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FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS AND LEADERS

WORK SMARTER, NOT HARDER

SMART goals keep key objectives in focus

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

The teacher was skeptical about SMART goals. She had been through planning and goal-setting before. She expected SMART goals to be another addition to her workload that would offer little or nothing to improve what she cared about most, her instruction and her students' learning.



Her middle school set a schoolwide SMART goal of reaching 85% proficiency on the statewide math assessment by 2008. Then, the 7th-grade math teachers set their own grade-level SMART goal. She respected her colleagues and she honestly evaluated her teaching to determine what she could do to help the team achieve its goal.

To be faithful to the SMART goals process, the team had agreed to do several benchmark assessments before the statewide assessment. She knew that if too few of her students were proficient on those assessments, she would need to reteach.

And that's when it all began to make sense to her. She discovered that her focus on a few key objectives meant that her students understood concepts more quickly. So, instead of dwelling on some concepts for days or even weeks, she could move on. That meant her students were learning more efficiently and she was

Continued on p. 2

WHAT'S INSIDE

Tree Diagram
Page 4

Tree Diagram for SMART Climate Goals
Page 5

Tree Diagram for SMART Writing Goals for Middle School Students
Page 6

5 Meetings for Developing SMART Goals
Page 7

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800-727-7288
www.nsdc.org

Work smarter, not harder, with SMART goals

"The reason most people never reach their goals is that they don't define them, or ever seriously consider them as believable or achievable. Winners can tell you where they are going, what they plan to do along the way, and who will be sharing the adventure with them."

— Denis Watley

ATTEND CONFERENCE SESSION

Jan O'Neill is presenting a concurrent session on "A SMART Approach to Improving Student Learning Districtwide" at NSDC's Annual Conference in Dallas. Look for Session J11.

Continued from p. 1

able to move more quickly through the curriculum.

Although she had been worried that SMART goals would consume more of her time, she discovered that using the SMART goals actually created more time for her.

This teacher's discovery should not be surprising. Businesses have long used SMART goals as a way to cut through the morass of conflicting priorities and focus their energies on goals that would make a difference to their work. Although SMART goals did not seep into the education lexicon until the 1990s, the power that they bring to school improvement work is the same. SMART goals can focus a school's or district's work and determine whether the work is making a difference.

Anne Conzemius, who has been working for more than 10 years with schools and districts to set SMART goals, said goals that schools set for themselves are more empowering for administrators and teachers than goals that are set for schools by external forces. "Mandates just don't carry the same life with them. When teachers engage with their grade-level colleagues or other teachers in their buildings to create meaningful goals, that makes a difference," said Conzemius, who with co-author Jan O'Neill wrote *The Power of SMART Goals* (Solution Tree, 2006). They are founders of Quality Leadership by Design, an educational consulting firm in Madison, Wis.

"One reason a lot of goals were never useful is because they didn't saturate into the classroom. For goals to make a difference to teachers, teachers have to be engaged in the process of developing the goal so they own the goal. That means teachers have to look at the data and design a goal that makes sense to them. The goal becomes powerful when teachers use it to inform their practice," she said.

CHALLENGES OF SETTING SMART GOALS

For a long time, Conzemius and O'Neill had to work to sell schools and districts on the idea that setting goals was an essential part of the improvement process. That's no longer necessary, they said. Schools and districts get that part of the message.

The problem now is not that districts lack goals. "It's that they want a goal for everything," Conzemius said.

O'Neill agrees. "We walked into one district where there were literally hundreds of goals. One school might have several dozen goals. When you have that many goals, nothing is guiding your improvement work," she said.

"In a lot of places, the strategic part gets lost but the true power of SMART goals is in that first criteria. It's the strategic nature of SMART goals that results in breakthrough improvement. When goals are strategic, they're focused on one or two academic breakthrough areas," O'Neill said.

