Introduction

Goal-setting is a particularly important leadership behaviour that has a significant impact on student achievement and school improvement. Goals can help leaders and teachers to narrow their focus and concentrate their collective effort on a prioritized area of need. This collective problem-solving leads to more coherent organisational practices that result in more focused, specific and consistent teaching practices in classrooms. In turn, these benefit student learning and improve outcomes.

Previous research has indicated that barriers to greater school improvement lie in lack of goal clarity, misalignment of strategies to goals, and a limited capacity to maintain a sustained focus on their progress towards the goals during the year. What the literature does not exemplify is what practical actions leaders have to take to improve outcomes.

This two year research partnership between three academics and three principals from one primary and two secondary schools explored how principals can lead more effective goal-setting practices and improve equity in student outcomes. We set out to identify practical actions and supported leaders and schools to reach their goals

What we did

- Conducted interviews to establish staff and leadership perceptions on effectiveness of goal-setting and improvement strategies at the beginning and end of project
- Provided ongoing support for the principals in their inquiries with their teams
- Observed and provided feedback about meetings (e.g. staff / faculty/ strategic planning meetings)
- Facilitated workshops with school staff around leadership, goal-setting and problem-solving (e.g. whole staff, middle and senior leaders)
- Facilitated across-school workshops with the schools' project teams comprising the principal, senior/ middle leader and a teacher

What we learnt

Our first key finding was that adherence to strong monitoring practices was the greatest predictor of success. Putting in place people and routines to embed these practices helped to develop collective responsibility for results. Principal leadership was key to ensuring that these monitoring practices were embedded as 'business-as usual'. Key practices included putting people in charge of specific targets, using meetings to monitor student achievement and to problem-solve, and developing artefacts to embed new habits.

Second, growing the capability of middle leaders was fundamental to gaining improvement. Middle leaders had to talk to, and problem solve with, other leaders and teachers to drive up the results for their area of responsibility. Artefacts that systemized this work were important in shifting middle leaders' role to a more improvement focused role than they had held historically. Artefacts included using standardized reporting templates (e.g., with this year's results compared to last years); using a standard meeting agenda to keep the focus on results and problem-solving; reporting online within a meeting about what is being done for priority students and what the next step will be.

Third, the professional development in schools also evolved over the years to become more tailored to teachers' needs and 'teacher-led'. Senior leaders had to put the conditions in place to facilitate this development. All schools moved from a mainly whole school approach with external facilitators to increasing use of internal facilitators (teachers/middle leaders) in professional learning groups.

Other findings were:

- The specific levels of measurable targets seemed not so important for all staff to know if specific staff were in charge of the targets, but all staff appeared to know the overarching goals.
- Good data management systems were crucial to effective monitoring. When specific staff were in charge of different data sets and ensuring success in specific targets, they would follow through and have discussions with whoever they needed to.
- Putting strong monitoring processes in place ensured problem solving could occur in a timely way for short term gains in results.
- Short term gains drove up middle leader efficacy and over time, a greater sense of collective responsibility for results.
- Having data about results throughout the year, allowed schools to adopt new strategies and adapt their current practices in response to the data.

Implications for principals' practice

- Be very clear about the key goals and keep reinforcing them.
- Ensure the school has a fit-for-purpose data management system.
- At the team level (e.g., departments, year levels), set up strong procedures for ongoing monitoring i.e., very regular meetings with clear and standardized protocols/artefacts that maintain a focus on looking at updated results for groups of students and problem-solving on next steps.
- At the class level, ensure that teachers focus on a manageable number of 'priority learners' in each class as a 'laboratory' for teacher learning i.e., what can I do that will have greater impact for this learner? Will that help all learners?
- Develop middle leaders to take a major role in leading improvement and monitoring achievement.
- Implement regular reporting to senior leaders through scheduled meetings and artefacts that outline the updated data, and analysis about recommended next steps so senior leaders can support problem-solving efforts.
- Ensure there is no 'slippage' in meetings i.e., meetings should always occur as scheduled.
- Facilitate very specific professional development that enhances teacher collaboration and problem-solving aligned to goals.

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