

Student Growth Objectives: Frequently Asked Questions



The following Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) provide responses to many of the inquiries the Department has received about Student Growth Objectives (SGOs). Administrators are encouraged to use this information when responding to common inquiries and concerns from educators. If the answer to an inquiry is not found below or is not answered by a review of the [SGO web page](#) hosted by the Department, please send the question directly to the Office of Evaluation at educatorevaluation@doe.state.nj.us.

Rationale

Q: Why do teachers have to set SGOs?

A: The [TEACHNJ Act](#) – New Jersey’s teacher tenure law – requires educator evaluations that include multiple measures of student learning. The law mandates that these measures be in place for the 2013-14 school year. SGOs must be set by all teachers to fulfill this requirement, and will count for 15% of the overall evaluation for SY13-14.

Q: What are the benefits of setting SGOs for my students?

A: SGOs are SMART (Specific, Measurable, Ambitious/Achievable, Relevant, Time-Related) goals that teachers set for themselves based on a measure of their students’ learning - a practice many New Jersey teachers have been following for many years. Setting goals allows teachers to plan systematically for their instruction, ensuring that they teach critical standards and use a quality assessment that accurately and fairly measures student performance. Research shows such goal-setting improves student performance, and does so to a greater degree when the goals are high quality (see this [Community Training and Assistance Center February 2013 Report](#)).

Setting SGOs and General Questions

Q: How can teachers who instruct in semester blocks or nine-week cycles set SGOs?

A: These teachers should set SGOs as early in the semester as possible. If the instructional period is less than nine weeks (e.g. 30-day cycles), teachers should set goals for several of these short cycles and then aggregate performance on these goals into their SGOs when possible.

Q: How should SGOs be handled for a teacher on a leave of absence or otherwise away from teaching for a period of time?

A: Teachers should be present for at least a nine-week continuous period of time during the year to set an SGO. A teacher who has not set an SGO before the November 15 deadline due to an extended leave should set an SGO as early as possible after his or her return to the classroom.

Q: How much do SGOs count toward the final evaluation score in 2013-14?

A: SGOs will count for 15% of every teacher’s evaluation and 10% of every principals’ evaluation in 2013-14. SGO weighting in subsequent years will be announced each April by the Department.

Q: How many students must I have in order to set an SGO?

A: You must have two or more students in order to set an SGO.

Q: How many SGOs must teachers set?

A: Teachers who will receive Student Growth Percentile (SGP) scores (4th-8th-grade Language Arts Literacy and Mathematics teachers of at least 20 separate students with valid SGP scores) must set one or two SGOs. The superintendent determines whether teachers with SGP scores will set one or two SGOs. Teachers who **will not** receive SGP scores **must** set two SGOs. Since many class rosters change throughout the year, a teacher’s student population may begin above 20 but drop below that number during the year. Thus, districts might consider requiring any teacher of 25 or fewer total students to set two SGOs. If the population is particularly mobile, districts might consider two SGOs for teachers of less than 30 (or more) students.

Q: I'm confused by SGOs; why doesn't the State just tell us what to do?

A: An important aspect of education in New Jersey is the independent spirit embraced by the majority of its nearly 600 school districts. The flexibility of the SGO process recognizes the independence and professionalism that many districts and educators exhibit. SGOs provide a way for all teachers to demonstrate their positive effect on student performance while recognizing unique teaching contexts.

Even though some educators may be unaccustomed to having this type of flexibility in their evaluations, the Department believes high quality SGOs that reflect best educational practices have great potential for improving student achievement and teacher practice across the state. The Department has provided a good deal of guidance to help teachers develop high quality SGOs without overly restrictive rules.

Q: Can teachers set an SGO for a particular skill or unit of instruction?

A: SGOs must be **long term** academic goals that include significant portions of both the curriculum and students for which the teacher is responsible. If one SGO can encompass the curriculum and students, then a second SGO might be developed to focus on a particular skill, content, or subgroup of students. The Department has used the terms “general” and “specific” SGOs to explain this concept. Please see the [SGO Guidebook](#) for more information.

