

3 of 6 in the series

Student Learning Objectives (SLOs)

Measuring Student Growth and Supporting Great Teaching

Evaluating teachers based on their students' academic growth has become a common practice in states and school districts across the country. But measuring student growth is not always as simple as tracking state-administered test scores. According to some estimates¹, 70 percent of American school teachers teach grades or subjects, ranging from early childhood to high school electives, in which no state assessments exist. How can student growth and teacher effectiveness be evaluated in these critical areas?

In some states and districts, **Student Learning Objectives (SLOs)** offer a solution. These school systems use SLOs to set rigorous, standards-aligned goals; measure student progress; and evaluate and support teacher performance.

SLOs are more than just a measurement tool, however; they also promote practices that support effective teaching and learning. When writing SLOs, teachers must collect and analyze baseline achievement data to gauge student skills, use that baseline data to set goals for student growth, identify and implement instructional strategies to ensure all students achieve those goals, monitor student progress and assess final results. **Such a cycle of planning, teaching, reflecting and adjusting is widely recognized as the foundation of effective instruction.**

ANATOMY OF AN SLO

Although they may vary by state or district, all SLOs share some components.

- At the heart of an SLO is a *learning objective*, written by a teacher or group of teachers for a group of students over a period of time, usually a school year or a semester (see below).
- Teachers typically provide a *rationale* for the learning content (such as, for example, Common Core State Standards) and the learning objective they have identified. Ideally, teachers base their learning target on a body of baseline data, culled from multiple sources, and use a comparable post-test or other assessment to determine the learning objective.
- Teachers list or describe the *assessments* they will use to measure growth—such as end-of-course exams, performance tasks or portfolios judged against a rubric.
- Finally, all SLOs include a *scoring methodology* that evaluators use to determine the teacher's effectiveness based on how many of his or her students met the learning target.

CONTENT AREA	Mathematics	GRADE LEVEL	7th	STUDENTS	78	INTERVAL OF INSTRUCTION	Year
LEARNING OBJECTIVE STATEMENT	Students will demonstrate mastery of proportional relationships and operations with rational numbers, two critical elements of the revised 7th grade district curriculum aligned to the Common Core State Standards.						
GROWTH TARGET	Students will take a cumulative final exam and complete a project that focuses on the two critical areas of proportional relationships and operations with rational numbers. Approximately 70% of the final exam assesses the two critical areas; data from these questions will be pulled to determine student progress. The tiered targets are as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tier 1 (25% of students) will show mastery of both critical areas on both the test and project (earning 85% or higher)• Tier 2 (70% of students) will show proficiency of both critical areas on both the test and project (earning 70%-84%)• Tier 3 (5% of students) will show a 25% increase by the end-of-year test and project.						

Source: Rhode Island Department of Education. www.ride.ri.gov/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/Teachers-and-Administrators-Excellent-Educators/Educator-Evaluation/Student-Learning-Objectives/SLO_MS_Math_Gr7.pdf.

To see examples of both high-quality SLOs and SLOs in need of improvement, visit the [U.S. Department of Education's Library of Annotated SLOs](#). Each SLO was analyzed by a group of leading states and includes a short summary statement explaining why it is high-quality or how it can be improved.



But this process is also demanding and leads many teachers and principals to mistake SLO creation for a compliance exercise—another task on an already long to-do list—rather than viewing it as an opportunity to reflect on teaching and learning. And many students, parents and teachers push back against SLOs that are based on poorly designed assessments, contending that they yield too much testing and not enough reliable information to help improve a teacher’s effectiveness and student learning.

SLO CHALLENGES

Common challenges include:

- **ASSESSMENT SELECTION:** Assessments can make or break SLOs’ success: High-quality assessments can support great teaching to rigorous standards, while low-quality assessments will undermine good teaching and result in unnecessary testing of students. School systems can use measures such as common science performance tasks, a collection of multiple fine arts performances judged against a rubric or districtwide end-of-course exams for their teachers’ SLOs. Common measures like these can provide a consistent level of quality and reliability. When common assessments do not exist, states and districts can bring together groups of teachers to create or identify assessments across classrooms. In any case, teachers need support and guidance on the elements of *strong* assessments.
- **TARGET-SETTING:** SLOs may prompt some teachers and principals to set low student growth targets to increase the chances that teachers will score highly. To ensure an appropriate level of rigor, states and districts can set floors for growth targets. Conversely, some teachers set targets that are too ambitious. Principal oversight is critical, as are random quality checks by district officials.
- **QUALITY IMPLEMENTATION:** SLOs require a significant amount of money, time, training and human capacity to implement well. Without sufficient investment, states and districts may water down the SLO experience. Teachers need enough time to analyze data, write objectives and think through the right instructional strategies for a particular group of students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given these factors, the impact of SLOs ultimately depends on whether a state or district commits to provide the time, resources and training required for their successful implementation. SLOs can be a powerful tool for improving both instructional practice and student achievement, but they can only have such an impact when states and districts:

