Improving Instruction and Achievement with SLOs

Developing student learning objectives requires teamwork, focus, and data.

BY RONALD S. THOMAS



A sea of change is taking place in teacher evaluation systems around the country. School districts in nearly 40 states have implemented student learning objectives or a related methodology as a part of educator evaluations, according to the Community Training and Assistance Center (CTAC).

Student learning objectives (SLOs) are measurable instructional goals established for a specific group of students over a set period of time. Based on data about student learning, they reflect what the teachers believe is most important for students to know and be able to do, and they are aligned to standards, such as Common Core State Standards and/or district or state priorities.

If SLOs are developed effectively, *all* educators are engaged in identifying the most significant learning in their courses, writing data-driven goals, and tracking student progress data—not just those teachers who teach subjects with high-stakes assessments. This school-wide engagement changes the school culture for the better.

I worked with Oakland Mills Middle School in Maryland's Howard County as they developed SLOs to increase student learning and teacher engagement over a two-year period. There were kinks in the process and steep learning curves for everyone, of course, but in the end, teachers felt more empowered, student learning blossomed, and all teachers had data to prove it.

From the Beginning

The process began in late summer as teachers met in their grade-level teams to identify the criteria for the SLOs.

Although each team came up with slightly different criteria, most said that SLOs should be useful in multiple content areas, needed by students in future grades, important enough to be an instructional focus for most of the year, measurable by multiple data sources, and consistent with the rigor of the grade-level state college- and career-ready standards.

Each content area includes important concepts and skills that teachers were concerned that *all* students master by the end of the year. It took time for the teams to complete a careful prioritization of all the possible content to be taught during the year to arrive at the most seminal concept or skill.

If SLOs are rigorous and worthwhile, other concepts and skills will be embedded within them. So, the next step was for the teams to "unpack" the objectives into their specific sub-skills and concepts and sequence the components into one or more learning progressions. This was an essential, but time-consuming step, because it enabled teachers to get "inside" the SLO and determine the instructional flow that would help students succeed.

Then, the teams identified or developed the baseline, mid-point, and post-instruction performance tasks or other data points they would use to assess student progress on the SLO. The goal, where possible, was to mirror the format and rigor of the planned consortia assessments.

The teams next planned the instructional strategies to teach the concepts and skills from the learning progression. We know that the best teachers can identify their most powerful instructional strategies, but only a little more than one-third of Maryland teachers surveyed in a 2014 WestEd study indicated that they received guidance in selecting evidence-based strategies for their SLOs. This is an area that every school must address intentionally.

The school as a whole decided that a mid-interval assessment, as required by the district, was not sufficient to provide the instructional guidance that teachers needed to ensure students are on track to attain proficiency in the SLO. So, the teams selected the Classroom-Focused Improvement Process (CFIP) *(www.mdk12.org/process/cfip)* to track the results of formative assessments. This allows for rapid adjustment of pacing of instruction in *real time* which, if the SLO is rigorous, should happen frequently.

The final step was key to the continuous improvement of Oakland Mills Middle School as a learning community: teams summarized their SLO data and identified the overall patterns of strengths and areas of need, the target groups and individuals who required further attention, effective and ineffective instructional strategies, and the changes the team would make when they implement their next SLO. Teachers shared these with the team who would work with the students at the beginning of the following year, providing them with precise data around which to establish their SLO.

Lessons Learned

As Oakland Mills Middle School Principal Kathy Orlando and I reflected on this experience, we identified some of the things we had learned.

Schools should begin the SLO identification process in the summer by having teams develop their own criteria for the characteristics of SLOs. Even if the criteria are similar among teams, the process of developing the criteria will build greater engagement and commitment.

Leaders should make the selection of the SLO a big deal—not for state accountability reasons, but for student learning reasons. SLOs should be essential knowledge and skills that teachers are passionate about and that they will be pleased to devote significant time to teaching.

Teachers need help getting "inside" their SLOs by unpacking them, determining the concepts and skills embedded in them, generating a learning progression for them, and tracking the data throughout the year. Identifying the most powerful, evidence-based instructional strategies to teach the SLOs should be a professional development priority.

Team-developed SLOs not only promote collaboration and interdisciplinary teaching, they help educators access the instructional support and creativity.

Engagement of all teachers from start to finish is *the key factor* that will make SLOs a major game changer in developing a data-driven culture.

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