"It's almost impossible to make significant improvement if you're trying to focus on multiple goals," O'Neill said. "You will be doing a lot of data gathering on key measures, studying new instructional strategies, assessing student progress, and evaluating where to go next. It's hard to do all that and focus on more than one goal at a time. Plus, you'll actually make greater progress on closing gaps in all areas if you focus on deeply improving just one area."

The pair also have learned that goal setting needs to start at the top of the organization. That means that superintendents and their cabinets should be involved in the process. "If there is little coherence in the system overall, it's almost impossible for a school to be successful because they need the support of curriculum, technology, and professional development to achieve their goals. At the system level, the superintendent and others need to model and communicate the importance of strategic goals and priorities," Conzemius said.

Once district goals are in place, schools can write goals to complement those district goals. Then grade-level or content-area teams can align their goals to support the school goals. The classroom teacher can write his or her SMART goals to blend with the grade-level or content-area goals. When that happens, Conzemius and O'Neill said systems start to make real progress.■

What are SMART goals?

The acronym SMART comes from the five components of SMART goals.

- Strategic and Specific
- Measurable
- Attainable
- Results-based
- Time-bound

Patricia Roy (2007) describes SMART goals this way:

Strategic goals focus on high-priority issues that are part of a comprehensive school or district plan. **Specific** goals focus on the precise needs of students for whom the goal is aimed.

For example, strategic goals are determined, in part, from analyzing student achievement and behavioral data. When this data is disaggregated, commonalities and differences among student groups become more apparent.

Measurable goals contain information about how a change will be calculated. The goal identifies the tool or instrument that will be used to measure whether the school or team has attained the desired results. Measurement is best accomplished by using a number of different tools and strategies. If a consistent pattern of change is seen through multiple measures, then the school will have greater confidence that its actions made the difference. For example, teams would use results from state assessment data, national standardized assessments, district or school performance measures, discipline referrals, or other instruments that measure performance, outcomes, or results.

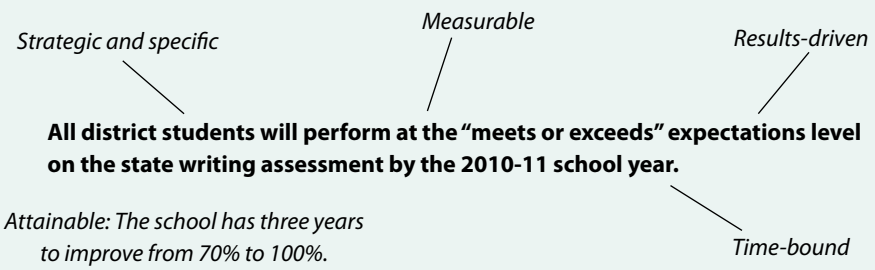
Attainable goals include actions that the school can control or influence and that can be accomplished with existing resources. The team setting the goal identifies a baseline or starting point when determining whether a goal is attainable. The team also needs to know how much time and what other resources are available to accomplish the goal. There is a delicate balance between setting a goal that is compelling and energizing to staff while not becoming so unrealistic that educators are discouraged from accepting the goal because they believe it's not possible to reach.

Results-based goals identify specific outcomes that are measurable or observable. Results could be expressed as attaining a certain level of student achievement in a content area, an increase in the number of students who improve in a certain area, or as improved performance as defined and measured by a performance rubric or clear criteria.

Many school people confuse "activity" with "results." They place into their school improvement goals the "means" they will use to accomplish the goal, such as implementing a new mathematics program or using cooperative learning strategies, rather than describing the outcome they expect for students. Results-based means a clear and specific description of the results of the school's activities.

Time-bound goals identify the amount of time required to accomplish it. Goals are sometimes more compelling when there is a sense of urgency attached to them. A pre-determined timeframe can create a sense of urgency and make the goal a priority to staff and students.

In short, SMART goals help us determine which of our efforts is making a difference, encourage us to set benchmarks to monitor progress, and identify specific evaluation measures.



Source: Roy, P. (2007). *A tool kit for quality professional development in Arkansas.* Oxford, OH: NSDC.

