

DPAS-II Goal-Setting: Perspectives from Best-Practice Schools

Memo

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Overview

Since 2007, the Delaware Department of Education (DDOE) has engaged external evaluators to conduct annual studies of the design, implementation, and outcomes of the Delaware Performance Appraisal System (DPAS-II). Research for Action (RFA), along with one partner organization,¹ served as the external evaluator for the 2014-15 and 2015-16 school years. RFA has a 20-year track record of conducting rigorous research and evaluation studies that speak directly to the needs and interests of educators.

This year, RFA visited six DPAS-II best practice schools² across the state that exhibited strong implementation of DPAS-II to conduct interviews with school leaders and focus groups with educators.³ The following memo is one of three documents designed to inform and support state and school-level efforts to improve implementation of DPAS-II.⁴

This memo highlights school administrator and educator perspectives that emerged from our site visits on challenges and promising practices associated with the DPAS-II goal-setting process for the Student Improvement Component (Component V). In it we consider how best practice school evaluators, teachers, and specialists use the process of goal setting to support student learning and growth.

Key Findings from Focus Groups and Interviews:

- **Implementation:** Educators' views of goal-setting utility were mixed, and influenced by their level of autonomy in selecting goals and their perceptions about the validity of assessments themselves.
- **Promising Practices:** Educators and administrators found it useful to set goals collaboratively in PLCs and valued the use of student data for progress-monitoring throughout the year.
- **Remaining Challenges:** Most educators and administrators at the six sites we visited still questioned the accuracy of DPAS-II in reflecting quality teaching. Many believed that the Student

¹ Operation Public Education (OPE).

² Schools were selected based primarily on data from the 2014-2015 DPAS-II survey, including indicators of fidelity of implementation and positive perceptions of the feedback and goal-setting processes. Student achievement measures and geographic diversity were also considered in the selection process.

³ In this memo, the term "educators" refers to Group 1 and Group 2 teachers and Group 3 specialists. See the Technical Appendix for definitions of these educator groups.

⁴ The two accompanying memos explore administrator communication about the purpose of DPAS-II and the formative feedback educators receive from their DPAS-II evaluator.

Improvement Component does not adequately account for factors outside of teachers' control, such as the poverty, trauma and learning challenges that some students face. Many specialists also experienced difficulty finding appropriate DPAS-II goals that reflected their unique roles as librarians, counselors, and nurses.

In this memo we also provide recommendations for the DDOE, districts, and schools on ways they can help improve the design and/or implementation of DPAS-II goal-setting. These recommendations were informed by suggestions from our study participants, promising practices and ongoing challenges that emerged from our visits to best practice schools, and review of related literature.

Key Recommendations:

- School administrators should consider working with specialists to craft DPAS-II goals that are reflective of their day-to-day practice and the needs of their students. DDOE should also provide additional guidance to administrators on available and appropriate measures for each specialist role.
- The DDOE should explore mechanisms to account for student and school-level characteristics, which many administrators and educators say impact DPAS-II ratings.

Below we employ the SMART goals framework to explore these and other findings and recommendations in more detail.

Introduction: Component V Goal-Setting

According to the DDOE's website, DPAS-II Component V was designed to:

- I. Help school leaders determine how much growth students have made from one year to the next and, most importantly, allow educators to determine their impact on the academic growth of students in a given academic period.
- II. Ensure that educators serving different types of students have an equal opportunity of showing significant growth in student learning and outcomes⁵.

Educators set goals for student growth at the beginning of the school year and receive a rating of Exceeds, Satisfactory or Unsatisfactory on Component V based on their student outcomes at the end of the school year.

As we documented in our Fall 2015 Report,⁶ even in best practice districts, educators and administrators often lament the aspects of Component V that they feel are difficult to understand, unfair, or poorly implemented. In response, the DDOE continues to make adjustments to the goal-setting process, and is particularly interested in unpacking current implementation, emerging promising practices from the field, and remaining challenges.

Implementation Findings: the Goal-Setting Process

The following section summarizes our findings about current implementation of Component V goal-setting in the six best practice schools we visited.

⁵See Delaware Student Growth Model for Teacher & School Leader Evaluation: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) for more information. http://www.doe.k12.de.us/cms/lib09/DE01922744/Centricity/Domain/375/Delaware%20Student%20Growth%20Model%20FAQs_Nov%202015.pdf
⁶ Long, D. A. & Beaver, J. K. (2015). *Delaware Performance Appraisal System Second Edition (DPAS-II) Evaluation Report*. Philadelphia, Pa: Research for Action.

