GOAL SETTING *to achieve results*

This school sets goals at four levels – schoolwide, grade level, classroom and individual student – to ensure shared ownership of learning and results.

My son's favorite pastime is one shared by many of today's youth – playing video games. We sat together as he played his newest game, and as he maneuvered the character through a whole host of obstructions, he told me 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 else 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.

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.

Setting goals that make a difference

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

By Rich Newman

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.

Spillane (2004) writes that developing a culture where leadership is shared or distributed "involves unpacking the interdependencies among leaders and followers in leadership practice." 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. 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. 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.

Goal setting at multiple levels

Monterey Ridge Elementary in San Diego has embraced the use of goal setting across the school landscape. This school employs four different levels of goal setting that connect from school-wide to individual student goals and creates a synergy in all our work.

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.

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Finally, individual students set goals based on their own 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 ensures 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.

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. This level of goal setting also ensures that all staff share ownership for the learning and for determining 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 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 may appear to be a 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. 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 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, this discussion that occurred in a second grade classroom: 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

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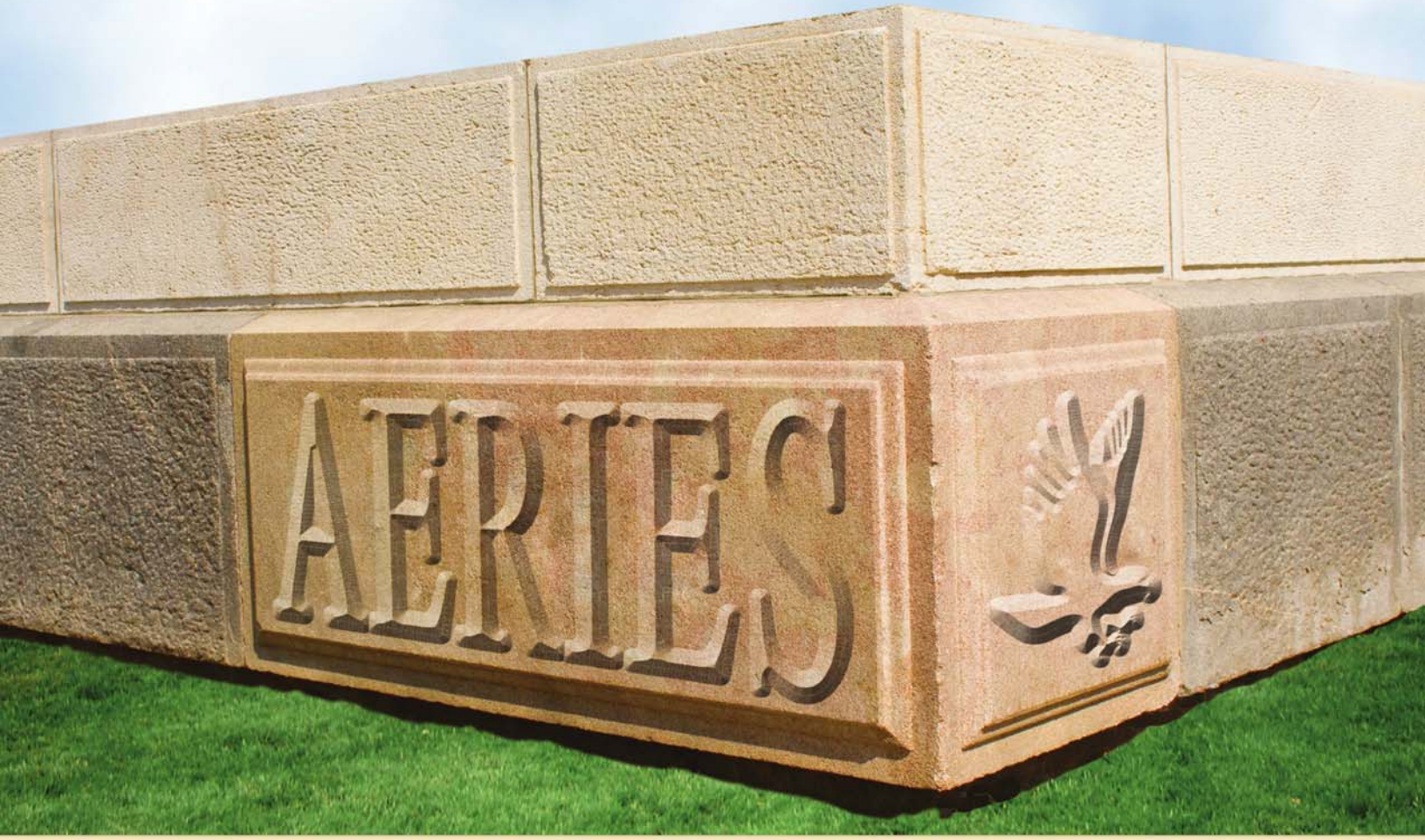

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he thinks he needs to improve in, and why. The student shares that he needs to improve his reading comprehension, and the teacher then helps the student develop strategies that would help him improve this skill.

The strategies discussed include reading books in his appropriate lexile level, taking a Reading Counts test after completing each book, writing a summary of 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.

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 four or five 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 and remain motivated and 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 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 more than 30 percent 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.

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 of their own goals and a clear roadmap for both the journey and destination.

One of the most important cultural changes the school has seen with increased goal setting is the way students can articulate what they are learning, where they need to improve and why they are focused on a specific skill.

Self-directed students

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 the teacher. As you sit with the children, you find that they are able to articulate what they are working on to improve their writing. 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.

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. 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 his or her analysis of the goals they set and then team members calibrated how their respective classes did compared to one another. Throughout this discussion, they shared ideas and strategies that worked well or proved unsuccessful.

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

A mid-year 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 each grade is on target to meet year-end goals. Also revealed were 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.

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!" 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 the work they are doing does not feel connected to their real lives.

The fact that our students and staff need to be able to set tangible goals that connect to a related purpose is key.

Ask any child playing a video game what they are playing, 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. 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.

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

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 can clearly see the path upon which they are about to embark.

The immediacy of success

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. 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

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schools can't be compared to that of a video game, our students and staff need to be able to set tangible goals that connect to a related purpose. 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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Rich Newman is principal of Monterey Ridge Elementary School in the Poway Unified School District in San Diego. He began his education career as a Teach for America fellow, and has since worked at the school, district, university and national level. Newman served as a program officer at The Wallace Foundation, where he helped lead a large-scale education leadership initiative. He 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.

Japanese lesson study

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prove learning and lead to more rigorous instruction. One realized, "Allowing students to struggle can be such a powerful thing, as it allows the students to discover."

Clea Fernandez and Sonal Chokshi (2005) have conducted extensive research on lesson study groups working in the eastern United States. They write:

"Ultimately, lesson study provides a way to reengineer U.S. teaching. It also provides a clear vision for what this profession should look like: one that has a rich, coherent and continually evolving body of professional knowledge; one that creates productive and satisfying roles for its members; and one that supports a healthy interplay between policy and practice."

Lesson study is an ambitious undertaking with enormous potential rewards. Schools beginning to engage in lesson study can realize that potential when teachers and school leaders do not view it simply as one more demand on school and teacher time, but as a structure to nurture and empower teachers' work.

The lesson study process results in the development and attainment of shared goals across the school – producing real and lasting improvement to classroom learning and student achievement. ■

Resources

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Madeleine Jetter is principal investigator, Project DELTA, and assistant professor of mathematics at California State University, San Bernardino. Gwen Hancock is program specialist, Project DELTA, Riverside County Office of Education.