EXPEDITIONARY
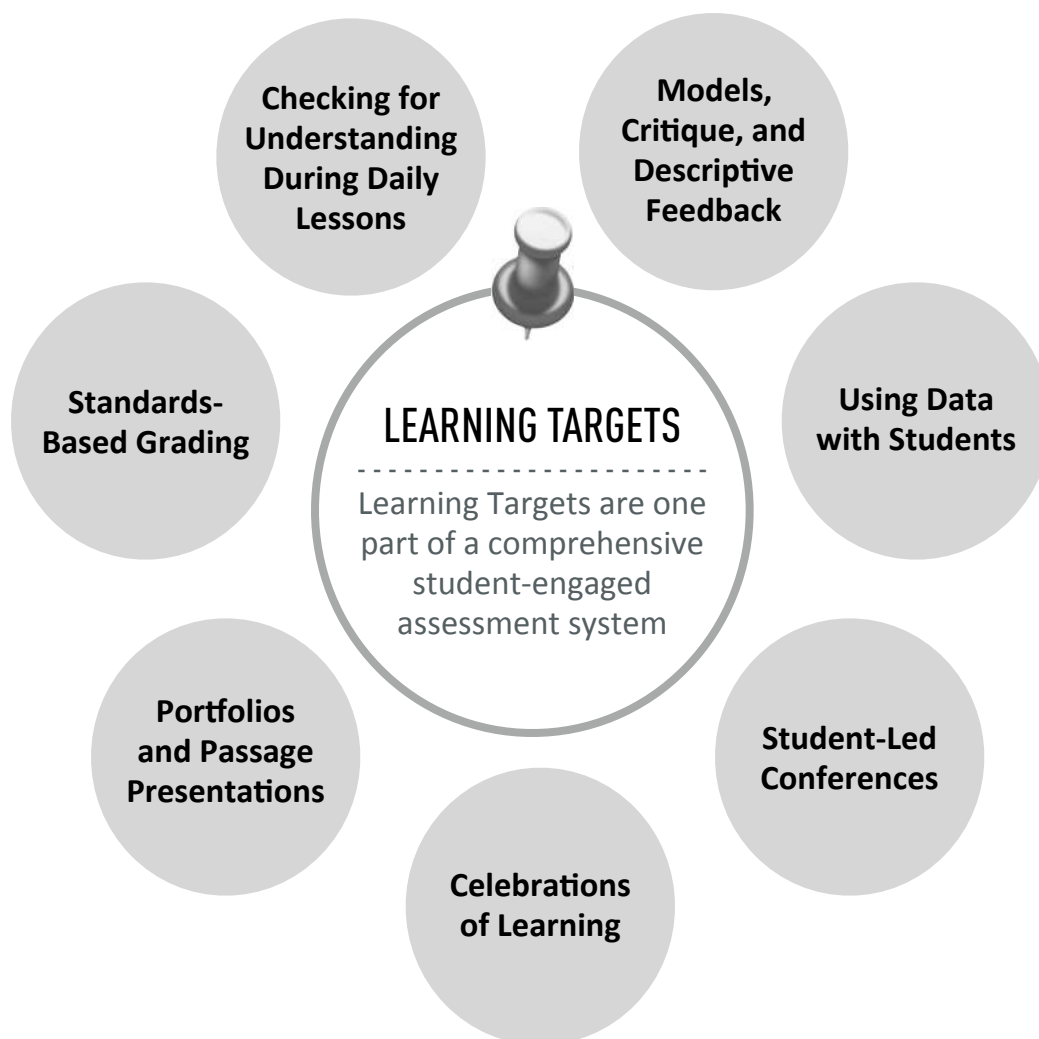LEARNING

# Learning Targets

Booklet One of the Student-Engaged Assessment Toolkit: Supporting Common Core Success in the Classroom

The diagram shows "LEARNING TARGETS" at the center with the text "Learning Targets are one part of a comprehensive student-engaged assessment system" surrounded by eight circles:

- Checking for Understanding During Daily Lessons
- Models, Critique, and Descriptive Feedback
- Standards-Based Grading
- Using Data with Students
- Portfolios and Passage Presentations
- Student-Led Conferences
- Celebrations of Learning

Learning Targets

# Overview

## Learning Targets: The Foundation of Student-Engaged Assessment

The process of learning shouldn't be a mystery to students. Learning targets provide them with tangible goals that they can understand and work toward. Rather than the teacher taking on all of the responsibility for meeting a lesson's objectives, learning targets, written in student-friendly language and frequently reflected upon, transfer ownership for meeting objectives from the teacher to the student. The seemingly simple work of reframing objectives written for teachers to learning targets written for, and owned by, students turns assessment on its head. The student becomes the main actor in assessing and improving his or her learning.