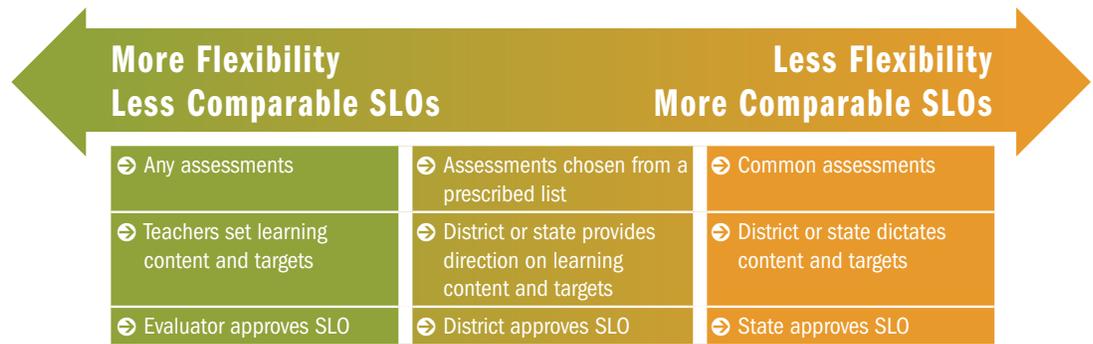
1. Establish a clear purpose and vision for using SLOs;
2. Communicate that purpose and vision to teachers and principals;
3. Align SLOs with other reform initiatives and goal-setting efforts;
4. Give teachers and principals the time, tools and professional development they need to create high-quality SLOs; and
5. Monitor SLOs for quality and provide assistance to teachers and principals who need it.

Establish a clear purpose and vision for using SLOs.

It is crucial to explain both *why* SLOs are important and *how* they will be used to improve teaching and learning. Even in states and districts where SLOs are required by law, teachers in all subjects and grades can use the SLO process as an opportunity to review data, choose relevant assessments, and set and monitor student learning growth against assessments. In this way, SLOs formalize what effective teachers already do.

A system’s vision for SLOs also shapes the SLO policies it adopts. For example, if the goal is to reinforce effective teaching practices, policies should offer teachers more *flexibility* in selecting assessments or setting minimum growth targets on their SLOs. Many educators believe more flexible policies generate more valuable and authentic SLOs. On the other hand, if a state or district’s primary goal is to use SLOs as an evaluation tool, then consider *standardizing* the menu of assessments that teachers can use in creating SLOs. This approach can help states and districts make better comparisons across teachers and schools.





Communicate the purpose and vision to teachers and principals.

Once armed with a clear vision for SLOs, communicate that vision to teachers, principals and other stakeholders. To make the case for using SLOs, which as a measure of academic growth, may be viewed with apprehension, address these key questions:

- **Why were SLOs chosen over other measures of effectiveness?** Example: “SLOs will enable us to measure students’ learning growth in your classroom from the beginning to the end of the school year.”
- **What are the benefits of SLOs to teachers and principals?** Example: “SLOs will reinforce good teaching practices, provide opportunities to collaborate within and across schools, and can be tailored to address the unique learning needs of every classroom.”
- **What is the relationship between SLOs and new Common Core State Standards?** Example: “Teachers should write SLOs with Common Core learning criteria and instructional shifts in mind.”
- **What challenges might SLOs present?** Example: “SLOs are challenging and will take time to implement. Feedback from teachers will be critical to help improve SLOs over time.”

Align SLOs with other reform initiatives and goal-setting efforts.

