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Student Learning Objectives

Benefits, Challenges, and Solutions

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Acknowledgments

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Lisa Lachlan-Haché, Ed.D.
Ellen Cushing
Lauren Bivona

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Not all student growth measures are alike, nor are they designed to be. But when student growth measures are used for educator evaluation, fairness and comparability become critical. This paper focuses on the benefits and challenges of student learning objectives (SLOs) and their use in educator effectiveness systems. To support educators in implementing fair and equitable SLOs, this paper highlights the work of leading states and districts as they develop innovative solutions to improve the quality of SLOs as a measure of student growth, and in turn, as a measure of educator effectiveness.

Benefits of Implementing SLOs

While value-added scores and approved vendor assessments provide standardization for the measurement of student learning, SLOs should not be thought of as just a less rigorous solution for measuring growth in nontested grades and subjects. In fact, SLOs offer their own set of advantages as outlined below.

SLOs reinforce best teaching practices. Setting goals for students, using data to assess student progress, and adjusting instruction based on that progress demonstrate good teaching practices (What Works Clearinghouse, 2009). SLOs can formalize good teaching by requiring each of these steps. They promote conversations between educators and their evaluators around student results, which can ultimately foster improved teaching practice and student learning.

SLOs are uniquely adaptable. *All* educators can demonstrate their impact on student learning and receive recognition for their efforts because SLOs are not dependent on the availability of standardized assessment scores. Instead, SLOs can be created to draw on different data sources such as educator-created assessments, performance assessments, or rubric-based assessments. SLOs also reflect changes in curriculum and assessments, making them adaptable to policy adjustments, a critical feature for this era of reform. Further, the SLO process allows educators to focus on the objectives that are most relevant for their student population and content area, and provide a clear, measurable connection to instruction.

SLOs acknowledge the value of educator knowledge and skill. SLOs can promote educator expertise by emphasizing teacher knowledge of curriculum, assessments, school context, and student data. With teacher satisfaction at an all-time low (MetLife, 2011), evaluation measures that promote educator expertise can be highly valued among teachers and leaders alike. In studies of compensation and evaluation systems that use SLOs, teachers cite the SLO process as empowering, giving them more authorship over the performance appraisal process (Donaldson, forthcoming; Lamb & Schmitt, 2012).

SLOs encourage collaboration. SLOs can be used to promote collaboration and reflection on practice among educators. Educators are not expected to work in isolation. By setting districtwide, subject-level, grade-level, or team-based SLOs, educators can establish common learning targets for their students and work together to meet the needs of all students. Furthermore, the SLO development cycle encourages educators to seek guidance and assistance from specialists who support student learning, including special education teachers; English language learner specialists; speech-language therapists; counselors; and curriculum, assessment, and data specialists. Teachers using SLOs in compensation programs report higher levels of department or team collaboration than teachers in comparison schools not using SLOs (Lamb & Schmitt, 2012). Specifically, teacher teams more often discussed professional development needs and goals, set learning goals for groups of students, grouped students in classes based on learning needs, and provided support for struggling teachers when participating in the SLO cycle.

SLOs connect teacher practice to student learning. When asked, teachers indicate that goal-setting processes such as SLOs, when included in a multiple measures evaluation system, are the most valuable aspect of the system (Donaldson, forthcoming). A recent evaluation of Indiana's evaluation pilot found that teachers who had enough time to work with peers on the SLO process were significantly more likely to agree that the new evaluation system encouraged data-driven instruction in their school and was good for student learning (TNTP, 2012). It is easy to speculate on these findings. SLO development supports educators in considering what average growth means in their classrooms, while asking them to think critically about setting high expectations for their students. During SLO development, educators naturally consider their role in driving students beyond low achievement scores and toward proficiency. The SLO cycle often generates discussions among educators and helps them articulate the level of learning needed in order for students to truly achieve.

Challenges to Implementing SLOs

When applied as a measure of student growth within most educator evaluation systems, SLOs must be "rigorous and comparable" based on federal or state guidance.[1] While rigor and comparability are defined in a variety of ways across the education landscape, states and districts consistently grapple with this challenge. Rigor in the SLO process is a challenge, and assuring comparability across classrooms, schools, and districts is especially difficult given the different contexts, assessments, and growth measures used.

