



The Power of SMART Goals: Using Goals to Improve Student Learning

Study Guide

This study guide is a companion to the newest book by Jan O’Neill and Anne Conzemius: *The Power of SMART Goals: Using Goals to Improve Student Learning*. It can be used by individuals, small groups, or an entire faculty to identify key points, raise questions for consideration, and suggest steps that might be taken to promote the use of SMART goals in a school or district. This guide is arranged by chapter, enabling readers to either work their way through the entire book or to focus on the specific topics addressed in a particular chapter.

We thank you for your interest in this book, and we hope that this guide proves to be a useful tool in your efforts to explore the SMART goals process.

Chapter 1

Introduction: The SMART Goals Process

1. The authors write, “Although most of us acknowledge the power of goals in our own lives, they remain the single most underestimated and underutilized means of improving student learning—particularly in the classroom—in education today.” Are goals underestimated and underutilized in your school and classrooms? If the teachers in your school *are* using goals to improve student learning in the classroom, what skills and structures empower them to do this? If they aren’t, what are one or two simple steps that could be taken to move teachers in this direction?
2. The authors cite research that “the power of student engagement in setting and monitoring goals was found to be second only to active participation in impacting student learning.” What role should goals play in a student’s academic life? What connections do you see between student goal-setting, feedback, and their motivation to take responsibility for their learning?
3. Goals, values, and behaviors are interrelated. How do the goals in your school reflect the values of your school and the kinds of behaviors you want to reinforce? Do your goals drive staff, student, and parent behavior? Could your goals be better focused on the behaviors and values that are important to your school?

4. The authors state that common roadblocks to goal-setting and monitoring include:
- The lack of a goal-setting mindset
 - The lack of common assessment tools developed with colleagues and inexperience using these tools to examine student data collaboratively
 - A lack of familiarity with the power of providing formulative feedback to both teachers and students
 - Discomfort with making ourselves vulnerable

Examine each of these roadblocks one at a time and dialogue about why they exist. What are the assumptions people have about assessment, feedback, grades, and sharing work? Seek to surface the assumptions in your group and the mental models people have about goal-setting and monitoring.

5. Have a conversation as a small group or as a full staff about the outcomes you want to achieve. Talk about how you would know these important outcomes were being achieved. How would you measure along the way to give yourselves feedback on your progress? If you have already identified clear, specific outcomes, are you including enough time to celebrate progress along the way? What elements of the 30+ minute meeting process do you already have in place in your school? What elements are missing, and what is the impact? Talk about what it would take to adopt this process and how it might benefit student and adult learning in your school.

Chapter 2

Keeping Goals Alive

1. The QLD Framework and the five key questions can help you build a culture of shared responsibility in your schools and district. Which of the elements of the QLD Framework—focus, collaboration, reflection, and leadership capacity—are alive and well in your school or district? Which could use more support? How might the five key questions help your school or district strengthen its focus, collaboration, reflection, and leadership capacity?
2. Newmann and Wehlage (1995) found that “the quality of education for children depends ultimately not on specific techniques, practices or structures, but on more basic human and social resources in a school, especially on the commitment and competence (the will and skill) of educators, and on students’ efforts to learn” (p. 1). Essentially, these researchers are talking about how resources are organized for change and improvement. What change model are you using as a school or district that builds educators’ commitment and competence as well as students’ efforts to learn? How are you organizing your resources?
3. Aristotle said that “excellence . . . is not an act, but a habit.” This quote suggests that right actions over time produce excellence. What are some successful strategies others in your group have used to build a habit of using goals to improve their personal and professional lives?

Take time to find out how others in your group have begun using SMART goals and what the impact has been.

4. Consider a change that is about to take place or is taking place in your school or district. Use Fullan's Three-Phase Change Model to assess whether you have addressed the necessary factors for successful change. If there are missing pieces, discuss specific steps you could take to make sure those factors are addressed.

Chapter 3

Linking Assessment and Goals

1. This chapter discusses the importance of examining student data collectively. It takes great trust to be able to do this objectively and honestly. The authors provide some examples of data trust rules. How could a group make sure their data trust rules live beyond the paper they are written on? What might happen if this important groundwork is not laid?
2. Involving students in the assessment process results in improved student learning; however, this is a relatively new practice for most teachers, and it may look different at different grade levels. Brainstorm reasons teachers might be resistant to involving students in assessment. Consider using Fullan's Three-Phase Change Model to uncover causes of resistance. Identify one or two main causes that could be addressed immediately.

3. Use a flipchart to brainstorm the differences between “assessment *of* learning” and “assessment *for* learning.” Discuss examples of each. Then examine your own school or district’s assessment policies and practices. Is there balance between “of” and “for?” Are assessments being used appropriately and for the purposes they were intended? What seem to be the underlying assumptions about assessment, its uses, and its primary users?

4. How might you support staff to develop sound assessment tools that are tied closely to the curriculum and used “just in time” to ensure immediate feedback regarding whether students have mastered the material covered?

5. To get the most leverage, goals and feedback need to go together. What are the potential uses of the SMART goal tree in a classroom, school, and district as a tool for focusing, collaborating, reflecting, and improving? How, when, and where might a student use this tool? How about a teacher? A team of teachers? Parents? A school improvement team? What about a district-level team?

