coherence

It also took us a long time to learn that coherence required that the number of goals be severely limited.

—Mike Schmoker, Tipping Point

Michael Fullan, in *The New Meaning of Educational Change, Third Edition*, writes: “The main problem is not the absence of innovation in schools, but rather the presence of too many disconnected, episodic, fragmented, superficially adorned projects.” Fullan continues by crediting Bryk and associates with naming this phenomenon the “Christmas tree” problem in their 1998 Chicago evaluation (p. 21). Fullan recommends that we respond to this potential overload by working on program coherence.

Fred Newmann and associates defined program coherence as “the extent to which the school’s program for student and staff learning are coordinated, focused on clear learning goals, and sustained over time” (Newmann et al., 2000, p. 5).

How can you check for program coherence? Following is one suggested strategy.

1. As you begin your improvement work in a given school, assemble the leadership team and talk about the importance of program coherence to increased school capacity and student achievement. Have them bring copies of their school improvement plan to this meeting. You may wish to develop a worksheet in the form of a matrix (see example below).
2. Ask the group to identify all “programs” currently ongoing in the school—with special emphasis on innovations adopted over the past five years or so. Record these on the matrix and ask the group to rate each initiative in terms of its impact on student achievement—from 1 = *minimal* to 5 = *considerable*.
3. Next, challenge the group to relate each program to one or more of the goals in their school improvement plan. Place a checkmark beneath each goal to which the program is related.
4. Finally, ask the group to talk about the completed matrix. You will want to formulate questions to focus the discussion:

- What does this chart tell us about the relationship between our school’s goals and to what extent do we (as a faculty) consider the potential of innovations to address our stated goals?
- How frequently do we monitor our programs by collecting effectiveness data? What kind of data do we collect? How do we analyze and use the data?
- What, if any, actions should we take based on this initial analysis?

PROGRAM OR “INNOVATION”	IMPACT RATING	GOAL #1 (write goal)	GOAL #2 (write goal)	GOAL #3 (write goal)
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				

One successful high school principal adopted a practice similar to one advocated for managing the shoes in one’s closet. Each time a new program was proposed, he asked faculty to identify a program or activity they would be willing to discard in order to make time and energy for the new program. While this strategy may not always work, it does suggest a final question to pose to leadership teams: Is there a program here you would be willing to discard if you had compelling evidence that a new initiative would substantially improve student achievement?

Reflection

- Reflect on your experience in schools. Can you recall a time when the effectiveness of a school faculty was stymied by a lack of program coherence? In what ways did the lack of coherence impact faculty and staff?
- Who would you want to have at the table for the activity/discussion outlined here?
- What other questions might you add to the list in #4?

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On the Job: Planning for Shared Goals

The school improvement specialist stories that appear in Improving Schools come from real life. The names have been changed or removed to preserve confidentiality.

When I think about the schools where I have worked, my mind floods with memories of what it takes to get them to the point of having shared goals. Especially, I recall my first assignment as a school improvement specialist. We'll call the school Main Street Elementary. There was little evidence of common goals, other than agreement that making it through the day was an accomplishment.

One of my first steps was to ask the principal, Ms. Smith, about a school improvement plan. She said Ms. Brown, the instructional facilitator, had written a plan and submitted it to the state, and was sure Ms. Brown would have a copy. I talked with the instructional facilitator, who did have a copy. What's more, she was pretty knowledgeable about what was in the plan but had not shared the plan with the faculty, although she had given a copy to the principal.

I soon learned that the faculty had limited knowledge of the plan because communication within the school was practically nonexistent. There was no faculty newsletter or weekly memo, and the principal held only one faculty meeting, which was at the beginning of the school year. Ms. Smith spent most of her time dealing with student discipline problems and had very little energy for communicating with faculty.

I decided that school improvement planning should probably begin with the instructional facilitator. She and I talked about the written plan and discussed strategies for communicating the plan to faculty members.