Fortunately, some states and districts have begun to implement innovative practices that address the most common challenges related to ensuring rigor and comparability (for more on these common challenges, see *Implementing Student Learning Objectives: Core Elements for Sustainability*). These challenges include the following:

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[1] Federal guidance, for example, on measuring student achievement in nontested grades and subjects permits the use of "alternative measures of student learning and performance, such as student scores on pretests and end-of-course tests, student performance on English language proficiency assessments, and other measures of student achievement" if they are "rigorous and comparable across classrooms."

- Identifying or developing high-quality assessments for all grades and subjects
- Creating appropriate growth targets for classrooms that include students who are starting at different achievement levels
- Setting ambitious yet attainable targets including identifying the proper grain size of an objective (broad content versus most important skills and concepts)
- Addressing the school and district culture change that will result from implementing SLOs
- Advancing educator practice and the continuous improvement of the SLO process

SLO Solutions

The following table illustrates how these challenges are met with innovative practices that reflect the needs and practices of each state and district. While many solutions will work in most contexts, keep in mind that each method may require tailoring to the needs of the state's or district's set of system goals, context, and capacity.

Challenge
Identifying or developing high-quality baseline data and assessments for all grades and subjects
Innovative Practices
Identifying rigorous assessments is a critical and often unanticipated challenge in developing an SLO. Ensuring that assessments are comparable across educators and accurately demonstrate student learning Is difficult; however, states and districts provide support in a variety of ways as follows: - Austin provides guidelines around the use of assessments for specific subjects and grades (p. 17) and created a quality assurance rubric for principals and campuses to use for rating SLOs. Austin also offers a checklist for principals. - Rhode Island has produced a Comprehensive Assessment System Criteria & Guidance document that provides guidance to teachers and principals on deciding which assessments are appropriate to use with SLOs. - Georgia has prepared a list of data sources to guide district teams as they determine growth targets. The state has also provided training that supports district teams in the development of high-quality assessments. The training spans three days, and educators are divided into subject-area teams. At the end of the session, the teams have developed a district-level assessment that can be used for the SLO. The state reviews the materials and posts the assessments across the 26 Race to the Top districts. - Indiana ranks assessment types based on the amount of confidence one can have in their alignment, rigor, and format, as well as the extent to which they are common across teachers of the same grades and courses. Guidance on choosing an assessment can be found on page 8 of the RISE Handbook. Indiana also offers a list of assessment options for teachers in subjects that are generally not tested by standardized assessments. - Ohio has developed a Guidance on Selecting Assessments document that includes set criteria that every high-quality assessment should include, such as frequently asked questions and an assessment checklist. - New York provides a list of approved assessments that must be used in an SLO. In Austin, the district has a list of approved but not required assessments. Teachers have the option to use them, but they can create their own as long as they follow the assessment guidelines.

Challenge

Creating appropriate growth targets for classrooms that include students who are starting at different achievement levels

Innovative Practices

Because SLOs are flexible, they allow educators to create growth targets that are appropriate to the educator's individual class, grade, or subject. In order to set appropriate targets, states and districts have established guidelines such as the following to support educators:

- Indiana encourages teachers to write both classroom and targeted goals for students in need of additional support.

- Ohio and Rhode Island encourage educators to set tiered targets. Tiered targets are specific growth targets for individual students or groups of students that have similar baseline data. Tiered targets help to more accurately capture an educator's contribution to learning because goals are not focused on attainment but rather individual growth.

- New York allows districts to take one of four approaches in setting SLOs. One of those approaches sets district-based growth targets so that all targets are comparable across grades and subjects.

Challenge

Setting ambitious yet attainable targets

Innovative Practices

During early implementation, knowing how to set ambitious yet attainable targets will be a challenge for educators. Applying best instructional practices to SLO development is a step in the right direction. Reviewing available data on past and current students, working with colleagues to create team objectives, and formatively assessing student knowledge throughout the year are all ways educators can further develop their capacity to set appropriate targets for their students. Nonetheless, a pilot period is an important aspect of implementation. By first setting growth targets in a low-stakes situation, educators can determine which growth targets are appropriate prior to full implementation of SLOs and without penalty. Following are three examples of how a state and two districts set their targets:

- Ohio recommends that a building-level committee review SLOs to develop a common understanding on the type and rigor of the SLOs across a school. By centralizing the approval process, the committee will be able to support those educators who set targets that are too high or too low, ensuring consistency within the building.

- In Austin, the district developed a spreadsheet that automatically sets the growth target for assessments that use a 100-point scale. For tiered targets, the district provides a scoring rubric.