Q: What's the difference between a general and a specific (or targeted) SGO?

A: General SGOs are broader in scope, including a significant proportion of curriculum in a particular course and all or most of a teacher's students. Specific – or targeted – SGOs focus on a particular set of standards or subgroup of students. General and specific SGOs lie on a continuum and it may be difficult to classify a goal as one or the other. This distinction is not important other than from a planning perspective. In cases where teachers will not have an SGP score, their **SGOs together** should include a **significant portion of the curriculum and students** for which they are responsible. In cases where teachers do have an SGP score, the SGOs can be used to reinforce math and LAL instruction. Alternatively, they can address subject areas such as science that do not typically receive as much attention as the tested subjects. Examples are shown in the table below.

Teacher	SGOs	Notes/Examples
Non-tested Grades and Subjects		
1 prep	One general SGO for all students plus one targeted SGO (may be a targeted content/skill or group of students)	General SGO includes 70% history standards and all students Targeted SGO focuses on use of informational text by all students
2 preps	One general SGO for all students in each course	Algebra 1 – SGO 1 Geometry – SGO 2
More than 2 preps	One general SGO for all students in each of the two courses containing the highest numbers of students	Spanish 1 (56 students) –SGO 1 Spanish 2 (43 students) – SGO 2 AP Spanish (8 students) – no SGO
Elementary	Two general SGOs for all students in two developmental domains or two subject areas	Literacy domain – SGO 1 Language domain – SGO 2 Math – SGO 1 Science – SGO 2
Tested Grades and Subjects (receive an SGP score)		
All	One or two SGOs (district discretion), general or targeted	SGP provides one broad measure of student performance. Teachers and districts determine SGO makeup based on needs.

Teachers who teach *different content* to multiple grade levels should consider each grade level a separate prep, e.g. a music teacher with grades 1, 2, 3, and 4 who teaches different standards for each level, would select two of the grade levels for her two SGOs.

Q: Since SGOs must be set by November 15th, should they include only standards being taught after this date?

A: No; teachers should start addressing the standards that will be included in the SGO assessment as soon as possible (i.e., once the assessment has been identified). SGOs should incorporate a significant portion of the school year, and this will be difficult if teachers wait more than two months into the school year. The November 15 deadline is there only to provide time for teachers to become familiar with the SGO process and to collect baseline data on their students.

Q: My district has said that all teachers must have the same SGO. Is this acceptable to the State?

A: Setting an SGO around a shared set of standards and a common assessment for a particular group of teachers who are teaching the same subject and grade makes sense. The Department encourages teachers to **develop and use common assessments** as much as possible. However, the target that each teacher sets for his or her students and the scoring plan associated with this should be tailored to each particular set of students. This is because it is important to set goals that are **appropriate for a teacher's particular group of students**. This is determined using baseline data at the beginning of the year. In some cases, clear data may suggest a district needs to improve student performance in a particular area, e.g., use of evidence in formulating arguments. In this case, the district may opt to ask its teachers to set one of their SGOs towards this particular skill. The other SGO the teacher set should be aligned with the content area curriculum that they are teaching. Districts should bear in mind that **teachers** are to develop their SGOs **in consultation** with their principals or direct supervisors. SGOs should not be provided by administrators. Instead, this process should be **collaborative** and lead to thoughtful discussion and the use of available data.

Q: Can a teacher's Professional Development Plan be based on his/her SGOs?

A: SGOs are based on academic performance gains of a teacher's particular students. The teacher's professional development plan (PDP), on the other hand, is based on areas of professional growth identified by the teacher and his/her supervisor. Professional learning goals are arrived at by examining multiple sources of evidence, including results of the teacher's summative evaluation; SGO assessment results; team, school, and/or district priorities; and other artifacts of the teacher's performance. Student learning data represents an important – but not the only – source of evidence, used to inform PDP planning. For example, when analyzing SGO results, it may be clear that a group of students has performed poorly in reading comprehension. To obtain more information, a supervisor might observe the teacher's instruction of reading comprehension and might suggest that he/she needs to improve on reading comprehension pedagogy. The need for improvement in this area would then be indicated as a goal in the teacher's PDP.