My next step was to sit down with the principal. I knew I needed her support and did not want her to feel I was threatening her leadership. With plan in hand, the two of us discussed the action steps. I asked her to help me understand where she thought the school was on implementing the steps. I started with simple questions and gradually began to probe, careful not to put her on the defensive. Once she realized I was interested, she relaxed some and I was able to guide her toward calling a meeting to share the plan with faculty members.

We had that faculty meeting, and then others where we began to look at school data. We eventually created a team to lead the school improvement planning process. Meanwhile, I continued to meet with the principal, always asking for her input and gently pacing and leading to keep her one step ahead of the faculty.

We finally got to shared goals for Main Street Elementary. Ms. Smith was still spending most of her time with discipline but, by the end of the year, she was beginning to see a connection between her discipline problems and school improvement planning.

As a school improvement specialist, I learned the important lesson that not everyone understands the benefits of planning. I also learned that just telling them wasn't enough. I had to start by building relationships and gaining trust. It was important for people in the school to understand that I was there to support them, to help them increase their ability to get their jobs done—and, throughout the process, to stay in the background and encourage them to be the players.

Reflection

- At Main Street Elementary, what strategies were used to bring school personnel to the point of focusing on shared goals?
- How important were the lessons learned by the school improvement specialist?
- What strategies might you suggest for moving this principal toward a leadership role?

Goals and Teamwork

Successful schools allow more professional autonomy, but they also provide accountability through explicit goals for student learning. The core structure essential to reaching these goals is built around teaching teams, time for teachers to collaborate and learn together . . . ongoing inquiry as a basis for continual improvement.

—Linda Darling-Hammond as quoted in Schmoker, *Tipping Point*

Teamwork is critical to the development and implementation of shared goals. This is a major premise of Mike Schmoker in his 1999 book, *Results: The Key to Continuous School Improvement*. Schmoker writes: “Success depends on the interdependency between collaboration and goals; between both of these and purpose.” He further argues that effective teamwork is the key to moving schools and districts toward higher performance. However, Schmoker warns that it is critical to “clearly distinguish between effective collaboration and the appearance of teamwork” (p. 9).

In her research, Judith Warren Little found a strong relationship between the right kind of collegiality and improvements for both teachers and students:

- remarkable gains in achievement
- higher-quality solutions to problems
- increased confidence among all school community members

- teachers' ability to support one another's strengths and to accommodate weaknesses
- the ability to examine and test new ideas, methods, and materials
- more systematic assistance to beginning teachers
- an expanded pool of ideas, materials, and methods (Little, 1990, as cited in Schmoker, 1999, p. 12)

Conzemius and O'Neill (2001) define collaboration as a process of developing interdependent relationships. Everyone involved focuses on a common purpose and set of goals and people rely on each other to achieve these goals. In their definition, collaboration is synergy—that is, it results in a group being more effective and accomplishing more than individuals can accomplish on their own.

Notice how goals are central to these definitions of collaboration. Collaboration moves teachers beyond congeniality to collegiality. It helps to establish structures—systems, processes, and policies—that make it possible for everyone to contribute their knowledge to continuously improve student learning.

Schools in which collaboration thrives have developed what is alternately called a professional learning community (Little, 1987) or a collaborative work culture (Fullan, 2001). A growing body of research supports the relationship between this type of professional community and increases in student achievement (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001).

On the Job: Checking the Checkers

The school improvement specialist stories that appear in Improving Schools come from real life. The names have been changed or removed to preserve confidentiality.

With mandated testing in full force, district goals often focus on low-performing students. Many proactive districts have plans in place to ensure success for students in NCLB subgroups. However, reactive districts often find themselves on a "list" and must simultaneously plan and implement strategies to address immediate needs. Some of these districts have no plans and no monitoring or accountability systems. As the people in these districts brainstorm paths of emergency action, one wonders why a collaborative effort did not begin sooner.

