m DEPARTMENT
OF EDUCATION

Setting Useful Goals

Goals can provide a rallying point and a common cause for teams and communities as they work to improve students' experiences of school. They can also be an exercise in paperwork, going unvisited after they've been set. This resource is meant to help set goals that will be useful.

Why are goals useful?

Goals – when combined with a solid plan – give us a sense of direction and purpose. A meaningful goal-setting process, and specific, clearly-defined goals, can increase motivation, change behavior, and improve achievement.

What makes goals useful?

Goals that are developed by engaging with families, community members, educators, and other important stakeholders are more likely to be achieved.

Because clear goals can be easily tracked, with the progress made visible and obvious to the people working on them and the people who helped create them, they are often more motivating and useful than vague goals. The SMART (Specific and Strategic, Measurable, Attainable, Results-Based, and Time-Bound) criteria help with setting clear and motivating goals.

Finally, goals are also most likely to be useful when they reflect existing motivations (rather than being created so that a form can be filled out).

Engaging stakeholders

It is important to engage with families and community members to determine priority areas and the goals that reflect these priorities. Creating a shared understanding of goals alongside families and the community establishes buy-in and commitment. Once goals are set, districts can focus on regularly communicating those goals and the progress toward attaining them.

The SMART criteria, with examples

A SMART goal meets six distinct criteria. Most programs administered by the Minnesota Department of Education that involve goal-setting require goals meet those criteria. The table on the next page discusses five of the six criteria, with examples. It is followed by a discussion of how to meet the Strategic criterion by connecting existing motivations to statewide goals.

SMART Criteria and Examples

SMART Criterion	Importance	Ambiguous Versions	Clear Examples
Specific (and Strategic – see next page)	Specific goals are easier to measure and show progress on than broader goals, which risk being vague. The details describe the data so stakeholders know how to check results.	The percentage of all students who are proficient on the Minnesota reading accountability tests will increase from 72.1% in 2018 to 76.0% in 2019. **Confusion:** What data, and about whom, does this represent?	The percentage of **all students enrolled in grades 3-5 for at least half an academic year** at **XYZ Academy** who are proficient on the Minnesota reading accountability tests will increase from 72.1% in 2018 to 76.0% in 2019.
Measurable	Goals based on measurements help prove when progress is happening. Goals with starting and ending values allow people to show what progress is expected.	All students enrolled in grades 3-5 for at least half an academic year at XYZ Academy will improve reading skills between 2018 and 2019. **Confusion:** What data are we using, and what is the desired change?	**The percentage** of all students enrolled in grades 3-5 for at least half an academic year at XYZ Academy who are proficient on **the Minnesota reading accountability tests** will increase **from 72.1%** in 2018 **to 76.0%** in 2019.
Attainable	People are more motivated to work toward goals they believe they can achieve than toward goals that seem unrealistic.	The percentage of all students who are proficient on the Minnesota reading accountability tests will increase from 72.1% in 2018 to 90.0% in 2019. **Confusion:** What increase is reasonable in one year?	The percentage of all students enrolled in grades 3-5 for at least half an academic year at XYZ Academy who are proficient on the Minnesota reading accountability tests will increase from 72.1% in 2018 to **76.0%** in 2019.
Results-Based	Goals based on specific results *for students* rather than inputs or tasks keep the focus on the motivating purpose – the big "why" – used when setting the goals.	The percentage of all students receiving 8 hours or more of focused reading instruction per week will increase from 72.1% in 2018 to 76.0% in 2019. **Confusion:** What is the student outcome we expect to see?	The percentage of all students enrolled in grades 3-5 for at least half an academic year at XYZ Academy who are **proficient** on the Minnesota reading accountability tests will increase from 72.1% in 2018 to 76.0% in 2019.
Time-Bound	Goals with a time frame create accountability and commitment and distinguish single-year from multi-year goals.	The percentage of all students who are proficient on the Minnesota reading accountability tests will increase from 72.1% to 76.0%. **Confusion:** What is the baseline, and when do we check the result?	The percentage of all students enrolled in grades 3-5 for at least half an academic year at XYZ Academy who are proficient on the Minnesota reading accountability tests will increase from 72.1% **in 2018** to 76.0% **in 2019**.

Strategic: Rationale, context, and timeline

The goal-setting process is most meaningful when the goals at each level – student, teacher team, school, district, and state – are connected and aligned. Minnesota has set statewide goals under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and the state's World's Best Workforce (WBWF) law, which defines the following broad areas for goals:

- School readiness.
- All third grade students achieve grade-level literacy.
- Close the academic achievement gap among all racial and ethnic groups of students and between students living in poverty and students not living in poverty.
- All students attain career and college readiness before graduating from high school.
- All students graduate from high school.