"Set priorities for your goals. A major part of successful living lies in the ability to put first things first. Indeed, the reason most major goals are not achieved is that we spend our time doing second things first."

— Robert J. McKain

▶ Jan O'Neill and Anne Conzemius recommend a series of structured meetings to help schools and districts write SMART goals. See Page 7 for their plan.

Tree diagram

NSDC TOOL

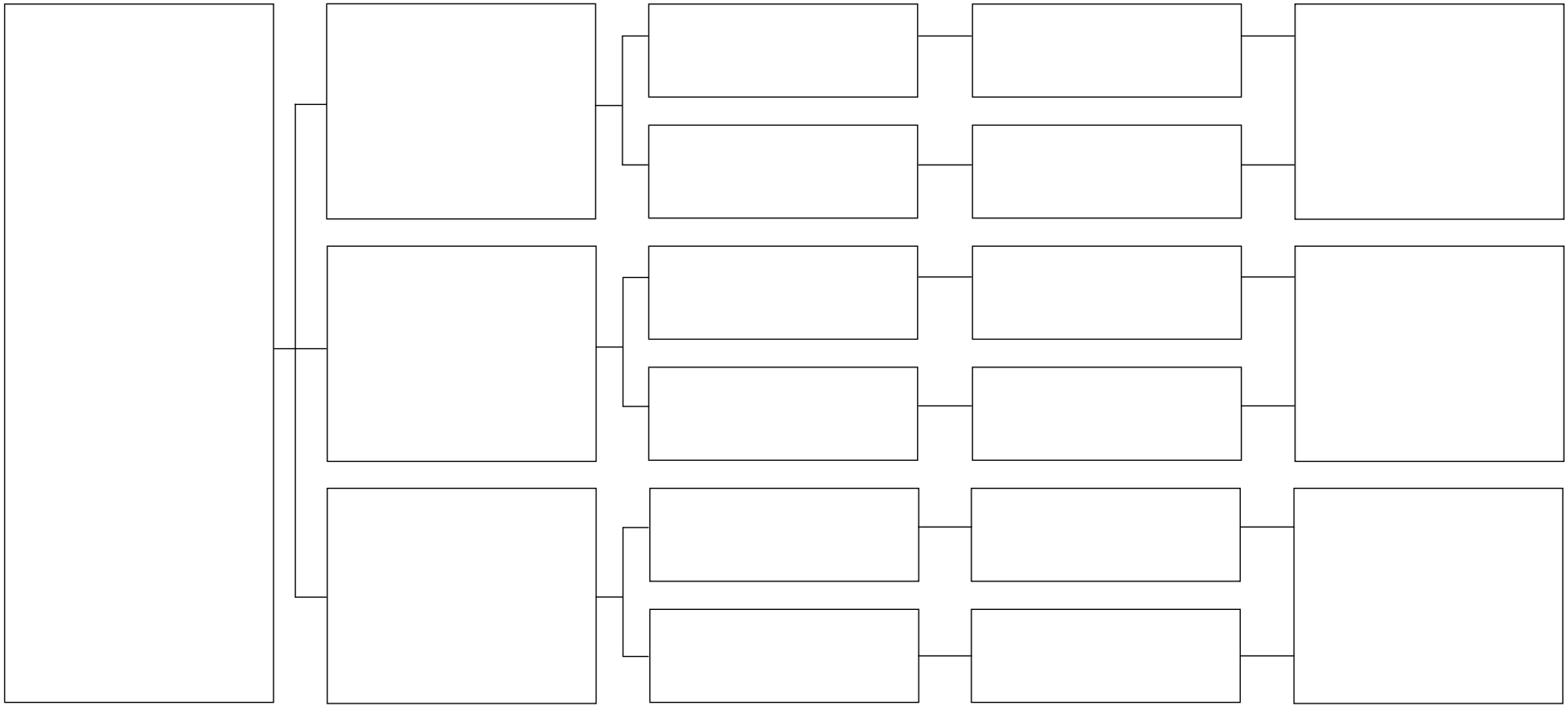
RESULTS GOAL
Ultimate improvement we want to see in student skills, competencies, performance.