Assessments

Q: Can a teacher's final exam be used for SGOs?

A: Modifying the final for SGO purposes is a good option for teachers who have a well-crafted, standards-based, and rigorous test. For SGO data to be available in annual conferences, this test should be administered earlier in the school year (April-May, depending on conference schedule) and should be modified to include only the standards that have been taught up to the time students take it. Teachers should use their professional judgment about the grade value of this exam, and the activities and assessments they will use to ensure the remainder of the school year is productive.

Q: Can a teacher use national exams, such as AP and NOCTI, for SGOs?

A: These exams are likely to be of a very high quality and therefore are fair and accurate ways to assess student learning. However, as with final exams, if they are administered at the end of the school year, teachers may not get results in time for an annual conference. Teachers who normally administer these types of exams may choose to create their own version of such tests for their SGOs. They might use exams available from prior years or sample items to help build the test.

Q: How can I determine if an assessment is appropriate for an SGO?

A: The [SGO Guidebook](#) contains guidance and [forms](#) to help teachers and the supervisors ensure that they are using appropriate assessments. However, there are three important questions to answer to determine this:

- 1) Is the assessment aligned to state standards?
- 2) Is it high quality in terms of rigor, validity, and coverage?
- 3) Will it be scored (and administered) with fidelity?

Q: What does it mean that the SGO “must be aligned to content standards?”

A: New Jersey has content standards for each subject area and grade, including the new Common Core State Standards. SGOs should be set to assess students’ performance on these content standards. Because teachers must prioritize which standards can be included in an SGO, they should identify and include those that are **critical for foundational understanding and future learning**. This work is best done by teams of educators as they develop their assessments at the beginning of the year.

Q: If a teacher sets two SGOs, can the same assessment be used for both?

A: Teachers may use the same assessment for both SGOs if the assessment fairly and accurately measures performance on the standards that are included in the SGOs.

Q: Can teachers use the NJ ASK as the assessment for SGOs?

A: Teachers of math or LAL grades 4-8 and receiving an SGP score **may not** use the NJ ASK. Through the SGP, those teachers will already be receiving a rating based on their students’ performance on the NJ ASK that will count for 30 percent of the evaluation. However, those teachers may use their students’ performance on prior years of the NJ ASK when gathering baseline data to determine their starting points. Teachers who do not receive an SGP may use the NJ ASK but scores on this test are not available until after the end of the school year. This means that these teachers would not get a summative rating until the scores were available.

Q: Where can I find more information about developing assessments?

A: The Department’s [training module on assessments](#) provides detailed instructions to help teachers choose and develop SGO assessments.

Starting Points

Q: Why do teachers need to collect baseline data?

A: Assessing students’ starting points helps teachers set ambitious and achievable SGOs. Teachers have long relied on instinct when assessing their new students. Gathering data formalizes this process and allows teachers to develop a clear picture of their students and justify the goals they set for them.

Q: What information can be used for baseline data?

A: There is a wide range of information that might be used; **grades and assessment scores from the current year** prior to setting the SGO, grades and assessment scores from previous years and subjects, pre-assessments, etc. Each teacher must determine what the most useful data is and how to use it for determining the starting points of his/her students. Keep in mind that using **more than one source of data** provides a better picture of students’ starting points.

Q: Are teachers required to use a pre-assessment?

A: No. Pre-assessments may be used to collect baseline data, but there are several other ways to determine students’ starting points as mentioned in the preceding question. Additionally, unless they are carefully constructed, pre-assessments may not provide the type of information that will be useful for setting appropriate goals. For instance, a pre-assessment that is identical to a post-assessment may be so challenging for students that most score very poorly and some become discouraged by their test performance early in the school year. Additionally, a pre-assessment on content in a subject area to which students have never been exposed (e.g. German 1) may provide little useful information. At the beginning of the school year, it may be challenging to motivate

students to do their best on a pre-assessment. However, some teachers are using carefully crafted and rigorous pre-assessments effectively and have worked to overcome some of the problems associated with pre-assessments noted above. In consultation with their supervisors, these teachers may opt to continue using such pre-assessments.