DDOE has suggested three strategies for goal setting:

1. Educators set a goal for the class average percentage increase of students' achievement from beginning of the year to end of the year
2. Educators divide students into tiers and set goals for each tier
3. Educators set individual goals for each student

There was wide variation in the level of autonomy that school and district administrators allowed educators in selecting assessment measures and setting DPAS-II goals. Levels of autonomy varied between schools and between teachers and specialists with different roles within schools. Some educators were allowed substantial flexibility in selecting measures, in setting targets, or in both areas. Others felt that their measures, targets, or both were dictated by administration.

All three goal-setting strategies were represented in our “best practice schools” but use of class averages and individual goals were more common than tiered goals, which require teachers to chunk students in tiered groups and calculate growth goals for each group.

Despite class averages being common, administrators and educators favored the use of individual student goals or of tiers, because these methods help to address student differences. However, educators in some schools were not given these options and therefore relied on class averages for goal-setting.

I feel like in my room it would be nice to set individual student goals. And that's way more work for myself, but it's more appropriate, just because I have multiple students, multiple grade levels, different disabilities – they all have different rates of learning. (Group 3 educator)

Educators' views of goal-setting utility were mixed. Some educators found that DPAS-II goal-setting improved their practice by helping them maintain a focus on student outcomes and providing useful pre, post, and interim metrics to assess learning. Other educators found that the DPAS-II goal-setting process did not improve or change their teaching practice, or worse, took time away from more important instructional activities.

It's always helpful to sit there and look at the data. The time that we spend in the beginning of the year looking at preliminary scores and saying, “This is where I am...This is where I have to go,” it's always helpful. Data can help you in guiding, “This is something I need to spend more time teaching or revisiting,” so I think that's probably always one of the best benefits of goal-setting. (Group 2 educator)

It doesn't change how I teach. It just changes how I feel. I don't think about that goal every day. I want the kids to improve, but that's always in the back of your mind whether that goal is there or not. I find it (DPAS-II) to be a waste of time and a waste of a week. (Group 1 educator)

SMART Goals Framework

In order to maximize the utility of DPAS-II for educators and their students, it's important that state, district, and school-level leaders provide guidance on the goal-setting process. The SMART Goals Framework outlines five criteria for setting strong performance and development objectives. The framework provides a useful organizational tool to help educators and administrators think about the quality of goal-setting.

SMART goals should be:

- **Specific.** Is your goal formulated in a way that you and others understand what is to be achieved?
- **Measurable.** Can your goal be accurately measured with evidence you will collect?
- **Attainable.** Is your goal a stretch, but also realistic?
- **Relevant.** Does the achievement of your goal have meaningful positive implications for your own teaching practice, student outcomes and the overall goals of your school?
- **Time-bound.** Is the time in which this goal should be achieved clear?

DPAS-II goal-setting is, by design, specific and time-bound. This brief will highlight promising practices and remaining challenges for administrators and educators who are working to set DPAS-II goals which are also **measurable, attainable, and relevant.**



Promising Practices for SMART DPAS-II Goals

The following section offers promising practices which may be useful to administrators and educators as they aim to set SMART DPAS-II goals to support student learning and growth.

Promising Practices for Setting Measurable Goals

Easy access to student performance data from past years enabled teachers to set better goals and targets. Checking in on interim results throughout the year helped some educators monitor their goals and adjust instruction. Administrators can support measurable goals by providing educators with data systems that are user-friendly and assessment packages that offer formative and timely progress-monitoring.

This year we added more times that we are progress-monitoring STAR, so that it wasn't just in the beginning of the year, middle of the year, and the end. So educators have some steps in between so that they can adjust instruction as we go along. (Administrator)

We also have to keep data throughout the year. We have to keep it in our PLC binder... So you are constantly thinking, here's how my students are progressing towards their goal. (Group 1 educator)

Promising Practices for Setting Attainable Goals

Structured time in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to meet and discuss goal-setting at the beginning of the year helped educators to better understand how to set challenging but attainable goals. It also helped to build a sense of shared purpose and expectations.

I do feel like with the PLCs at the beginning of the year, we really go through the process together. So I feel very well supported as we are creating the goals and just making sure that we all have a good understanding of the process and what's involved. (Group 1 educator)

Educators and administrators valued opportunities to engage in self-reflection and dialogue about why students did or did not meet their goals and strategize together about future goal-setting.

At the end of the year, our principal asks, "What do you think contributed to this student not making the goal, what do you think contributed to (them) having success?" So we type up a narrative to go over our data. He really wants to explain what was done to meet or exceed whatever it was. (Group 2 educator)

If you don't meet your goal, it's a conversation that we'll have. And you can explain to me, this is why this kid didn't make it. I am not out to get anybody for this – we're going to work hard together to take care of that. (Administrator)

When educators did not attain their goals, some administrators in best practice districts exhibited flexibility in interpreting DPAS-II ratings and assigning "improvement plans." Administrators may consider their broader knowledge of student factors and past teacher performance in evaluating the best course of action.

