

ASK THE TEAM

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Flexibility for Fairness: Crafting Business Rules for Student Learning Objectives

Question From the Field

How are states creating business rules for student learning objectives (SLOs), such as exceptions for students with poor attendance, teachers on leave, or teachers serving as intervention specialists?

Across the United States, a wide cross-section of administrators and teachers are learning the in's and out's of setting, assessing, and scoring SLOs. An SLO is a set of goals that measures an educator's progress in achieving student growth targets. SLOs are particularly helpful for teachers in nontested subjects and grades because the goal can be set using any type of assessment. The SLO process varies from state to state, but a common set of questions often emerges during this process.

For example, what happens to the SLO process if the following occur?

- A teacher's roster changes drastically due to high student mobility rates.
- A teacher's assignment changes significantly over the course of the year.
- A teacher serves as a pull-in/push-out teacher or coteaches.

To address these common situations, states and districts are crafting business rules specifically for SLOs. Business rules typically list specific exceptions to any standard process, although states refer to these exceptions by different terms, such as operating rules or guidelines. In the case of SLOs, business rules outline exceptions that are designed to mitigate bias introduced in the SLO process by these particular situations. SLO business rules attempt to build flexibility into SLOs while sustaining a consistent process across all teachers and students.

In response to questions from the field, we gathered a sample of SLO business rules from multiple states and districts that are currently implementing SLOs. The implementation of SLOs is still an emerging process in these states. Little information is available on the effectiveness of these rules in achieving their aims, so we provide this overview only as starting point for discussion on this topic in your state or district.

1. STUDENT CONSIDERATIONS

Absenteeism and Mobility

To be fair and accurate, a teacher's SLO must focus on the students he or she can influence and grow. If students are chronically absent or no longer enrolled in a course, SLOs must be adjusted to measure the growth teachers can actually make with students. By providing business rules that address student absenteeism and mobility, states and districts help to ensure that these challenges are addressed in a fair and consistent manner across classrooms. States and districts generally provide flexibility for teachers to address these challenges by establishing (1) clear-cut attendance thresholds or minimum student enrollment criteria and/or (2) processes that allow an evaluator and a teacher to account for student attendance and mobility concerns during midcycle or end-of-cycle conferences. Generally, states have set minimum thresholds or criteria, whereas districts often set more stringent thresholds or detailed criteria that are tailored for their unique contexts. The following is a quick overview of options that states and districts are using, often in combination.

Absenteeism

- **Option 1.** Specify a threshold for student attendance. For example, students who are absent more than 15 percent to 20 percent of the time are dropped from an SLO.
- **Option 2.** Allow teachers to adjust their SLOs, during a midcycle or end-of-cycle check-in with their evaluator, to account for student attendance rates. For example, at the midcycle check-in, teachers may set unique growth targets for students who are absent 30 or more days.
- **Option 3.** Allow teachers to provide evidence of chronic absenteeism during the final evaluation conference and take this information into account as an extenuating circumstance when determining a summative score for SLOs.

Mobility

- **Option 1.** Allow teachers to remove from their SLO(s) any students who were not enrolled during a specified period of time.
- **Option 2.** Allow teachers to revise their SLOs during a midcycle check-in with their evaluator to account for changes in their student rosters. For example, at the midcycle check-in, teachers may set unique growth targets for new students and remove unenrolled students from the SLO roster.
- **Option 3.** Weight the final SLO score based on the number of days a student was enrolled in the school.
- **Option 4.** Require a student to have been in attendance for both the pretest and posttest to be included in SLO rating.

Tip

SLO training for educators should include information, tools, and examples on how to modify an SLO target or score to address student absenteeism and mobility. Establishing a business rule that allows for flexibility through modifications is important, but to ensure better consistency and fairness, educators need training to improve their professional judgment in making these decisions.

State Spotlight

Rhode Island

- **Absenteeism.** Students chronically absent are still included in SLO calculations; a notation regarding their absenteeism is included, however, and the evaluator takes it into account when determining the SLO score.
- **Student mobility.** SLOs are based on the students on the roster at the beginning of the school year. At the midcycle check-in, teachers can adjust their SLOs based on significant changes in their rosters. Students added or removed, added after the middle of the year, or no longer on the roster at the end of the interval of instruction (e.g., quarter or semester) are not included in the final results of SLOs.