Many programs call for goal-setting, and requirements for goals can vary from program to program. Setting strategic goals that reflect your community's true priorities and values (and that don't contradict each other) keeps the goals useful.

This tool is meant to help build on the motivations and work that already exist in your community when developing new goals and reflecting on current goals.

Strategic Goal-Setting

Key Question	Example	Try It Yourself
What do community members – especially from historically underserved populations – want for our students, and **why**?	Many parents are requesting their children be placed with specific teachers. After probing deeper, it's become clear that **certain teachers are seen as significantly better** than other teachers in the same grades or subjects. This suggests community concerns about **teacher effectiveness**.	*What is your "why"?*
What do other leaders and I want for our students that's similar to what community members want, and **why**?	We want all of our students to be served by effective teachers, in part because **we want to make sure that the quality of a student's experience isn't determined by how involved or connected a parent is able to be**.	*What is your "why"?*

Key Question	Example	Try It Yourself
How do these priorities **connect to our current work**?	PLCs have begun to work on **improving curriculum, instruction, and assessment in alignment with standards**. In an effort to increase consistency, our teachers have begun to develop some **common, standards-aligned assessments**, including pre-assessments at the beginning of the year or semester, at each elementary grade level and in each secondary subject area.	
How do these priorities **connect to other local and state goals**?	We've already been prioritizing **high-quality instruction in our district**, and the state has made **teacher equity**, including equitable access to effective teachers, a goal.	
What adult actions or results can we measure that reflect these priorities? NOTE: This can be the focus of more day-to-day attention than the goal based on student results.	We will track progress by looking at the **domains focused on classroom practice** in our teacher development and evaluation system. Our target is to have 100% of teachers meeting professional expectations in these domains by 2022.	

Key Question	Example	Try It Yourself
What student results can we measure that reflect these priorities?	We would like to measure end-of-term student mastery on standards-aligned common assessments for each grade and subject level, as well as beginning-of-term to end-of-term changes in student mastery our teachers have developed. This will allow for detailed evaluation of student results overall and for specific student groups. However, we have not finished developing those common assessments. While we do, we can use **proficiency on the MCAs and MTAS tests** as an incomplete proxy in some grades and subjects. We expect proficiency rates to increase as classroom practice improves.	
How do we want to see these results change **in the long-term**, and **why is that the change you want to see**?	We expect that meeting our target for teacher practice will increase student proficiency as measured by the MCAs and MTAS (which we will use for goal-setting while we develop common assessments). Specifically, we expect to see **math proficiency increase from 86.3% in 2018 to 95.0% in 2022** for students enrolled for the full school year.	
How do we want to see these results change **in the next year**?	**In 2018, 86.3%** of Gopherville students enrolled for the full school year were proficient on the math MCAs and MTAS. **In 2019,** our goal is **a proficiency rate of 88.0%** for similarly enrolled students**.**	

Example goals from Gopherville

This section provides some example goals, as well as statewide goals included in Minnesota's ESSA state plan. When a district set its own local goals, it can use the measurements from the statewide goals as starting points, but it can also use other data sources if they better reflect the community's priorities.

School readiness

In 2017-18, students who completed Gopherville's pre-kindergarten program improved by an average of 10 points on Local Assessment X between the beginning and end of their program. In 2018-19, students who complete the program will improve by an average of 15 points on Local Assessment X.

The percentage of all Gopherville kindergarteners with proficient Kindergarten Entry Profile (KEP) results will increase from 80.1% in 2017-18 to 85.0% in 2018-19.

Third grade literacy

State goal: The percentage of third grade students in Minnesota public schools who show proficiency on the reading MCA and MTAS tests will be 90.0%, with no student group below 85%, by 2025. How does your SMART goal align with this?

The percentage of all students enrolled in grade 3 for at least half a school year in Gopherville who are proficient on the Minnesota reading accountability tests will increase from 82.8% in 2018 to 84.0% in 2019.

24.8% of students enrolled in grade 3 for at least half a school year in Gopherville met their individual growth targets on the NWEA reading test in 2017-18. In 2018-19, 30.0% of students enrolled in grade 3 for at least half a school year will meet their individual NWEA reading growth targets.

Close the academic achievement gap

State goal: The percentage of students in Minnesota public schools who show proficiency on the MCA and MTAS tests will increase from 59.4% in 2017 to 90.0% in reading and from 57.7% to 90.0% in math, with no student group below 85%, by 2025. How does your SMART goal align with this?