One rural district that found itself on a list, and with an outside agent to guide it, immediately studied the system data carefully and individual school data even more closely. To assist school staff, the central office staff identified students by name and by performance level. District personnel took the information to the schools and made presentations to every faculty group. Teachers received copies of state standards and county pacing calendars. The teachers were then surveyed to determine how the central office could provide support in the form of materials, programs, professional development, and the like.

After all this, questions remained: What is the guarantee that data will be acted on, standards will be addressed, or pacing calendars will be followed? Who is checking?

The district has addressed current needs in the five-year strategic plan. Each principal has been asked for a school improvement plan that addresses the needs of the district. An opportunity for sharing these goals has been scheduled. Monitoring is expected. So, who is the monitor? Who is checking the monitor?

After determining that special education was a district priority, surveys indicated that teachers wanted professional development on inclusion and differentiation. They wanted opportunities to share strategies, plans, and successes. These professional development opportunities were designed and built into the calendar. How is it working? Who is accountable for implementation and feedback? Who's checking?

Efforts are underway to develop effective methods to assess student success; to monitor and assess action steps of each school improvement plan; to evaluate the success or failure of attempted improvements; and to monitor for teacher, student, administrator, and district effectiveness. This is the overall plan for checking the checkers.

Is it really necessary? After all, these people are professionals. One principal told me he was confident his teachers were doing what they were supposed to be doing, and he had no intention of “breathing down their necks.” He should have checked. The tutoring programs had not started, the school improvement plan had not been updated, and his “go-to” teacher had just asked for a transfer. He had no idea!

Now, in this particular district, everyone is on the same page—albeit different locations on that page. As the district staff members become more comfortable with promoting the importance of change, the idea of sharing common goals will become more important. Checking and monitoring will gain more importance to districts and schools as they seek to ensure that common goals are met.

Everywhere in education, checking and checkers are gaining importance. The bottom line is that a strong monitoring system is vital to creating a continuous flow of accountability in the system. Is this punitive? No. The practice guarantees a fair and continuous program of growth for students and assurances for parents. It promises that everyone really cares about quality control and the pursuit of common goals.

Reflection

- School improvement specialists understand the importance of accountability. However, many schools and districts struggle with the task of monitoring to ensure accountability. As a school improvement specialist, how would you build the capacity of a school or district to monitor shared goals?
- How would you guide a school principal toward more effective monitoring of the school improvement plan?

On the Job: Doing Business Through Shared Goals

The school improvement specialist stories that appear in Improving Schools come from real life. The names have been changed or removed to preserve confidentiality.

While meeting with other school improvement specialists who serve rural school systems, I tentatively stated my opinion that central office staff seem hesitant—even afraid—to “put themselves out there” in terms of working with school staff. The retired superintendent seated across the luncheon table pointed at me and said, “Bingo!”

As our work continued and I had time for reflection, I began to see a pattern emerging. I realized I was being “used” to promote necessary changes in a county I serve, and I commented to an instructional supervisor that I should purchase a T-shirt that says, “Blame me.” She agreed and remarked that this is sometimes the only way to make things happen. It clarified for me the fact that central office staff members are in positions of authority but can’t always wield their authority.

Central office people have a wealth of knowledge about staff development and state directives, as well as “insider” education information. They know what works. They know the dos and don’ts as well as the ins and outs. What they often don’t have is leverage. I seem to be their leverage.

I have observed that most communications between central offices and schools come in the form of instructions or mandates channeled through the school principals. These communications seem to be based on directives, not dialogue.

A supervisor in the county recently said, “We have no credibility with our teachers.” I know that central office expertise is lost if they neglect opportunities to collaborate with school staff. The supervisors need confidence and expertise to facilitate teachers’ learning and sharing. They also need guidance in directing change and promoting collegiality.

My job is to help the central office (1) focus on major areas of district concerns, (2) become adept at creating opportunities for conversation with school staff about teaching and learning, and (3) make lasting changes in the system that will help all students to make continued progress. I always keep it in mind that newly introduced methods should, over time, become “the way they do business.”