When the students in Lori Laliberte's kindergarten class at the Odyssey School in Denver, CO learned that their "bessbugs" had died, they were sad. They had been observing and caring for the bugs as part of a learning expedition focused on the life cycle. The company agreed to send them new bugs and, since one of the Colorado state standards[1] for kindergartners is learning to use written language for a variety of purposes, the occasion provided an authentic opportunity to learn to write a thank-you letter. Two learning targets guided their effort: "I can identify the main parts of a letter" and "I can explain the purpose of sending a letter." The students knew what their learning targets were from the outset of their lesson, and they were able to actively work toward meeting them.

> **Learning targets** are goals for lessons, projects, units, and courses. They are derived from standards and used to assess growth and achievement. They are written in concrete, student-friendly language—beginning with the stem "I can"—shared with students, posted in the classroom, and tracked carefully by students and teachers during the process of learning.
>
> Expeditionary Learning's work with learning targets is informed by the assessment for learning practices of Rick Stiggins, Judith Arter, Jan Chappuis, and Steve Chappuis and the Assessment Training Institute.

By translating state standards into learning targets her students could make sense of, Laliberte engaged them as active partners in making progress. She knew they had met the target when they could say "I can." The term "target" is significant. It emphasizes that students are aiming for something specific. Learning targets are meant to be used by students. Every day, students discuss, reflect, track their progress, and assess their work in relation to learning targets. Learning targets build investment in learning by giving students the language to discuss what they know and what they need to learn. As an eighth-grader at the Odyssey School remarked, "The teacher will take time to break down the target so we know where we're going with the learning."

## Learning Targets and the Common Core

Writing and using good learning targets is a learning process for teachers. Fundamental to crafting strong learning targets is developing a clear understanding of the standards on which the targets are based. While it is helpful for teachers to start small—writing learning targets for daily lessons—they can eventually transform all of the required state and Common Core standards into learning targets for lessons, projects, units, and courses. Likewise, schools that have committed to the practice school-wide can anchor their standards-based grading and reporting structures on learning targets, including student-led conferences, portfolios, and report cards. Learning targets can enrich standards and bring them to life for students so they are no longer something that matters solely to teachers and administrators. For teachers, creating learning targets begins to solve the problem of how to help students reach higher-level standards and achieve academic success.

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[1] This lesson was implemented prior to the release of the Common Core State Standards.

Translating standards into student-friendly learning targets is a complex job and works best when administrators, instructional guides, and teachers work together to identify their key priorities based upon the required standards. In Expeditionary Learning schools, leadership teams work with teachers to create school-wide, standards-based curriculum maps that act as a foundation for planning and instruction. Curriculum maps describe a vertical sequence of curricula and define the key content and skills that need to be addressed at each grade level and in each discipline. When content and skills are prioritized in this way, school leaders can ensure that teachers are meeting key standards and provide them with invaluable support as they begin writing learning targets for their standards.



*School leadership teams create curriculum maps that provide teachers with important clarity as they write learning targets for their lessons, projects, units, and courses.*

Alongside standards, clearly defined habits of scholarship are the starting point for quality character learning targets. Habits of scholarship are generally developed at the school-wide level and reflect the character values of the school in relation to performance (e.g., work habits, collaboration with others, respectful communication). There is a clear link between habits of scholarship and the Common Core State Standards, which identify "portraits of students who meet the standards" in English Language Arts (ELA) and Literacy and Mathematics. These portraits include qualities such as independence and self-direction in learning, perseverance in problem-solving, understanding other perspectives and cultures, and using appropriate tools strategically. Including character learning targets during both daily lessons and longer units of study is a powerful way for teachers to reinforce the importance of work habits and social and emotional learning.