- In Hazelwood, Missouri, the district held a calibration session for all principals implementing SLOs in School Improvement Grant (SIG) schools. Principals rated similar, anonymous SLOs and compared ratings, focusing specifically on the quality of the growth targets. Conversations illustrated discrepancies and led evaluators to more consistently review and approve SLOs that had ambitious yet attainable targets.

Challenge

Addressing the school and district culture change that will result from implementing SLOs

Innovative Practices

The SLO process will require a significant shift in how educators participate in their evaluation system. Much of the work conducted at the educator and educator-team level requires support. There are several processes that can support districts through the culture change as shown in the following examples:

- Ohio has rolled out SLOs through a series of pilot programs where districts and regional centers in some cases worked together to develop SLOs. In 2012–13, Ohio will begin training district teams through regional sessions focused on SLOs. Through this work ODE aims to support districts in creating building teams that will work together and become experts in the SLO setting and approval processes.

- Georgia rolled out SLOs through its Race to the Top districts and offered a series of trainings that required district teams to develop district-level SLOs for educators in similar grades and subjects. Building content knowledge around SLOs and assessment literacy, their piloting encouraged educators to collaboratively develop tiered growth targets for their students.

- In an effort to support educators with this change, Rhode Island is phasing in SLOs over two academic years. The first year required educators to develop SLOs but did not tie any human capital decisions to SLO outcomes. In the second year, when educators were more comfortable with the entire SLO process, the state began attaching such decisions to SLO outcomes in combination with other measures of student growth and teacher performance. Rhode Island has provided training to all principals in the state to ensure they can offer professional development or other supports to educators to facilitate the SLO process.

- Like most states, Indiana rolled out SLOs with many resources. The state offered videos, archived radio broadcasts, and webinars featuring educators from the pilot explaining the SLO process and describing their experiences with SLOs. In addition, Indiana offers online training modules that walk educators and administrators through the SLO process.

Challenge
Advancing educator practice and the continuous improvement of the SLO process

Innovative Practices

SLOs would not be useful tools in building student knowledge and advancing educator practice if goals for student academic achievement became easier to obtain and less rigorous over time due to the pressure to meet expected targets. The following states and districts are working to ensure that the SLO process remains rigorous and accountable:

- In Austin Independent School District's beginning years of implementation, multiple central office staff reviewed and approved every SLO. As educators have become more comfortable with the process, the central office still reviews every SLO at the beginning of the year, but only one person does the review unless a revision is required. In addition, the district conducts an audit at the end of the year to verify results.

- The Georgia Department of Education reviews and approves all district-level SLOs and requires that districts follow a specified process when developing their own assessments.

- Ohio will conduct random audits of the SLOs developed by educators and educator teams to ensure that they maintain rigor over time, accurately represent the content covered in a class, and include a representative and proportional population of the educator's schedule.

- Rhode Island is using Intermediary Service Providers (ISPs) to act as liaisons between the districts and the state. ISPs meet with districts to identify implementation challenges and bring those challenges to the state. The ISPs then work with the state to develop solutions to those challenges.

- Rhode Island also holds principals accountable for the rigor of the SLOs by evaluating the quality of principal-approved SLOs as part of the principal evaluation.

Conclusion

SLOs offer a solution to the challenge of measuring educator effects on student growth in subjects and grades not covered by state assessments and standardized tests. They also provide an opportunity for educators to challenge themselves and each other to set high growth expectations for students. As a teacher- and principal-developed measure, SLOs can connect the dots for educators, helping them see where their own goal setting plays a role in their students' achievement. Furthermore, SLOs are easily understood by teachers, principals, parents, and other stakeholders, and that transparency may leverage their use in instructional improvement efforts.

These benefits can only come to fruition, however, with the structured processes that eliminate or reduce the challenges and limitations of the SLO process. Poorly set targets, badly timed meetings, a lack of consistent training, and a myriad of other problems can limit the quality of SLOs and make the process a cumbersome routine with little meaning. Guidance, training, and monitoring procedures can help ensure the quality of SLO rigor and comparability, while further innovation can help reduce the impact of additional challenges.

For an introduction to SLOs and the SLO process, examples of how they can be used to measure teachers' contributions to student growth, and innovative approaches to the challenges of SLO implementation, see *Student Learning Objectives as Measures of Educator Effectiveness: The Basics.* For more information on implementing SLOs at the state and district levels, see *Implementing Student Learning Objectives: Core Elements for Sustainability.*

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1000 Thomas Jefferson Street NW
Washington, DC 20007-3835
800.356.2735 | 202.403.5000

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