All too often, state and district leaders work in silos when rolling out new initiatives. When that happens, teachers and principals are likely to miss the synergies between SLOs and Common Core standards, and teachers will tend to begrudgingly view SLOs as an add-on rather than part of their current practice. This concern can be avoided by aligning SLOs with other reform initiatives and goal-setting efforts. For instance:

- **Create cross-functional teams** with staff from the offices of academics/curriculum, human capital or human resources, professional development, technology and accountability to identify or create appropriate assessments, develop and implement training, and monitor the quality of SLOs.
- **Require teachers to write SLOs that include Common Core-aligned instructional strategies and assessments** to help them connect the dots between new evaluation and support systems and the Common Core. Importantly, SLOs should align with a school system’s overall strategy for assessment, including the purposes and uses of formative, interim and summative assessments.
- **Align SLOs with existing goal-setting efforts and improvement plans** to help conserve scarce professional development and human capital resources. For example, data teams that support schools in setting improvement goals also should be trained to help teachers write SLOs.

Give teachers and principals the time, resources and professional development they need to create high-quality SLOs.

Writing high-quality SLOs is hard work for teachers and principals; the following supports can make a world of difference to their efforts:

- **Time:** Principals and district administrators should ensure teachers have time to identify the right assessments, gather baseline data and create goals for student growth. Discussion of SLOs should also be slotted into instructional leadership team meetings, grade- or team-level meetings, or other times



SLO RESOURCES

There's no need to reinvent the wheel. Instead, consult toolkits developed by the [Reform Support Network](#) or the [Center for Assessment](#) to access a variety of advice, and check out the resources from these leading states and districts:

- [Austin Independent School District](#)
- [Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools](#)
- [Houston Independent School District](#)
- [Colorado](#)
- [Indiana](#)
- [New Jersey](#)
- [New York](#)
- [Rhode Island](#)

when teachers can compare or set learning targets. Additionally, states and districts may set aside time to convene teachers in similar subjects or grades to develop SLOs collaboratively. These investments of time can build teachers' engagement and capacities, helping them produce better SLOs.

- ➔ **Resources:** A comprehensive suite of tools and supports—including templates, guidance manuals, checklists, rubrics, training modules and exemplar SLOs—can help teachers and principals write and review SLOs, see what high-quality SLOs look like and reflect on the instructional strategies that impact student learning.
- ➔ **Professional development:** Districts and states should lead professional development focused on areas where teachers and principals tend to struggle the most, such as reviewing baseline data, identifying appropriate assessments and setting rigorous but attainable targets. Principals or teacher leaders also can be trained to deliver school-based SLO professional development. Baltimore City Public Schools has identified SLO ambassadors at every school to conduct training, answer questions and assist the principal in reviewing SLOs.

Monitor SLOs for quality and provide assistance to teachers and principals who need it.

Principals often are the only ones who review SLOs for quality. Unless states and districts monitor SLOs for quality and intervene with principals and teachers who need additional support, unsuccessful or sloppy SLO practices can become entrenched. Monitoring is also critical to ensure that teachers write high-quality SLOs and that districts and states use accurate SLO data when evaluating teachers. But how can states and districts ensure quality without scrutinizing every SLO?

- ➔ **Identify a sampling of SLOs from across grades and subjects to review them for rigor.** Although not comprehensive, this strategy will reveal trends, including strengths and deficiencies, in SLO processes across schools. This is an essential responsibility of districts and states: to audit for quality and adjust SLO processes based on those data.
- ➔ **Monitor SLOs at the school level to provide support to struggling principals.** Use “approval rubrics” that compare a principal's review of an SLO against a normed standard; this helps ensure that all SLO reviewers share a common understanding of what high-quality SLOs look like. Principals who consistently approve low-quality SLOs should receive additional training and support.
- ➔ **Remind stakeholders that SLOs will continuously improve with more data and feedback from educators.** For instance, administrators in [Denver Public Schools](#) communicate frequently with teachers on updates and enhancements to their SLO model, a process that has proven valuable in those districts.

SLOs are more than just an evaluation tool—they are an opportunity for states and districts to monitor students' progress in nontested grades and subjects in a way that feels authentic to teachers and honors the work they do. But districts and states must be prepared to commit the resources needed to implement SLOs successfully, and hold teachers and principals accountable for their efforts. It is urgent that states and districts take the necessary steps to implementing SLOs so that they can fully harness their power to improve teachers' instruction and support students' growth and achievement.

1 Goe, L. and Holdheide, L. (2010), Measuring Teachers' Contributions to Student Learning Growth for the Other 69%. The National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality. Available at <http://bit.ly/1GMA405>.