The percentage of Hispanic students enrolled in Gopherville for at least half a school year who are proficient on the MCA and MTAS math tests will increase from 68.7% in 2018 to 72.0% in 2019. Similarly enrolled white students' proficiency rate will increase from 71.5% in 2018 to 73.0% in 2019.

The percentage of black students enrolled in Gopherville for at least half a school year who reach their individual reading targets on the NWEA test will increase from 65.3% in 2018 to 71.0% in 2019. The percentage of similarly enrolled white students who reach their targets will increase from 72.1% in 2018 to 76.0% in 2019.

For students enrolled for at least half a school year in Gopherville in both 2017-18 and 2018-19, the percentage who advance at least one achievement level (e.g. from Does Not Meet Standards to Partially Meets Standards) on the MCA and MTAS mathematics test will increase from 15.2% to 18.0% for students eligible for free or reduced price meals and from 18.3% to 19.0% for students not eligible for free or reduced price meals.

NOTE ABOUT ACHIEVEMENT GAPS: In very small and/or homogeneous districts where achievement gaps cannot be meaningfully calculated by race/ethnicity, economic status, English learner status, or disability, other groups (such as gender) can also be analyzed for gaps. It can also be useful to combine groups; for example, a district might combine its students of color and American Indian populations into one group to compare to white students.

Career and college readiness

State goal: The percentage of eighth grade students in Minnesota public schools who show proficiency on the math MCA and MTAS tests will be 90.0%, with no student group below 85%, by 2025. How does your SMART goal align with this?

The percentage of Gopherville's graduating students who have earned college credit in articulated concurrent enrollment, dual credit, and/or PSEO courses will increase from 11.0% in 2018 to 20.0% in 2019.

The percentage of 11th graders in Gopherville who participate in work-based learning or youth apprenticeship will increase from 8.2% in the 2017-18 school year to 12.0% in the 2018-19 school year. As a result, the percentage of Gopherville's graduating students who have received an industrial certification will increase from 7.3% in 2018 to 11.0% in 2020.

The percentage of Gopherville 10th graders who report progress toward completion of PLP goals in Element 1 will increase from 84.2% in 2018 to 87.0% in 2019.

All 11th graders in Gopherville take the ACT. The percentage who meet at least one ACT college-ready benchmark (reading, English, math, or science) will increase from 31.2% in 2018 to 34.0% in 2019.

From 2018 to 2019, the percentage of Gopherville's graduating seniors who enroll in college the next fall will increase from 74.2% to 78.0%. Of students who enroll in college, the percentage taking developmental education courses will decrease from 35.3% in 2018 to 31.4% in 2019.

Graduation

State goal: Minnesota's four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate will increase from 78.2% in 2012 to 90.0% in 2020, with no student group below 85%. How does your SMART goal align with this?

Gopherville's four-year graduation rate will improve from 92.2% in 2018 to 95.0% in 2019.

An analysis of Gopherville's four-year rate shows that most non-graduates are continuing their education, but are behind in credits. The percentage of students who are on-track with credit completion at the end of 11th grade will increase from 85.4% in 2018 to 90.0% in 2019.

Gopherville's four-year dropout rate in 2018 was 7.2%. By focusing on dropout reengagement, Gopherville's four-year dropout rate in 2019 will be 4.5%.

School climate

While not one of the goal areas under World's Best Workforce, school climate is an important area where schools or districts can set goals for other programs and for their own continuous improvement work.

The percentage of Gopherville students considered "highly engaged" based on positive responses to at least five out of six specific questions from the Minnesota Student Survey will increase from 82.1% in 2019 to 87.0% in 2022.

The percentage of Gopherville students enrolled for at least half the year who are consistently attending – defined as attending more than 90% of the time they are enrolled – will increase from 84.4% in 2018 to 86.0% in 2019.

Where can I find data from the state?

The Minnesota Report Card includes data on:

- State test results, including proficiency rates and achievement levels.
- Graduation rates.
- English language development on the ACCESS test.
- College-going.
- Engagement and safety survey results from the Minnesota Student Survey.
- Accountability indicators under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

MDE's Data Reports and Analytics page provides access to, among other areas:

- World's Best Workforce district data profiles, including district and regional data on 3rd grade reading proficiency, academic achievement for all student groups, 8th grade math (a rough proxy for career and college readiness), graduation, and teacher equity.
- Accountability indicators under ESSA, including academic achievement, progress toward English language proficiency, academic progress, four-year and seven-year graduation rates, and consistent attendance.
- Other graduation rate data (via the "Student" link under "Student Data").
- Minnesota Student Survey data.