Source: *Rhode Island Educator Evaluation FAQ* (<http://www.ride.ri.gov/EducatorQuality/EducatorEvaluation/RIModelFAQ.aspx>)

District Spotlight

Pointe Coupee Parish School System, Louisiana

- **Absenteeism.** A student who is absent more than 20 percent of the school year may be removed from the student learning target (SLT). A student who is absent 20 consecutive days between October 1 and the beginning of the state testing period may be removed from an SLT.
- **Student mobility.** Students who enter the classroom before October 1 and remain through the second week in April will be part of the teacher's roster that is included in the state's educator evaluation data system.

Source: *Pointe Coupee Parish School System Student Learning Targets 2012–2013* (http://www.pcpsb.net/images/stories/COMPASS/SLT/AUGUST_7_2012_TEACHER_HANDOUT_SLT.pdf)

2. TEACHER CONSIDERATIONS

Extended Leave and Assignment Changes

Compared with student absence and mobility, states and districts provide fewer detailed business rules regarding teacher exceptions. Teachers cannot be held accountable for the growth of students when teachers have not been present in the classroom to influence student growth. States and districts want to be certain that students' learning is not inaccurately attributed to educators who have had to leave the classroom or have been reassigned to a different classroom. A few states have specified extended leave flexibility for teachers, which allow educators—in collaboration with their supervisors—to determine the best course of action for evaluating SLO progress within the evaluation framework. Teachers also may be allowed to modify SLOs at midcycle or end-of-the cycle conferences to address a wide range of teacher absence or mobility situations.

State Spotlight

Louisiana

- **SLO modification.** The state allows teachers to modify their SLTs through a formal process. Teachers must submit a written request for a midcycle conference with their evaluator. The principal and the superintendent must approve any modifications by February 1 of each year.
- **SLO teacher absence.** A teacher's evaluation result can be invalid for any teacher with 60 or more excused absences in a given academic year, which could include maternity leave, military leave, extended sick leave, or sabbatical leave.

Source: *Louisiana COMPASS Teacher Evaluation Guidebook* (<http://www.louisianaschools.net/lde/uploads/20118.pdf>)

State Spotlight

Wisconsin

- **SLO modification.** The state allows teachers to share potential mitigating circumstances, such as an extended medical leave or an event that significantly changes the school culture, with evaluators during end-of-cycle conferences. The educator and the evaluator will determine the degree of impact the situation had on final effectiveness ratings.

Source: *Student Learning Objectives Process Manual: Developmental Pilot 2012-2013* (http://ee.dpi.wi.gov/files/ee/pdf/sloprocessmanual_version1.pdf)

State Spotlight

Connecticut

- **SLO modification.** The state specifically allows teachers with significant assignment changes during the course of a school year to make adjustments to SLOs during midcycle conferences with their evaluator.

Source: *SEED: Connecticut's System for Educator Evaluation and Development* (http://www.connecticutseed.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/SEED_Handbook.pdf)

3. TEACHER CONSIDERATIONS

Teachers of Students With Disabilities

Teachers of students with disabilities, including intervention specialists and push-in/pull-out teachers, are provided explicit guidance in SLO development and the establishment of differentiated learning targets. For example, Rhode Island provides recommendations on the SLO development across various service delivery models (e.g., coteaching and resource room) that compel collaboration in SLO development among both special and general education teachers. Moreover, many states

Tip

The Council for Exceptional Children explicitly recommends that IEP goals *not* be used as SLO growth targets. An SLO is intended as a long-term academic goal for groups of students. An IEP is a goal set for individual students and is highly specific to that individual student. Using IEPs in an SLO process undermines the integrity of both processes (Council for Exceptional Children, 2012).

provide guidance to teachers in establishing differentiated learning targets that are rigorous—yet achievable—and take into account present levels of performance and past learning trajectories for students with disabilities.