Reflection

- The school improvement specialist said, “I was being ‘used’ to promote necessary changes in a county.” Do you agree with this view? What are the pros/cons of such a situation?
- What does the school improvement specialist mean by the statement “I always keep it in mind that newly introduced methods should, over time, become ‘the way they do business.’”

If you want to improve a school system, before you change the rules, look first at the ways that people think and interact together. Otherwise, the new policies and organizational structures will simply fade away, and the organization will revert, over time, to the way it was before.

—Peter Senge, *Schools That Learn*

Translating Goals to Action

Once a school or district has developed goals, then staff must determine strategies that will assist them in reaching their goals. Creating a quality action plan is one such strategy. The basis of the action, or implementation, plan is the creation of quality action steps. When writing these action steps, keep it in mind that your strategies should align with goals.

Alignment occurs when the action steps (1) are clearly linked to the goal statement and (2) have the potential to produce the desired results in student performance. Given that the academic behaviors of students, teachers, and the school organization are interconnected, it is probable that most quality action steps will build on, connect closely to, and/or be dependent on each other.

School improvement planning teams are encouraged to develop student-centered action steps first. From there, teams will want to design teacher-centered and organization-centered steps to support the student-centered actions.

- **Student-centered action steps** focus on the actions of students and are designed to help students perform at the levels established in the goal statements and objectives. They answer the question What kinds of activities will help students further their learning and improve their academic performance?
- **Teacher-centered action steps** concentrate on instructional strategies. They answer questions such as What will teachers do to improve their instructional practice? What will teachers do to improve student performance?
- **Organization-centered action steps** address what the school as an organization will do. They answer questions such as What actions will the school organization take to support students as they work to improve their academic performance? What actions will the school organization take to support teachers as they improve their instructional practice? What kinds of activities will the school organization initiate to enable all stakeholders to participate in the school improvement efforts?

Action steps should include specific implementing and monitoring steps. Another way to classify action steps is by the kind of action being implied. To determine whether an action step is implementing or monitoring, planning teams identify the purpose.

- *Implementing action steps* establish the implementation of instructional strategies and practices to support goal statements and objectives.

- *Monitoring action steps* monitor or reflect on the progress and impact of implementing and/or enabling action steps.

Each implementing or monitoring action step is linked to and/or builds on another; it also addresses the behavior of students, teachers, or the organization. Student-centered steps are usually implementing. Teacher-centered and organization-centered steps can be implementing or monitoring.

Understanding these classifications can assist the school improvement planning team as it creates an exemplary and comprehensive action plan. Consider the following examples.

Example A: K-6 students will use a variety of math manipulatives three or more times a week to assist them in understanding number sense, measurement, geometry, and statistics.

Example A describes what students will do to improve their performance in math; therefore it is student-centered. Note that teachers will construct these activities to target specific strands of math. This action step is implementing because it is designed to implement instructional strategies and practices that support goal statements and objectives.

Example B: Teachers will participate in a three-day professional development session that focuses on the effective use of manipulatives in PreK-6 math classrooms.

Example B targets the behaviors of teachers. It would enable teachers to provide quality math instruction using manipulatives. Consequently, this example is a teacher-centered, implementing action step. Without such action steps, schools leave to chance the quality of instruction students receive.

Example C: Administration will attend, with teachers, the biweekly grade-level team meetings to discuss the use of manipulatives and evaluate their impact on student learning.

Example C is a *monitoring* action step; it evaluates the “actions” of Examples A and B. Organization-centered, monitoring action steps establish when, how, and by whom these kinds of questions will be asked and reflected on. Example C helps the school organization answer such questions as Are our efforts making a difference in student performance? Is there more we need to do to support our teachers? Is our investment balanced by our return? Have our efforts to support the behaviors of students and teachers impacted student performance? If so, how?

Reflection

- The majority of action steps written by school personnel are teacher-centered. Why do you think this is true?

- As a school improvement specialist, how would you work with a faculty to help them understand the benefits of beginning with student-centered action steps?

What get measured gets done.