We have an administrator who listens to us and knows the (student) backgrounds and takes that into account. It's not just a cut score. When he looked at the cold data he could say you're not doing your job, but he knows I am. (Group 2 educator)

If I need to get you to an improvement plan, it means we aren't able to figure out a way to work together. And I've never had to have to do that. Even if it means I have to switch a grade level, or pair them up with a teammate until they... can be back on their own a little bit. I'm willing to do those kinds of things. It's great to meet your goal, but ultimately we need our kids to be ready for the next grade. (Administrator)

Promising Practices for Setting Relevant Goals

Educators valued autonomy in setting goals that were specific to their students, grade level, and content area. When administrators allow teacher autonomy, they communicate a sense of trust in their staff and help to establish buy-in to the goal-setting process.

I think they give as much leeway as they can to make our goals for DPAS II. They understand that our goals should be set around what's best for our kids and the population of students that we have. That the students in our school may not fit the same cookie cutter mold around the state or even around our own district. (Group 2 educator)

I don't want to limit teachers or put them in a box by, "No, we're using class average only (for goal-setting)." It's the teacher's choice whether they're looking at percentages or benchmarks. I think that's real important for their buy-in. (Administrator)

Educators found goal-setting more useful when assessments were developmentally appropriate and aligned with their classroom curriculum. This increased their sense that goal-setting was fair and useful to both teachers and students.

Well I think they (goals) have to be authentic and about what you actually are doing and they have to be applied to my kids. (Group 3 educator)

I think whatever test we use, whatever assessment we use, it should be based on what we're doing in our curriculums. I think our test was a writing test and at the time we were focused on reading, so our curriculum wasn't as heavy on writing and it was really hard for them to meet those goals at the end of the year. Whatever it is, it just all needs to be cohesive. (Group 1 educator)



Remaining Challenges for SMART Goal-Setting

The following section discusses challenges that participants reported in our visits to best practice schools. These challenges may be present in other schools as well.

Remaining Measurement Challenges

Changes in assessments and the Component V process from year to year made setting goals more challenging. Several educators and administrators described the goal-setting process as a “moving target.”

I think it was hard for us to set a goal because it was the first time we've ever used Amplify, so how do we know a reasonable amount of growth in a year? For us to wrap our head around are we making good progress? Is this an acceptable amount of progress? (Group 1 educator)

As a member of the state's DPAS review committee, my vote was always “no change.” You can never really look at the success of a program when you're constantly changing it. So, it's all changed but leading the change has been goal setting and the Component V piece. It's never been the same twice. (Administrator)

Many educators and administrators had concerns about the validity of assessments used to measure student growth and derive Component V educator ratings. These include concerns about pre and post assessments that measure different skills and concerns about computer-based testing in the early grades and for students with special needs.

I always had issues with this assessment... Like, the pre-test for example, is a reflection essay where they have to explain why the discovery's important. The post-test is a comparison one, so it's testing them on two different skill-sets. But they still have to improve that rubric score. So, I feel as if maybe the information is not valid because it's two different things you're looking for. (Group 1 educator)

I had the issue with several of my kids that have never ever taken the test on the computer. That figures in there. The kids are so young and a lot of them are coming from schools that weren't lucky enough to have a computer lab. They've never had to sit at a computer for more than 15 or 20 minutes. (Group 1 educator)

Some educators also expressed concerns about the impacts of frequent high-stakes testing on their students, including resulting anxiety and lost instructional time.

We lost a day. Some kids lost several days because they had to keep going back because (the test) was too hard. But when I looked at the scores they are exactly where I would have put them-- I already knew just from teaching in the classroom. So they're taking a test to prove what quality teacher I am, but it's hurting them, which then hurts our soul... The kids are just spending way too much time taking tests to get data which is taking away from learning. (Group 1 educator)

Remaining Attainability Challenges

Across all schools we visited, educators and administrators reported that their perceptions of quality did not align with DPAS-II's rating of quality and cited factors outside of a teacher's control which can significantly impact DPAS-II ratings.