The **Common Core State Standards** were released in 2010 and are being adopted by an increasing number of states throughout the United States. They build upon the strengths of current state standards and create clarity and consistency in how knowledge and skills are taught across all K—12 schools. They are also informed by standards of other high-performing countries to ensure that students in the United States are prepared to participate in the global economy and society. The standards emphasize the following:

- Rigorous content and application of knowledge through high-order skills
- Alignment of college and career expectations
- Development of proficiency and independence of all students

*www.corestandards.org*

With standards and habits of scholarship prioritized, teachers can write learning targets in clear, student-friendly language that translate into actionable goals for students to work toward. Such learning targets enrich standards. Given the Common Core requirements for higher-order thinking, learning targets are more important than ever. As teachers embrace higher and clearer expectations for all students, they must empower students to truly understand what is required of them and what they are capable of. Clear learning targets are the starting point for building such awareness and capacity in students.

# Getting Started

## Writing Learning Targets

### Choose a standards-based lesson with which to get started

Learning targets are derived from a number of sources —from Common Core, state, or local standards, school-developed habits of scholarship, or content area program materials. Some teachers work in schools where they have the autonomy to choose which standards they will address during a given time frame. Some work in schools where curriculum maps have already been developed by school-based leadership teams. Still others work in schools where curriculum decisions are made at the district level. In any case, teachers can employ learning targets in their classrooms to engage students in tracking their learning. When first getting started with learning targets, teachers should choose a lesson that meets required standards, that can be completed in one session, and that can be assessed during that time frame.
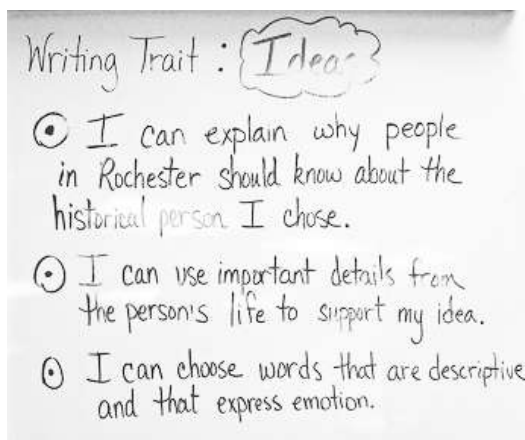
*These targets were derived from the fifth-grade Common Core writing standard, W.5.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.*

### Write learning targets for the lesson

It makes good sense to start small. After choosing a lesson, translate the objectives for that lesson into manageable, assessable, and student-friendly learning targets. It is important that the learning targets not try to cover too much ground, especially for teachers just getting started writing them.

While it may not be wise for a second-grade teacher to attempt to create her first learning targets for a daily lesson for the entire Common Core State Standard W.2.1: "Write opinion pieces in which they introduce the topic or book they are writing about, state an opinion, supply reasons that

support the opinion, use linking words (e.g., because, and, also) to connect opinion and reasons, and provide a concluding statement or section," it is perfectly reasonable to choose one manageable and assessable component of this standard and create learning targets. For example, the teacher may decide that the most important place to start is for students to learn to form an opinion of a story they have read, supported by evidence. She may choose "I can develop an opinion about my story," followed by "I can craft one sentence that describes my opinion of my story," followed by "I can support my opinion with one example from my story." A well-designed lesson that identifies the learning target, builds students' skills in forming opinions and giving evidence, and checks for their progress along the way and at the conclusion, has a high likelihood of seeing most, if not all, students meeting the target during the lesson. For a teacher just getting started with learning targets, determining feasible and assessable lessons from which to build learning targets is an important foundation.

It is also critical that students are able to assess their progress during and at the conclusion of a lesson. This is a key component of student-engaged assessment. If the learning target in a ninth-grade English class is "I can write a haiku poem that creates a vivid picture," there should be time for students to assess their poem against established criteria for vivid language at the end of the lesson. If instead they turn it in to the teacher on their way out the door and do not return to it the next day, there is limited opportunity to engage students in assessing their own progress and making plans for improvement. The student-engaged part of the assessment is lost.



