

What makes a Goal “SMARTer”?¹

Good goals help educators, schools and districts improve. That is why the educator evaluation regulations require educators to develop goals that are specific, actionable and measurable. They require, too, that goals be accompanied by action plans with benchmarks to assess progress.

The “SMART” Goal framework is a useful tool that individuals and teams can use to craft effective goals and action plans:

S	=	Specific and Strategic
M	=	Measurable
A	=	Action Oriented
R	=	Rigorous, Realistic and Results-focused (the 3 R’s)
T	=	Timed and Tracked

Goals with an action plan and benchmarks that have these characteristics are “SMART”.

A practical example some of us have experienced in our personal lives can make clear how this SMART goal framework can help turn hopes into actions that have results.

First, an example of *not* being “SMART” with goals: *I will lose weight and get in condition.*

Getting SMARTer: *Between March 15 and Memorial Day, I will lose 10 pounds and be able to run 1 mile non-stop.*

The hope is now a goal that meets most of the SMART Framework criteria:

It’s S pecific and Strategic	= 10 pounds, 1 mile
It’s M easurable	= pounds, miles
It’s A ction-oriented	= lose, run
It’s got the 3 R ’s	= weight loss and running distance
It’s T imed	= 10 weeks

SMART enough: To make the goal really “SMART,” though, we need to add an action plan and benchmarks. They make sure the goal meets that final criteria, “Tracked.” They also strengthen the other criteria, especially when the benchmarks include “process” benchmarks for tracking progress on the key actions and “outcome” benchmarks that track early evidence of change and/or progress toward the ultimate goal.

¹ The SMART goal concept was introduced by G.T. Doran, A. Miller and J. Cunningham in *There’s a S.M.A.R.T. way to write management’s goals and objectives*, *Management Review* 70 (11), AMA Forum, pp. 35-36. *What Makes a Goal “SMART”?* also draws from the work of Ed Costa, Superintendent of Schools in Lenox; John D’Auria, Teachers 21; and Mike Gilbert, Northeast Field Director for MASC

Key Actions:

- reduce my daily calorie intake to fewer than 1,000 calories for each of 10 weeks.
- walk 15 minutes a day; increase my time by 5 minutes a week for the next 4 weeks.
- starting in week 5, run and walk in intervals for 30 minutes, increasing the proportion of time spent running instead of walking until I can run a mile, non-stop, by the end of week 10.

Benchmarks:

- For process, maintain a daily record of calorie intake and exercise.
- For outcome, bi-weekly weight loss and running distance targets (e.g., After 2 wks: 2 lbs/0 miles; 4 wks: 4 lbs/0 miles; 6 wks: 6lbs/.2 mi; 8 wks: 8 lbs/.4 miles)

SMART goal statements with action plans and benchmarks will make a difference in schools.

S = Specific and Strategic

Goals need to be straightforward and clearly written, with sufficient specificity to determine whether or not they have been achieved. A goal is strategic when it serves an important purpose of the school or district as a whole, and addresses something that is likely to have a big impact on our overall vision.

M = Measurable

If we can't measure it, we can't manage it. What measures of quantity, quality, and/or impact will we use to determine that we've achieved the goal? And how will we measure progress along the way? Progress toward achieving the goal is typically measured through "benchmarks." Some benchmarks focus on the process: are we doing what we said we were going to do? Other benchmarks focus on the outcome: are we seeing early signs of progress toward the results?

A = Action Oriented

Goals have active, not passive verbs. And the action steps attached to them tell us "who" is doing "what". Without clarity about what we're actually going to do to achieve the goal, a goal is only a hope with little chance of being achieved. Making clear the key actions required to achieve a goal helps everyone see how their part of the work is connected – to other parts of the work and to a larger purpose. Knowing that helps people stay focused and energized, rather than fragmented and uncertain.

R = Rigorous, Realistic and Results-focused (the "3 R's")

A goal is not an activity: a goal makes clear what will be different as a result of achieving the goal. A goal needs to describe a realistic, yet ambitious result. It needs to stretch the educator, team, school or district toward improvement, but not be out of reach. The focus and effort required to achieve a rigorous but realistic goal should be challenging, but not exhausting. Goals set too high will discourage us, while goals set too low will leave us feeling "empty" when they are accomplished, and won't serve our students well.

T = Timed

A goal needs to have a deadline. Deadlines help all of us take action. For a goal to be accomplished, there need to be definite times when key actions will be completed and benchmarks achieved. Tracking the progress we're making on our action steps (process benchmarks) is essential: if we fall behind on doing something we said we were going to do, we'll need to accelerate the pace on something else. But tracking progress on process outcomes isn't enough. Our outcome benchmarks help us know whether we're on track to achieve our goal and/or whether we've reached our goal. Benchmarks give us a way to see our progress and celebrate it. They also give us information we need to make mid-course corrections.