Q: How can a teacher measure the growth of his/her students?

A: Technically speaking, “growth” can only be shown using similarly constructed pre- and post-assessments. For many teachers this is not practical and the Department is not requiring this. However, teachers recognize how much their students “grow” during the year as they watch them develop skills and knowledge. An assessment of skills, foundational knowledge, and the use of past learning data, for example, provides rich information about how prepared students are for a given course. Armed with this information, teachers will be able to set ambitious but achievable goals for these students. The SGO assessment will determine how much the students learned or “grew” between the beginning and end of the instructional period.

Q: Where can I find more information about determining starting points?

A: The Department’s [training module on starting points](#) provides detailed instructions to help you choose and develop SGO assessments.

Common Concerns

Q: I’ve heard people say that SGOs will lead to a lot more testing of students. This concerns me.

A: SGOs can be based on assessments that teachers currently use to evaluate their students, as long as they are **fair and accurate measures** of their students’ performance (see [form](#) for guidance on this). Even though teachers may need to modify their assessments for SGO purposes, the number they actually administer does not need to increase.

Q: Will the Department of Education collect individual SGOs?

A: In general, no, although collecting and reviewing SGOs from Priority/Focus schools may be a part of the support the state provides to these schools. In most districts, however, teachers will submit SGOs only to their principal/supervisor by November 15th, 2013 (and by October 15th in subsequent years). Each district must certify that all teachers have submitted approved SGOs; the Department only collects each district’s teacher SGO ratings at the end of the year. That being said, the Department is interested in sharing high quality SGOs that teachers have developed and will collect voluntarily-submitted SGO exemplars from teachers to share with other educators around the state. Educators who wish to share their SGOs for consideration may do so by sending them to educatorevaluation@doe.state.nj.us.

Q: How can all teachers be held equally responsible for setting goals even though their students perform at different levels?

A: SGOs are measure of **academic growth**, not proficiency, and are tailored to the needs of a teacher’s particular students and the priorities of the school. The goals within these SGOs should reflect the starting points of the teacher’s students. The scoring range is based on what the teacher and administrator consider reasonable learning for the particular students. This makes the SGO system a much fairer way to evaluate teachers whose students may perform at lower levels than others.

Q: What incentives do teachers and principals have for setting achievable but ambitious targets for SGOs?

A: The Department believes that the vast majority of educators will act ethically and honestly in setting SGOs that will help their students grow. In addition, AchieveNJ rewards appropriate professional behavior through the Evaluation Leadership component of principal evaluation. 20% of a principal’s evaluation is based on the effectiveness with which they implement the new evaluation system for teachers. This aspect of a principal’s performance will be assessed with New Jersey’s [Principal Evaluation Leadership Instrument](#). A component of this rubric requires principals to approve and monitor the quality of SGOs (see section 2D in the rubric). There is similar component in the state’s [Assistant/Vice Principal Evaluation Leadership Instrument](#) (section D).

Educator Specific Questions

Q: I am a school counselor. Do I need to set SGOs? Do you have exemplars for SGOs for that I could take a look at?

A: SGOs are not required for school counselors, but only for teachers with an assigned class roster. Educational specialists such as academic coaches, CST professionals, librarians/media specialists, paraprofessionals, athletic trainers, health workers and counselors, etc. may set SGOs at the discretion of local district leadership. However, the Department encourages all educators to set SGOs to help improve their performance by goal setting. Office of Evaluation staff members have worked with several professional organizations that represent these educational specialists to develop SGO samples that may be useful reference documents. Please contact your professional organization for these samples.

Q: I teach classes in which students are very transient. Many students who start the school year do not complete it and many join classes mid-way through the school year. How can I set appropriate goals for these students and have these be a fair measure of my performance?