Many states are considering how the individualized education programs (IEPs) for students with disabilities fit into the SLO development and monitoring process. Although the process may appear similar, IEPs are customized for individual students and their learning needs, whereas SLOs are designed to be developed for a group of students. In fact, many states have specifically stated that IEP goals cannot be used in SLOs; however, IEP goals should be used as a source of evidence when developing SLOs and the appropriate learning targets.

State Spotlight

Rhode Island provides the following guidance on how teachers in several instructional contexts should write SLOs:

- **Coteachers.** The special educator and the general educator should work together to develop SLOs for all of the students that they teach.
- **Teacher working across grade levels.** Special educators should set broad SLOs for English language arts and/or mathematics that apply to all students, across multiple grade levels.
- **Teacher working across classrooms.** Special educators can take one of two approaches. They can coordinate with general educators to (1) support SLOs for students of mutual responsibilities or (2) develop broad SLOs that apply to all students, across classrooms.
- **IEPs.** Although there may be overlap between content, assessment, and IEP goals, IEPs cannot be used as the SLO itself.

Source: *Rhode Island Educator Evaluation FAQ* (<http://www.ride.ri.gov/EducatorQuality/EducatorEvaluation/RIModelFAQ.aspx>)

State Spotlight

New York provides the following guidance for teachers:

- **Resource teachers.** Resource teachers should include in their SLOs all students for whom they are listed as the teacher of record. If a resource teacher does not have a specific subject area of focus or sees different students throughout the year but not consistently, the teacher should set a schoolwide, district, or team SLO with district staff approval. Resource teachers also should work collaboratively with the classroom teachers of record whose students they work with most frequently.
- **IEPs.** Teachers of students with disabilities may set differentiated growth targets based on the baseline data available for each student. Districts may determine special circumstances for when an IEP goal may be used as an appropriate SLO, as long as the SLO aligns to learning standards. Only academic goals within IEPs can be used as SLOs; behavioral or occupational therapy goals cannot be used in SLOs.

Sources: *Guidance on the New York State District-Wide Growth Goal-Setting Process: Student Learning Objectives* (<http://engageny.org/sites/default/files/resource/attachments/slo-guidance.pdf>); *Student Learning Objectives* (<http://engageny.org/resource/student-learning-objectives>)

Indiana

- **Specialists.** Indiana’s business rules for SLOs state that teachers who do not have a full class of students are to work with the principal and the district to determine how to proceed with SLOs.
- **Teachers of special education students.** Indiana recommends two targeted SLOs rather than the one classroom-level SLO and the one targeted SLO required for general education teachers.

Source: *Special Education Measures of Student Learning Guidance* (<http://www.riseindiana.org/sites/default/files/files/Student%20Learning/RISE%20SPECIAL%20EDUCATION%20GUIDANCE.pdf>)



I WANT TO KNOW MORE

Bonus Resources:

Council for Exceptional Children. (2012, October). *The Council for Exceptional Children’s position on special education teacher evaluation*. Arlington, VA: Author. Retrieved from [http://www.cec.sped.org/~media/Files/Policy/CEC Professional Policies and Positions/Position_on_Special_Education_Teacher_Evaluation_Background.pdf](http://www.cec.sped.org/~media/Files/Policy/CEC%20Professional%20Policies%20and%20Positions/Position_on_Special_Education_Teacher_Evaluation_Background.pdf)

Goe, L., & Holdheide, L. (2011). *Measuring teacher’s contributions to student learning in nontested grades and subjects* (Research & Policy Brief). Washington, DC: National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality. Retrieved from <http://www.tqsource.org/publications/MeasuringTeachersContributions.pdf>

Lachlan-Haché, L., Cushing, E., & Bivona, L. (2012). *Student learning objectives as measures of educator effectiveness: The basics*. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research. Retrieved from http://educatoralent.org/inc/docs/SLOs_Measures_of_Educator_Effectiveness.pdf

Reform Support Network. (n.d.). *Targeting growth: Using student learning objectives as a measure of educator effectiveness*. Fairfax, VA: ICF International. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/implementation-support-unit/tech-assist/targeting-growth.pdf>

For more examples or information on this topic, please e-mail gtlcenter@air.org.

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