INDICATORS
Standards and objectives (weak areas for students).

MEASURES
Tools we'll use to determine where students are now and whether they are improving.

TARGETS
The attainable level we'd like to see.

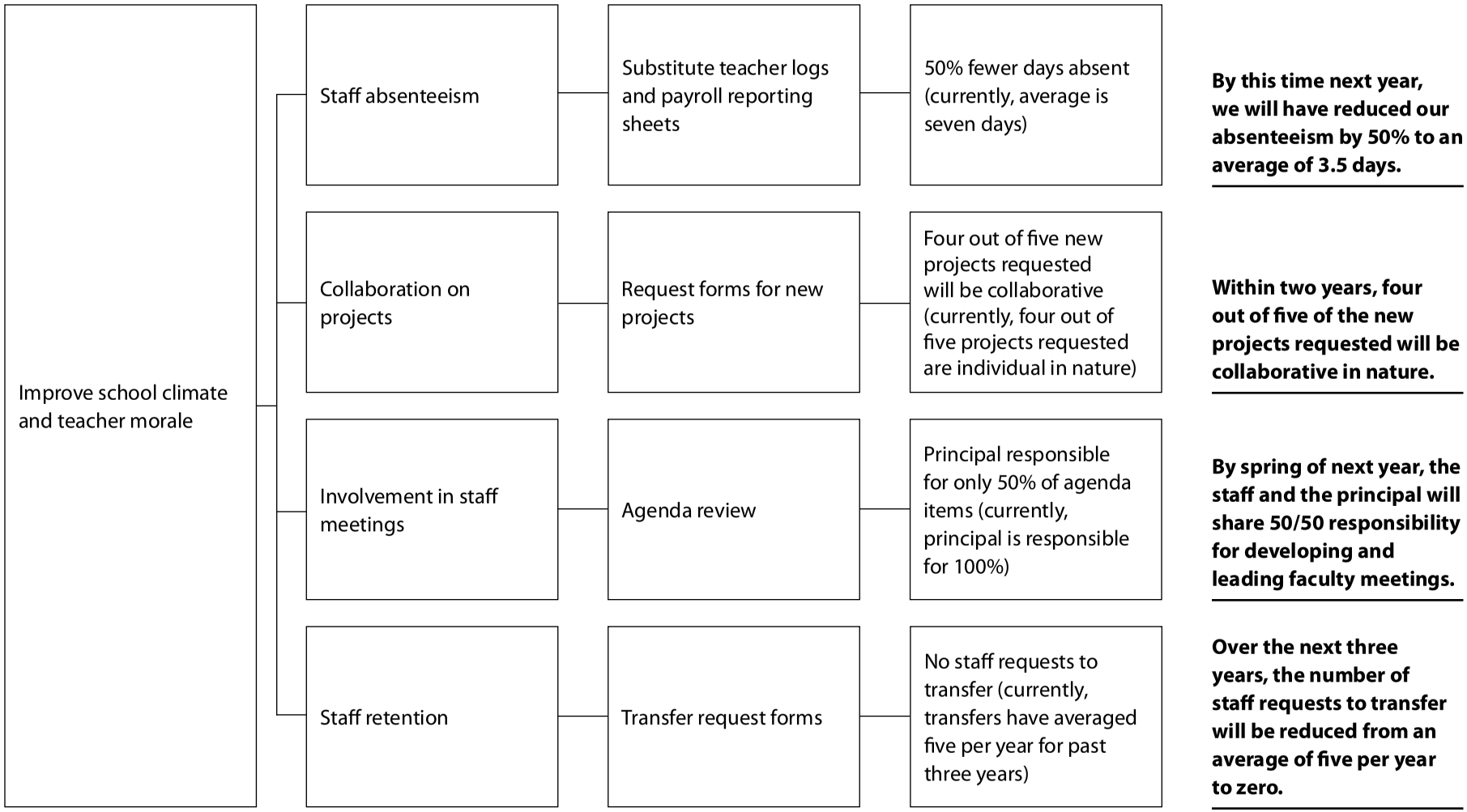
SMART GOALS
Strategic/specific, measurable, attainable, results-based, and time-bound.