*It is important that teachers save time at the conclusion of a lesson to check in on student progress.*

A common mistake that many teachers make when learning to write quality learning targets is writing a learning target that describes the task rather than the learning. For example, to say "I can make a poster about the ideal habitat of a polar bear" is much different than "I can describe the ideal habitat for a polar bear in a poster format." The emphasis in the first learning target is on making the poster. In the second, the emphasis is on learning about polar bear habitats. Though there is a time and a place for learning targets on craftsmanship and quality work, teachers must be clear about the learning they wish to assess. For more examples of common mistakes and pitfalls, see the Common Challenges section of this booklet.

| Table 1: Examples of Daily Learning Targets | |
|---|---|
| **Learning Targets for Younger Students** | **Learning Targets for Older Students** |
| • I can describe the differences between living and non-living things.<br>• I can explain my reasons for sorting and classifying insects.<br>• I can find words I want to use in books, word walls, and word cards.<br>• I can write words that send a message. | • I can demonstrate the role of genetic mutation in fruit fly reproduction by conducting an effective experiment.<br>• I can describe how photosynthesis and cellular respiration help an ecosystem maintain homeostasis.<br>• I can describe historical events that impacted the Sacco and Vanzetti case using a primary source text. |

The daily learning targets in Table 1 are derived from standards and then contextualized in light of the specific curriculum content. For example, the learning target "I can describe historical events that impacted the Sacco and Vanzetti case using a primary source text" links to the Common Core reading standard RI.9-10.8: "Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is valid and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; identify false statements and fallacious reasoning."

## Using Learning Targets

**Introduce the learning target(s) to students at the best point in the lesson**
In most lessons, the learning targets are shared with students at the start of the lesson and then referred to throughout as teachers and students assess progress. Some teachers have students read the targets aloud, restate them to a classmate, or discuss them in small groups or as a class to ensure that they understand what they are aiming for. As students become more sophisticated with using learning targets, they may wish to critique or revise them. Teachers can choose to collaborate with students in revising them to be more clear, compelling, or measurable, and even in creating new learning targets. This process of sharing and discussing learning targets provides meaningful learning opportunities, especially for building key vocabulary. For example, in the accompanying video, we see Jon Exall's sixth-graders at the Odyssey School in Denver, CO spend several minutes grappling with a key concept in the learning target before they start working: "I can use primary source documents to develop introductory understanding and introductory research questions for our first immigration case study."



SEE ACCOMPANYING VIDEO

For some lessons, it is better to hold off on sharing learning targets with students until partway through the lesson. For lessons that open by engaging students with a mystery text—a provocative piece that stimulates interest and generates questions—or by allowing students to experiment with scientific or artistic materials, it is often best to hold off on revealing learning targets so that

students will not be constrained in their thinking or discoveries. After discussing the ideas that emerge, the learning targets can be introduced to frame the next steps of work.

**Develop strategies to check for student understanding**

In order for students to assess their progress toward meeting their learning targets, teachers must build in checkpoints along the way. Even well-written learning targets will contribute little to engaging, supporting, and holding students accountable for their learning if they are not referred to and used actively during the lesson. The end of a lesson is also an important moment for checking for understanding. A well-constructed debrief will allow students to reflect on their learning, returning to the day's learning targets to assess their progress.

There are a wide variety of strategies for checking student understanding and progress toward learning targets during the course of a lesson and at its conclusion. Among the possible strategies:

- Hand signals (e.g., fist to five, thumbs up, down, or sideways, high, middle, or low)
- Written checks (e.g., whiteboards, exit tickets, guided practice)
- Verbal checks (e.g., cold-call questions, lottery-style questions, class whip-arounds)
- Progress charts (e.g., students posting sticky notes, dots, checks, or initials)
- Peer check-ins (e.g., pair shares, peer critique, small-group check-ins)
- Quick quizzes, written or verbal
- "Clicker" technology (e.g., computer-projected responses from all students)

See the Checking for Understanding During Daily Lessons booklet for more extensive discussion of these strategies.

