

Develop Goals

SUMMARY

Prerequisite Best Practices:

- Best Practice in School Budgeting, 1C – Analyze Current Levels of Student Learning

Key Points

- Goals for student achievement are the starting point for a school district's budgeting process. Therefore it is important that goals be formatted appropriately and distributed to all individuals and schools.
- A district should develop its goals using the SMARTER framework, which allows districts to test goals to make sure they are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound, Engaging, and Resourced. A district should establish goals at the regional (if applicable), district, and school-site levels. The goal-setting process should be collaborative and include a range of stakeholders.
- When setting goals, a district should assess its strategic environment to understand what can reasonably be achieved over the short- and long-term. A district should also identify interim milestones to assess if progress is being made.
- Understanding current levels of district-wide performance and its desired performance helps to set school-site goals. First, a district needs to identify the current performance level at individual schools, which provides insight into different needs or existing gaps across individual schools. Information on individual schools can then be compared against district-wide goals and performance in order to set individual school goals.

Related Award Program Criteria

- **Criterion 2.A.1: District-Wide SMARTER Goals (Mandatory).** The applicant has articulated a set of district-wide goals that are consistent with the SMARTER framework as demonstrated by the presentation of the goals in the budget document and supplementary materials. The applicant can explain the goal setting process in the award application.
- **Criterion 2.A.2: School Site SMARTER Goals (Mandatory).** The goals have been distributed to individual school sites, as demonstrated in the supplementary materials and budget document.
- **Criterion 2.A.3: Goal Content.** The goals address student performance as well as factors that influence student performance (e.g., learning climate, professional capacity, etc.) as demonstrated in the supplementary materials.

Introduction

Ambitious goals for student achievement are the starting point and a linchpin for the school district budget process.¹ Reasons that a strong set of goals are essential include:

- **Goals articulate the board and executive leadership’s vision for the district.** A set of ambitious goals is the basis for demonstrating the district leadership’s high expectations for their students and staff.² While goals should be ambitious, districts should also ensure their goals are realistic given the district’s capabilities and outcomes being pursued.
- **District-wide goals are the basis for distributing performance objectives to individual school sites.** The district’s goals should require progress for every student. District-wide goals should then be translated into goals for individual school sites. While not strictly part of the budget process, individual school site goals should become the basis for goals pursued by principals, teachers, parents, and students.
- **Goals are the basis for evaluating potential investments of funds.** The difference or gap between the goal and current performance can be used to begin a dialog questioning existing methods of serving students and to discuss what potential changes in resources are needed at the district and school levels in order to achieve the goals. With goals in place, it becomes easier to ask if a proposed use of resources furthers the district’s mission and contributes towards the district’s plan to improve student achievement.
- **Goals are the basis for evaluating whether resources have been used effectively.** After resources have been used, the effectiveness of that investment can be evaluated more easily, for example has the district moved closer to achieving its goals or not?

This best practice document describes:

- I. The preferred format for goals (i.e., the SMARTER framework)
- II. The process for distributing district-wide goals to individual schools and classrooms

I. The Format for Goals: The SMARTER Framework

Background. The SMARTER goal framework allows the district to test its goals against seven characteristics of effective goals,³ where each letter of the SMARTER acronym signifies one characteristic:

- **Specific.** The goal is precise about the outcome or result that the district wishes to achieve. For instance, a hypothetical goal would be to increase the percentage of students scoring at or above “proficient” in reading from 55 to 90 percent and to increase the percentage scoring at or above “advanced” in reading from 25 to 50 percent. Another example would be to increase the percentage of students passing Algebra 1 within three semesters from 50 to 75 percent.⁴
- **Measurable.** The goal can be measured. Not only should the goal be verifiable, but it should also, ideally, be quantifiable. However, the data to accurately measure the current level of performance and changes in performance should be obtainable (a) for a reasonable cost and (b) quickly enough to support management decision making. The Best Practice in School Budgeting, 1C – Analyze Current Levels of Student Learning, describes different types of measurements a district might use.
- **Achievable.** The goal is rooted in an understanding of the district’s current strategic environment, including factors such as current levels of student achievement, professional capacity of the district’s staff, the learning climate in schools, and the instructional guidance system. This understanding is used to develop goals that the organization can reasonably expect to accomplish, including smaller short-term goals to build momentum towards bigger longer-term goals.⁵
- **Relevant.** Foremost, goals should focus on results or outcomes that matter most to students’ academic success, including performance in core subjects like

reading/English language arts/writing, mathematics, and science.⁶ Secondly, goals should also cover student performance in other key subject areas within the district’s curriculum. Goals also may need to address improving elements of the strategic environment that are found to be deficient, such as student under-performance by sub-group, student behavior, lack of professional capacity in schools, a poor learning climate in schools, etc.⁷ Finally, goals should be relevant to all students, which means the goals should encompass measuring progress for individual students, not just average progress for an entire school⁸ or progress of the entire student body against a threshold.⁹

- **Time-bound.** The goal should identify a time period for achieving the goal as well as interim milestones where incremental progress will occur. Often, a multi-year time period is necessary to achieve a goal. Ambitious goals will usually require consistent pursuit over a three- to five-year period.
- **Engaging.** The goal reaches for ambitious, yet realistic, improvement in student achievement and organizational performance. By setting ambitious goals, districts can engage stakeholders and staff by signaling a belief that their students can achieve these high standards as well as a belief that positive changes by the district will help lead to these gains in student achievement.¹⁰
- **Resourced.** The district has the capacity to achieve its goals and has aligned and coordinated its resources accordingly. The budget is the process by which goals are resourced.