Source: Used with permission of Quality Leadership by Design, qldlearning.com.

Tree diagram for SMART climate goals

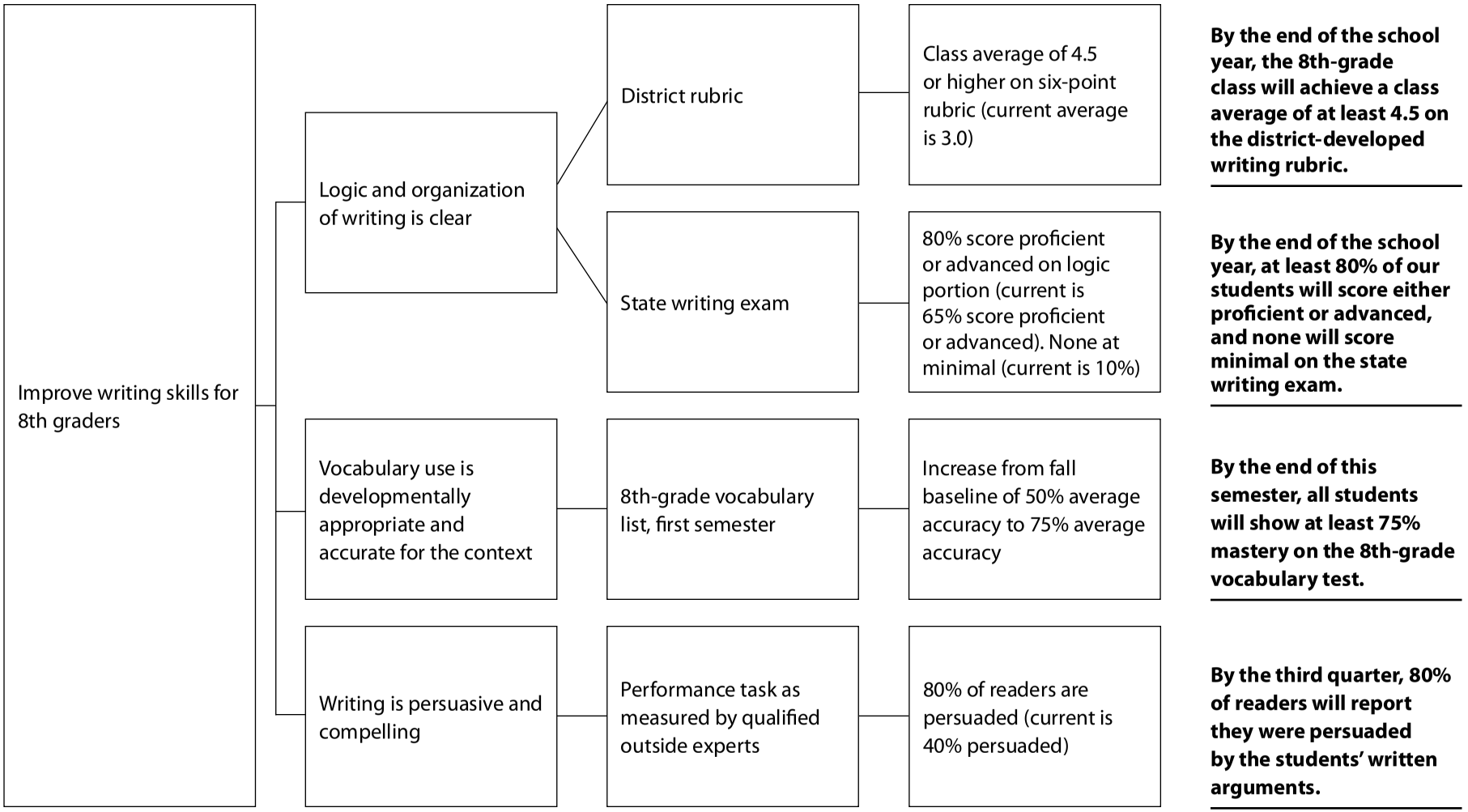
NSDC **TOOL**



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Tree diagram for SMART writing goals for middle school students