Chapter 4

SMART Goal–Driven Curriculum and Instruction

1. Chapter 4 stresses the importance of focusing on the big picture in curriculum and not getting bogged down by the details. Moving teachers from text-driven instruction to big idea–driven instruction is a giant leap for many, requiring a new mental model about the purpose of curriculum. Explore what this mental model would look like. What are the assumptions about teaching and learning underlying this model?
2. This chapter provides details about how to move from big ideas to more specific learning targets and appropriate assessment methods. The authors conclude their examples with learning targets in kid-friendly language. Choose a curricular goal and develop a table (as in Figure 4.3). Now develop this goal into kid-friendly language. Experiment with a lesson in your own classroom, using learning targets language. Share the assessment with students and report back to your team with the results.
3. The data dialogue inquiry cycle outlined in this chapter drives teachers to a deeper level of understanding about student learning and results; however, it takes time, patience, and discipline to use this cycle well, and most of us feel too busy to take the time to dig this deeply. How could you “slow down to go fast” and change the habit of rushing to conclusions? What are two or three simple things you could do to begin changing this habit?

4. Why is it important to get the team to commit to improvement goals before the next time the assessment is administered? What should a team consider when setting improvement goals between assessments? Discuss the roles of time, resources, motivation, focus, and commitment in setting these goals.

Chapter 5

Using SMART Goals to Drive Professional Development

1. The authors write, “Setting and using student-focused goals linked to content and performance standards can lead to highly focused professional development that results in better learning for students.” Are professional learning goals (organizational, individual, and student learning) in your school and district closely linked to content and performance standards? If not, how can you support growth in this area?
2. The success of professional development is demonstrated by improved student learning. Do you have measures in place at your school and district to ensure that professional development is linked to student learning outcomes? Do you have measures to ensure that student learning “consistently aligns with and supports organizational and individual professional goals”? How might these measures be improved?

3. In this chapter, leadership is defined as being the responsibility of everyone in the organization. When leadership is shared, there is a shift of roles as the principal becomes more of a coach and teachers assume greater responsibility, including how to use data to inform and guide their instruction. What type of data is currently being used by teachers, and is it building their knowledge of how to deliver better instruction? What role is the principal playing in your school? Is she or he modeling how to use data to inform and guide instruction?

Chapter 6

Building Capacity for Goal-Oriented Thinking

1. The authors ask, “Why do some teachers take initiative while others hold back and wait to be told what to do, or even resist when invited to participate in improvement efforts?” They suggest that this is because some people are optimists and will persevere in the face of difficulty, while pessimists simply give up at the first sign of failure. Do you agree or disagree with this position? Why?
2. Dialogue together about the reasons for teacher discouragement. What are some of the causes? Use the “Five Why’s” technique (see *The Handbook for SMART School Teams*, Solution Tree, 2002) to dig more deeply into root causes. Examine assumptions about why people go into teaching and where the disconnects may occur.

3. Consider the reasons you keep on going in spite of failure or fatigue. What works to motivate you? Share these reasons with your group. Explore together what a process might look like for motivating teachers throughout their careers. What role could SMART goals play in remotivating teachers?

4. This chapter describes several things that principals can do to grow teacher leadership. Rate yourself in these areas. In what areas are you strongest? In what areas do you need to improve? How do you know? How could you find out?

5. The busy pace of the school works against finding time for reflection. Yet, as the authors state, “Engaging in reflection is one of the most powerful things teachers can do to grow their leadership.” How can we support each other to regularly get out of the tumble and heat of the “dryer” and take the time to reflect on our work?

Chapter 7

Case Studies

1. How does the 7-step process outlined in this chapter mirror the school improvement process you are currently using? What is added by your process or by this process? Reflect on each step and examine how it adds value to overall school improvement success.

2. What would it look like, sound like, and feel like at your school if all students had “input and ownership of their learning?” What would you stop doing, keep doing, and start doing? Generate a list for each of these and pick one thing from each list to act on.
3. Imagine that a researcher is coming to visit your district, school, or classroom. This researcher wants to know everything she or he can before the visit: What have you done to make things better today than they were yesterday? What policies, systems, practices, and people have you put in place to make improvements? How are student results different today than they were yesterday? What role have SMART goals, balanced assessment, focused curriculum, professional development, and shared responsibility played in your story? Write your story as a case study for this visiting researcher.

What did you learn as a result of participating in this reflection process?

Chapter 8

Renewing Our Schools, Our Practices, Ourselves

1. As the authors state, “Those of us who are passionate about being learners ourselves, who are never satisfied with the status quo, will constantly search for new and better ways to reach each and every student. Those of us who understand that the job is far too complex to be done alone will willingly collaborate with our colleagues to focus

on SMART goals, develop ongoing assessments, and use those assessments to continuously improve our instruction and programs.” Dialogue with your colleagues about your willingness to engage in this level of deep collaboration and reflection. What do you need to be able to reach this level? What do others need?

2. Consider your personal and professional learning goals. Write a statement of commitment, develop a strategy/action plan, and ask your colleagues for support. Then schedule time with each other throughout the year to ensure you are getting the feedback you need to stick to your commitment.

Reference

Newmann, F., & Wehlage, G. (1995). *Successful school restructuring*. Madison, WI: Center for Organization and Restructuring of Schools.