A: One way to tackle this is to set several goals for shorter periods of time (e.g., 10 weeks) and collect these into one SGO. You can develop each goal with baseline data at the start of a unit of instruction, and develop a scoring plan that reflects the number of students you currently have. Your goal can be written in terms of a percentage of students that is enrolled in the class for a significant proportion of the unit. At the end of the unit, you can assess the performance of your students and get a rating for the goal you have set. Those students who have left the class during this period of instruction would not count in this rating. Students who have newly entered the class would not count either. You would repeat this cycle with the new population of students making adjustments to reflect the change in your student population. At the end of the SGO period, your final rating is based on your average success in each of the unit goals you have set. Teachers who teach quarterly courses may use a similar approach to this.

Q: I have seen the exemplars published on the Department's website but my content area is not covered. Does the state have plans to publish more exemplars?

A: The Department has been working with groups of educators to develop SGO exemplars, which will be added in the future. However, all exemplars are designed to be teaching tools that all teachers and administrators can use to help develop their own SGOs. The structure of each exemplar is the same and the development process can be applied to any subject and grade. Even though the assessment may vary, the exemplars can help guide all teachers in writing their own SGOs. The annotated versions provide commentary showing how the author of the exemplar made decisions during the development process. The commentary also shows how the SGO might be improved. Administrators should carefully review these comments as they prepare to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the SGOs that their teachers develop.

Q: I teach Special Education. How will my SGOs be different than a general education teacher's?

A: Like a general education teacher, your SGO should be tailored to meet the needs of your students. As much as possible, your SGOs should encompass the curriculum and students for which you are responsible. The IEPs of the students you teach contain added guidance to help you provide the type of instructional support that will help your students succeed. You may use this guidance to help inform your SGOs. For example, you may set an SGO that includes standards for reading comprehension. The IEP of a student may include strategies to improve the comprehension skills that the individual student has not yet learned. In this case, the IEP and SGO for that student are aligned.

Q: I am the Special Education teacher in an inclusion class. Should the general education teacher and I have the same SGO?

A: This is one of few cases where teachers may have identical SGOs. If you both have the same students, teach the same material, and use the same assessments, it makes sense to develop and

apply the same SGO. In cases where this type of collaborative relationship is not present, teachers may set different SGOs.

Q: I teach a population of students with severe disabilities. Can I set an SGO that addresses progress in non-academic areas in this case?

A: If you are teaching a group of students whose academic progress is limited by certain behavioral or emotional restrictions (e.g., students who cannot read or write), you may set a non-academic SGO. However, the design of this SGO should still capture a significant portion of the work that you are doing with your students throughout the year. In addition, a non-academic SGO for a group of students must be appropriate for all of the students in the group. If your group of students is extremely diverse, it would be better to set individual goals for each of the students tailored to their specific needs and identified areas of growth. You would then aggregate the results of these goals into one SGO score.

Q: I teach courses that only last one marking period. How do I set SGOs in this case?

A: There are two options here. 1) Create goals for several marking periods and aggregate the student performance for each of these marking periods into 2 SGOs. This ensures that fewer students are left out of the teacher's SGO. 2) Set one SGO for one marking period and one for another.

Q: If I have to submit my SGOs by November 15th how do I set an SGO for a course that starts after this date?

A: In the case of semester or marking period courses, you could develop the SGO before the deadline using the assessment you use for the course. You would submit the SGO using a hypothetical scoring plan for the course and then adjust it (with the superintendent's permission) by February 15th once you have real student baseline data with which to work.

Q: I teach multiple grade levels. How do I set SGOs?

A: If you teach the same standards in these classes, you may set SGOs as you would if the students were in one grade level. However, if you teach multiple sets of standards or subject areas, you should set an SGO for two of the grades or subjects you teach.

More Information and Answers to Other Questions

Q: Whom should I contact for answers to specific questions that are not included in this FAQ or the materials provided by the Department?

A: While external vendors and consultants may be able to answer some questions regarding SGOs, to be sure of the reliability of the answer you get, you should contact the Office of Evaluation at the Department at educatorevaluation@doe.state.nj.us or 609.777.3788.

Q: Where can I find more resources on SGOs?

A: The [AchieveNJ SGO Web Page](#) provides detailed guidance documents, presentations, workshops, training modules, and SGO exemplars.