—Tom Peters, *Thriving on Chaos*

Data helps us to monitor and assess performance. Just as goals are an essential element of success, so data are an essential piece of working toward goals. . . . Regular monitoring, followed by adjustment, is the only way to expect success.

—Schmoker, *Results: The Key to Continuous School Improvement*

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Shared Goals for Learning: Are They Visible in Your School?

How can a school improvement specialist determine the extent to which goals for learning are shared across a school community? The simplest and most direct approach is to ask individual members of the school community what they consider to be the most important goals for learning in their school—and compare these to written goals. Additionally, you can look for artifacts or evidence that a school has a common focus. What are some indicators that a school is goal-oriented? The matrix below presents some sample indicators and possible evidence of each. You can use this tool to get started in determining the extent to which a school community uses goals to guide its daily actions.

Indicator	Evidence
School vision and mission prominently displayed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vision and/or mission posted in classrooms and in strategic places in the building • Vision and/or mission on school letterhead • Vision and/or mission in school newsletter and papers • Vision and/or mission in student and teacher handbooks
Classroom instructional objectives displayed and used or referred to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On boards • On assignment sheets • As integral part of lessons • In lesson plans • Hear in teacher’s introduction of material and in his/her recap/evaluation of a lesson • Communicated to parents

Indicator	Evidence
Use of national, state, and local standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copies available in each teacher’s room and in conference room • Incorporated into lesson plans • Focus of professional development sessions • Copies available in front office as reading material for parents and other visitors • Copies available in faculty lounge • Reflected in student assignments and workbooks
Collaborative planning in grade-level or departmental teams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers talk about priority goals and translate these into instructional objectives • Teachers share successful strategies with one another • Teachers engage in action research to collect data for the purpose of determining extent to which a given strategy promotes shared goals and objectives • Teachers develop and use common assessments to monitor student progress toward instructional goals
Interdisciplinary/cross-curricular instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence of theme-based instruction • Team teaching and cross-disciplinary teaching • Science fairs, geography bees, and other academic competitions • Project-based instruction
Teachers discussing schoolwide goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goals posted in teachers’ lounge • Buzz session in faculty meetings, staff development, team-level meetings, parent/teacher conferences around schoolwide goals • School improvement plan revisited on regular basis—reflected in component minutes and faculty minutes

This tool evolved from work Edvantia did with Tennessee’s school improvement specialists, who are called Exemplary Educators.

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Shared Goals for Learning—A Summary of the Literature

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Introduction

A shared vision connects people in the school community around a common idea. A strong, shared vision actually helps us focus our attention on the possibilities and potentials—not the problems and pitfalls. The vision lays the foundation block for the culture of the school; it has great power to energize and mobilize.

J. A. Walsh and B. D. Sattes, *Inside School Improvement* (2000)

Schools can be marked by intense isolation among teachers, between teachers and administrators, and between parents and teachers. Yet we know that in successful organizations, people feel connected to one another and to the work of the organization. An important characteristic of a successful school is that everyone in the school understands and agrees on what the school is trying to do. That is, they share common goals. A clear vision, expressed through specific goals and high expectations, guides action and contributes to improved student achievement (Cotton, 2000; Levine & Lezotte, 1990).

Sometimes, goals get lost in the rituals of schools: they are created and then largely forgotten. However, goals can become an important part of the fabric of the school when all activities are aimed at achieving them (Marks, Doane, & Secada, 1996). Successful schools begin by identifying and communicating a set of goals and then implementing those goals, actively seeking the support of key stakeholders (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). These key stakeholders include the faculty and staff of the school, as well as parents and community members. Shared goals can focus needs assessment activities, which then generate data that provide a solid base for informed decisions about instructional issues (Corallo & McDonald, 2002; Kotter, 1990). In this way, goals prompt *and* sustain continuous improvement.

Characteristics of a Good Goal Set

Many people find that helpful goals have some common characteristics.