Last year only one teacher in the school did not make her Component V goals and she was our teacher of the year and she's an amazing, phenomenal teacher and we were both like "we can't put you on an improvement plan." It just didn't match. We had a lot of evidence for why it just didn't match....She gave her end of the year test the day after we had our field day. Whereas we had teachers who we thought probably should be put on an improvement plan and they made their goals. (Administrator)

I'm coming from [a school with a] very different population. But here we have so many different needs. We have kids in foster care, and kids who have horrible home situations... So I just think, I don't know. I just think assessment doesn't necessarily equate to teacher effectiveness. (Administrator)

Many educators felt that DPAS-II goal-setting based on written assessments was inappropriate for certain students, especially those with special needs/IEPs.

I'm just happy for what each little kid can do. You can't measure that with one test for everybody. The kid that doesn't say any words, but after how many months that we've been here now he finally says 'hi.' ... You can't necessarily put that in a form and send it to DDOE—and fill out a bubble sheet and say this is great. (Group 3 educator)

Remaining Relevance Challenges

Across all schools we visited, specialists reported difficulty finding appropriate goals that reflected their unique roles as librarians, music teachers, counselors, and nurses. Administrators echoed this challenge. Specialists not only felt limited by the assessment options available to them, but suggested that they might receive better guidance from an evaluator with expertise in their profession or role.

That's one of the pieces that I believe needs even greater specificity. Because when you take a look at a reading class compared to a Phys-Ed class, you're taking a look at some totally different things. As we take a look at our assessment tools for specialists as opposed to content areas, it's not always as clean and equally as measurable. It's not as clean data as it could be. (Administrator)

In these positions, it's hard. It doesn't really reflect what I do all day. I have goals, but what I'm using to measure (them) is a small part of what my actual job is. You know, with counseling, there's the confidentiality. I think it's hard to find something measureable that [gets at] what I'm doing all day long. Another challenge is, I have four different grade levels, and typically you pick two goals. But when you're working with a child in kindergarten versus a child in 3rd grade, it becomes very difficult to select only two goals that are really going to be appropriate for the multi-age. (Group 3 educator)

Specialists who had limited time with students found DPAS-II goal-setting to be especially challenging and burdensome.

Well I think the librarians-- the way we are evaluated is different compared to a lot of the other groups. Mine takes 5-6 weeks to complete a project to be able to get the data to actually evaluate me, so I think that's difficult. I see some people that only need to give a pre- and post-test.... I use almost half my time just doing these projects (for DPAS-II). (Group 3 educator)

Many educators still perceived a disconnect between DPAS-II goals based on student assessments and the broader scope of their role as teachers. They emphasized that DPAS-II provides a limited picture of a student's achievement and ignores important social and emotional needs of students and progress made in those areas.

If a parent comes in and meets with me today, I'm going to talk [more] about the whole child to them than I am about the child's numbers. As a parent, I'm like, "Do they really know him? Are they really seeing what I think is best for him and what he needs?" That's real teaching. Their parents don't care so much about DPAS as they do about the other stuff. Is he getting along with others? And the data that we collect is about their academics. It's not the whole child. (Group 2 educator)

I think tests show content growth, but they do not show the whole picture of any student or classroom. I think that's one of the issues that I have sometimes with this type of evaluation system is that a student isn't a test number. It doesn't tell you what they've done or what they've experienced. So, it's useful but it's not a tell-all of a kid and what they did and what my classes did. Or us as teachers. It's tough to evaluate us on this one group of students on that one day, on that one time of their life. (Group 1 educator)



Recommendations for Improving DPAS-II Goal-Setting

The following recommendations were informed by educator perspectives at best practice schools, the promising practices and challenges that emerged from our focus groups and interviews, and the literature on SMART goals.

Recommendations for District and School-Level Administrators

- **Ensure that educators have access to past and present student data** throughout the year to inform goal setting and progress monitoring.
- **Encourage educators to set goals collaboratively in PLCs** with support from administration.
- **Create opportunities for educator self-reflection and dialogue on why they did or did not meet goals.** These conversations can help guide the next round of goal-setting.
- **Consider student characteristics and past performance when interpreting educator ratings** and exhibiting flexibility in assigning improvement plans when educators do not attain their goals.
- **Support educators in selecting assessments that are aligned with curriculum and are developmentally appropriate.**
- **Allow educators to set goals based on tiers or individual targets,** as well as class averages.
- **Work with specialists, particularly counselors and nurses, to craft DPAS-II goals that are holistic and reflective of non-academic skills and needs.**

Recommendations for DDOE:

- **Provide additional guidance to district administrators on available and appropriate measures for specialist roles and continue to improve the existing bank of measures for specialists**—these measures should be vetted by practitioners.
- **Consider ways to more appropriately measure growth for special education students and students in the early grades.**
- **Explore additional mechanisms to account for student and school-level characteristics,** which many administrators and educators say impact DPAS-II ratings.