*Building in checkpoints along the way ensures that students understand the material and gives the teacher the opportunity to address learning gaps.*

*"I know I understand the learning target when I feel the confidence to say 'I can.'"*

*—Eighth-Grade Student, Odyssey School, Denver, CO*

# In Practice

## Using Learning Targets Over the Long Term

There are many layers to learning targets. Writing and using discrete learning targets for daily lessons is the first step in gaining facility with the practice. Employing learning targets for longer-term goals takes this work one step further, requiring that teachers consider the more sophisticated features of the practice:

- Prioritizing and contextualizing Common Core, state, and local standards
- Using both long-term and supporting learning targets
- Integrating character learning targets
- Balancing knowledge, reasoning, and skills learning targets
- Aligning standards, targets, and assessments

**Prioritize and contextualize Common Core, state, and local standards**
It is one thing to transform the objectives for a lesson into learning targets, and quite another to do this work for all of the standards for a long-term project, unit, or course. Schools can prioritize standards by identifying the big ideas and enduring understandings they want students to master, and distinguishing between what's critical to know and be able to do, and what's worth being familiar with. A school-wide standards-based curriculum map is a solid foundation for planning and instruction and an invaluable tool for teachers. If a school does not have a curriculum map in place, teaching teams should work together to identify the standards that address the big ideas, that are compelling for students, and that can be reasonably addressed during the course of a project, unit, or course.

In Expeditionary Learning schools, the primary unit of study is the learning expedition. Learning expeditions are based on case studies that give broad topics a specific—often local—context. The specific context allows teachers to translate required standards on broad topics into learning targets that are meaningful to students in the context of a locally specific learning expedition. Students are

more likely to be engaged in protecting the river that runs through their neighborhood than they are in river ecosystems in general. In a school that does not have a curricular structure like learning expeditions, choosing a locally relevant lens through which to study academic content makes the curriculum more compelling for students and increases engagement.

To illustrate the prioritization and contextualization process, consider the "We All Live Downstream" learning expedition from the sixth grade at the Odyssey School in Denver, CO. Students spent approximately three months studying Colorado's endangered Platte River. Using the school's curriculum map as a guide, instructional guide Liza Eaton worked with teachers to identify the key state science standards[2] and Common Core ELA and Literacy standards that they would address during the course of the learning expedition.
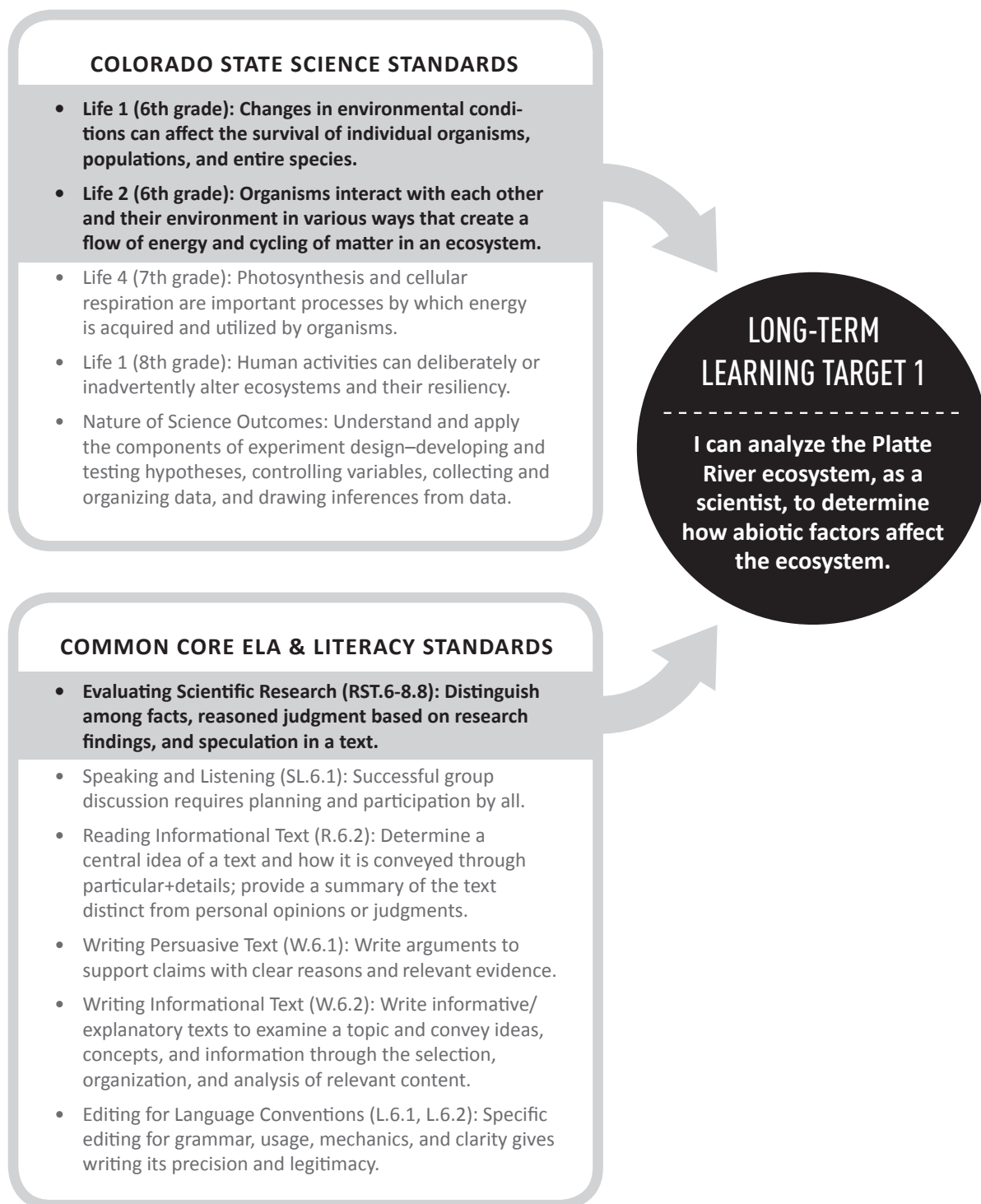
> **Learning expeditions** are the signature curricular structure in Expeditionary Learning schools that make content standards come alive for students. They are interdisciplinary studies, usually lasting 6–12 weeks, led by a teacher or teaching team. Learning expeditions are based on state and Common Core standards, aligned with local curriculum maps, and focused on essential content and skills. Each learning expedition includes guiding questions, kickoff experiences, case studies, projects, lessons, fieldwork, experts, service learning, and a culminating event that features high-quality student work.

