

Goal setting in this new school year

by Bambi Betts

By now, most international schools who have been paying attention will have clear mission and visions statements to guide their work. They will be clear about who they serve and why. They will have a reasonably clear picture of the "big learner outcomes" for their students and a profile of a graduate from the school. The strong messages about vision and leadership from both the effective schools research as well as from industry have led us to this much improved state.

Excellent schools will also have a goal setting process which ensures that the whole school community is focused on a few, essential directions annually or bi annually. While the value of setting goals is beginning to be understood by educators, both individually and institutionally, there are two current aspects in educational goal-setting that are somewhat disturbing:

1. the nature of the goals typically set by schools
2. the process of collecting evidence of achievement of those goals.

From Program to Learning

Check your current school goals. It is very likely that they read something like: Improve the after school activities program; or improve morale amongst the faculty, or improve the math curriculum. These are what might be termed program goals, that is, ways in which we intend to improve what we offer to students and/or teachers.

But what, truly, is the goal of each of our institutions? Is it any of these things? Isn't it to help students learn? If the purpose of a company is to manufacture computers, is it likely that company will set a goal of improving the procedures manual? Such a goal is very unlikely to propel a company towards its real mission to sell more computers. So what do companies do: they set targets. X computers will be sold this year. And then they go about outlining strategies for achieving that goal.

Actions such as improving the procedures manual or upgrading the staff lounge become STRATEGIES for achieving the real goal: selling X computers.

If our fundamental goal in schools is to help produce learning in students, then learning goals should be the centerpiece of our goal-setting process. Rather than set program goals, set learning goals: 80% of our students will reach the grade-level writing standard.

Collecting Real Evidence

Such goals of course beg the question; do we have a standard of learning in our school that is universally understood? And are there tools in place to collect convincing evidence of the achievement of that standard? The unfortunate answer in many school settings is no.

Until now, our "softer" program goals have contributed wishy-washy data collection methods. How do we know if faculty morale is better or if the kids' behavior as a whole is actually improved? The goals themselves often cast collecting evidence into the realm of the anecdotal.

Many of our schools have failed to take the most crucial step in goal setting: agreeing on what accomplishment of the goal actually looks like. When the time comes to decide if the goal has been met (if in fact it does ever come), this lack of agreement makes it virtually impossible to analyze the results. School communities need to define together what tools will be used to gather evidence of learning and set agreed upon targets for each of those tools. For example, if the desired result is that 80% of our students will achieve or exceed the grade level writing standard, then what tools will be used to show evidence of achieving that result?

Clearly there is a range of learning results for which this process is much more clear-cut things like reading and writing, math calculation, etc. Most of our schools are also engaged in affective education simultaneously. The notion of finding real and effective measures of student progress toward these goals is, of course, challenging; challenging but essential. As we practice with this notion, the essential behaviors related to these disposition type outcomes will become increasingly clearer.

A good starting point for an international school might be to select one learning goal for the year and together work through the process of defining what achievement actually looks like and what tools will be used to provide evidence. This process truly focuses a school on its major mission.