Recommendation. Districts should follow the SMARTER goal framework to develop goals that guide the budget process. These goals should address the results the district (and school sites) wishes to achieve in two key areas:

- Student performance¹¹
- Essential supports for student achievement¹²

II. Defining Goals and Distributing Goals to Schools

Background. The district’s SMARTER goals establish the levels of performance that the district will work toward at the regional (if applicable), district, and school-site levels. Goals established at the district level

should be used to guide the development of goals for individual school sites.

Recommendation. Districts should follow the steps below to define goals and distribute them to school sites:

1. Assess the district’s strategic environment.

The district must understand where it is today in order to best develop a goal for where it wants to be. The most important aspect of a district’s strategic environment is current levels of student achievement. The Best Practice in School Budgeting, 1C – Analyze Current Levels of Student Learning, describes the considerations in assessing student achievement in detail. In addition to student achievement, a district should examine issues that are critical supports of student learning. Leading school researchers have identified essential supports of student learning that districts should consider analyzing, including: the professional capacity of the district’s staff, the learning climate in schools, and instructional delivery practices. Assessing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to performance in these supports may suggest goals the district should pursue in order to ultimately improve student achievement.

2. Set SMARTER goals for multi-year district-wide improvement.

Based on a review of the strategic environment, a district should have a better understanding of what it can reasonably expect to achieve over the next one, two, three, four, and five years; where the most improvement may be needed; and where status quo conditions are acceptable. Following this understanding, SMARTER goals can then be set for district-wide performance. There are a number of methods for setting goals, and the best method depends on the particular circumstances of the organization. At a minimum, however, the goal setting process¹³ should incorporate a review of the strategic environment, include a range of stakeholders, and take a long-term perspective while identifying shorter-term “small win” opportunities in order to build momentum.¹⁴

3. Understand baseline performance at the school level.

Understanding the current performance levels at individual school sites (including historical trends and future projections, when available) provides insight into the degree of improvement required across schools, in classrooms, and at the level of each individual student (if possible). For each

school, the gap between the level of desired performance expressed by the district-wide goals and the current level of performance within individual school sites should be assessed. This informs the district which schools need the most improvement and those that may not.

- 4. Set school site goals.** Informed by the gap between desired district-wide performance and current district-wide performance, as well as the relative

performance of individual school sites, goals can be set for each school, including goals for improvement by classroom and categories of students. The process should incorporate SMARTER goals, with collaboration among stakeholders at the individual school sites assuming particular importance at this stage. School principals should take the lead in distributing these goals to teachers, parents, and students outside of the budget development process.

Endnotes

- ¹ Allan R. Odden describes ambitious goals as one of 12 elements of comprehensive strategy to improve student learning and close the achievement gap and cites other researchers and sources with similar findings. See Allan R. Odden, *Improving Student Learning When Budgets Are Tight* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin-Sage, 2012).
- ² Public education researcher Karen Chenoweth has found that the district leadership's high expectations of students are a common characteristic of high performing schools (regardless of demographic or economic characteristics of the student body). See Karin Chenoweth, *It's Being Done: Academic Success in Unexpected Schools* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2007).
- ³ Researcher on school effectiveness, Allan Blankstein, recommends the SMART goal framework for districts. GFOA added to this the additional criteria of "engaging" and "resourced" to emphasize the need for ambitious goals and connection to the budget process. See Alan M. Blankstein, *Failure is Not an Option: 6 Principles that Advance Student Achievement in Highly Effective Schools*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin-Sage, 2013).
- ⁴ Odden, *Improving Student Learning When Budgets are Tight*.
- ⁵ Informed by the concept of "proximate objectives" by Richard P. Rumelt, a noted strategic planning researcher and practitioner from UCLA. See Richard P. Rumelt, *Good Strategy, Bad Strategy: The Difference and Why It Matters* (New York: Crown Business, 2011).
- ⁶ Odden, *Improving Student Learning When Budgets Are Tight*.
- ⁷ These areas of underperformance would have been revealed by the district's assessment of its environment. Please consult Best Practice in School Budgeting, 1C – Analyze Current Levels of Student Learning, for a review of the issues a district might consider analyzing as part of its environmental assessment.
- ⁸ Measures of average progress obscure variation within the student population. For example, a small number of high-performing students could pull up the average, obscuring a larger number of under-performing students.
- ⁹ A measure of performance such as "percent of students at or above national norms" is highly sensitive to the test score results for the subset of students whose academic achievement is near the cut-off or threshold. Under this kind of measure, it is really only the achievement of students near the threshold that counts. See Anthony S. Bryk, et al., *Organizing Schools for Improvement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
- ¹⁰ Odden, *Improving Student Learning When Budgets Are Tight*.