NSDC TOOL



Source: Used with permission of Quality Leadership by Design, qldlearning.com.

5 meetings for developing SMART goals

NSDC **TOOL**

Meeting #1: Identify the need by isolating the opportunity or gap between the current situation and what is wanted.

5 min. Ask the presenting question: What student learning issues are we struggling with the most?
10 min. Brainstorm responses.
5 min. Identify top three priorities by multivoting.
10 min. Ask: What more do we need to know? How can we find out?

Between meetings, gather student data and information on priority areas.

Meeting #2: Identify SMART goals for priority areas.

10 min. Present graphs of student performance in area of concern. (Focus on skill areas or proficiency/performance level.)
10 min. Brainstorm result-oriented goal(s) for priority area(s).
5 min. Select one results-oriented goal for each priority area(s).
10 min. Make the results-oriented goal SMART. Individuals write indicators, measures, and targets for one goal.

Consider indicators by skill/competence/performance expectations aligned to standards. Consider both standardized and classroom-based measures. Consider student data when writing targets.

5 min. Share SMART goals round robin one at a time.
15 min. Have group select "best of" indicators, measures, and targets to write group SMART goal.
10 min. Ask: What do we need to know to affect student learning for this SMART goal?

Between meetings, do literature research or best practice review.

Meeting #3: Correlate best practices to current practices.

10 min. Share information gathered between meetings.
10 min. Develop matrix. What are we already doing that supports best practice in this area? What else would we like to learn about?
10 min. Identify instructional strategies we want to do, do more often, or stop doing.

Between meetings, research ways to develop professional knowledge to learn best practices.

Meeting #4: Identify staff development methods we want to use.

10 min. Share information about various staff development methods.
10 min. Use matrix. Individuals select preferred strategy for learning about best practices, identifying areas in which they are willing to coach/teach others.
15 min. Discuss implementation. How will we implement staff development for best practices? What support do we need? How will we measure progress on the SMART goal?

Between meetings, implement staff development and integration of best practices. Gather data to measure against the baseline.

Meeting #5: Analyze results and refocus efforts.

10 min. Present graphs of new data.
15 min. Discuss what worked, what did not work, and why.
15 min. If the instructional strategy worked well, discuss how to hold the gains. If the strategy did not work well, decide next steps: Start doing the strategy differently, stop doing the strategy altogether, or start a new strategy.

Start the cycle over again.

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Hayes Mizell

Emeritus executive director
Dennis Sparks

Editor
Joan Richardson

Designer
Sue Chevalier

BUSINESS OFFICE
5995 Fairfield Road, #4
Oxford OH 45056
513-523-6029
800-727-7288
Fax: 513-523-0638
NSDCoffice@nsdc.org
www.nsdc.org

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Countdown to Dallas!

There's still time to register for NSDC's 39th Annual Conference in Dallas on Dec. 1-5.

You can register online. Start that process at: **www.nsdc.org/conference07/welcome/hostletter.cfm**

Check the web site for the latest information about hotels — **www.nsdc.org/connect/events.cfm**

As you think ahead to the conference, remember to talk with colleagues about the sessions they're planning to attend so you can coordinate your learning.

AND START THINKING ABOUT WASHINGTON IN '08

Proposals to present at NSDC's Annual Conference in the Washington, D.C., area in December 2008 are available now on the web site — **www.nsdc.org/conference08/proposals/**

The deadline to submit proposals is Feb. 1, 2008.

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