1. *A few, easily remembered goals* are better than a long list of elaborately worded goal statements. Because people must often make immediate decisions during classroom instruction and faculty meetings, and as they evaluate learning activities, they are more likely to implement a few clearly worded goals than a long list. When workable goals become part of the internal culture of the school community, all activities can be aimed at achieving them (Marks, Doane, & Secada, 1996).
2. Because there are only a few goals, they should be carefully crafted to focus attention on the aspects of the school that can be considered *priorities*. Goals that are very narrow (affecting only one or two grades or groups of students, for example) are unlikely to be seen as important by everyone. Likewise, goals that are too broad may be open to interpretations that are way off the

mark. It may be helpful to think of the goals as the foundation on which all of the school's actions can rest and be supported.

3. Goals should be *related to standards* (Teddlie & Stringfield, 1993). This is especially important, given current standards-based accountability systems. Goals based on the criteria by which the school will be judged make it easier for the school community to support the goals and to evaluate the degree to which the goals have been accomplished.
4. Goals should be stated in such a way that they *drive action*. The goal statements should guide mundane decisions that may seem, at first glance, unrelated to school improvement—such as dress codes and faculty meeting agendas—as well as essential decisions about graduation requirements, scheduling of students and courses, instructional delivery, and so forth (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Chubb & Moe, 1990).

Goals, then, can be thought of as destinations, not road maps. However, if we know where we are going, then planning the trip becomes much easier. Well-articulated goals that are widely supported increase the likelihood that everyone will reach the destination together.

Shared Understanding of Goals

In schools that value shared leadership, a widespread understanding of important goals is crucial (O'Neill, 2000; Teddlie & Stringfield, 1993). This makes sense: if a number of individuals make important decisions, then the decision makers must share a common set of goals so they can act in concert. Research has repeatedly revealed that low-performing organizations struggle because members do not clearly understand the purpose(s) of the organization and their own roles in helping the organization reach its goals (Senge, 1990).

Goals that are shared among school faculty and staff also help to articulate the specific vision of school improvement. School reform relies on defining and pursuing clear, measurable goals, as well as the benchmarks for achieving these goals (Hansel, 2001; Schmoker, 1996). For example, implementation of instruction should be monitored by measuring small successes that advance those articulated goals (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991; WestEd, 2000). When selecting strategies for continuous school improvement, a number of specific actions will be identified. As these actions are taken, all members of the school community should be able to understand how each action contributes to attaining the goals. Progress toward the goals will help to generate a spirit of collaboration and sustain willingness to support the school goals (Housman & Martinez, 2001).

The impact of shared goals should be observable. When analyzing the performance of the school over the past year, school staff should try to identify how the goals were translated into actions that led to improvements. If some goals have been achieved, they can be replaced by others that represent future opportunities. The goals should be specific enough to sustain a coherent focus over time and to encourage the

development of additional goals related to the school's mission (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). The process of articulating goals never ends. As new challenges arise, new goals will be needed.

School Mission

The importance of mission, and particularly shared mission, has been a theme of the leadership literature for some time. However, only two studies were found that investigated the role of shared mission in schools (Denison & Mishra, 1995; Licata & Harper, 2001), and neither included student achievement data. The dearth of information available on this topic suggests that the relationship between mission and student achievement is a fertile field for research.

- Denison & Mishra (1995) explored the relationship between organizational culture and organizational effectiveness. To carry out the study, they analyzed questionnaire data from a variety of types of organizations (sample size, 764). The results of this correlational study provided evidence that four organizational traits were positively related to organizational effectiveness: involvement, consistency, adaptability, and mission.
- Licata & Harper (2001) investigated the relationship between school health and robust school vision. Using regression analysis, they looked at data collected from 554 teachers in 38 middle schools in the Midwest. They found a positive correlation between teachers' perceptions about the health of the organizations in which they worked and their perceptions of the existence of a robust school vision. In addition, the themes of academic intensity and institutional integrity were most strongly related to a robust vision.

Summary

Common goals help teachers, students, parents, and community members focus their actions so that they translate into desirable results. Ideally, goals should be realistic, clearly stated, measurable, and widely understood and supported.

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