From there, they prioritized the most salient standards that would offer opportunities for depth and a compelling local context, and wrote long-term learning targets that guided the students throughout the expedition. They paid careful attention to a sequence of learning targets that would address the standards. For example, reading standards were drawn on more in the beginning of the learning expedition as students built background knowledge about the Platte River and river ecosystems. Writing standards entered the process more toward the end, as students prepared a final product to present their experimental findings.

Figure 1 illustrates how two Colorado state science standards and one Common Core ELA and Literacy standard were combined to form Long-Term Learning Target 1, one of several long-term learning targets for the learning expedition. Figure 2 illustrates how this long-term learning target was further broken down into three supporting learning targets.

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[2] This learning expedition was done in 2011, prior to the release of the Common Core State Standards for science. It translates well to the new standards, which are organized around Scientific and Engineering Practices, Cross-Cutting Concepts, and Disciplinary Core Ideas.

**Figure 1: Prioritizing and Contextualizing Standards into Long-Term Learning Target 1 for the "We All Live Downstream" Learning Expedition**

**COLORADO STATE SCIENCE STANDARDS**

- **Life 1 (6th grade): Changes in environmental conditions can affect the survival of individual organisms, populations, and entire species.**

- **Life 2 (6th grade): Organisms interact with each other and their environment in various ways that create a flow of energy and cycling of matter in an ecosystem.**

- Life 4 (7th grade): Photosynthesis and cellular respiration are important processes by which energy is acquired and utilized by organisms.

- Life 1 (8th grade): Human activities can deliberately or inadvertently alter ecosystems and their resiliency.

- Nature of Science Outcomes: Understand and apply the components of experiment design–developing and testing hypotheses, controlling variables, collecting and organizing data, and drawing inferences from data.

**LONG-TERM LEARNING TARGET 1**

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**I can analyze the Platte River ecosystem, as a scientist, to determine how abiotic factors affect the ecosystem.**

**COMMON CORE ELA & LITERACY STANDARDS**

- **Evaluating Scientific Research (RST.6-8.8): Distinguish among facts, reasoned judgment based on research findings, and speculation in a text.**

- Speaking and Listening (SL.6.1): Successful group discussion requires planning and participation by all.

- Reading Informational Text (R.6.2): Determine a central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular+details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments.

- Writing Persuasive Text (W.6.1): Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.

- Writing Informational Text (W.6.2): Write informative/ explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.

- Editing for Language Conventions (L.6.1, L.6.2): Specific editing for grammar, usage, mechanics, and clarity gives writing its precision and legitimacy.
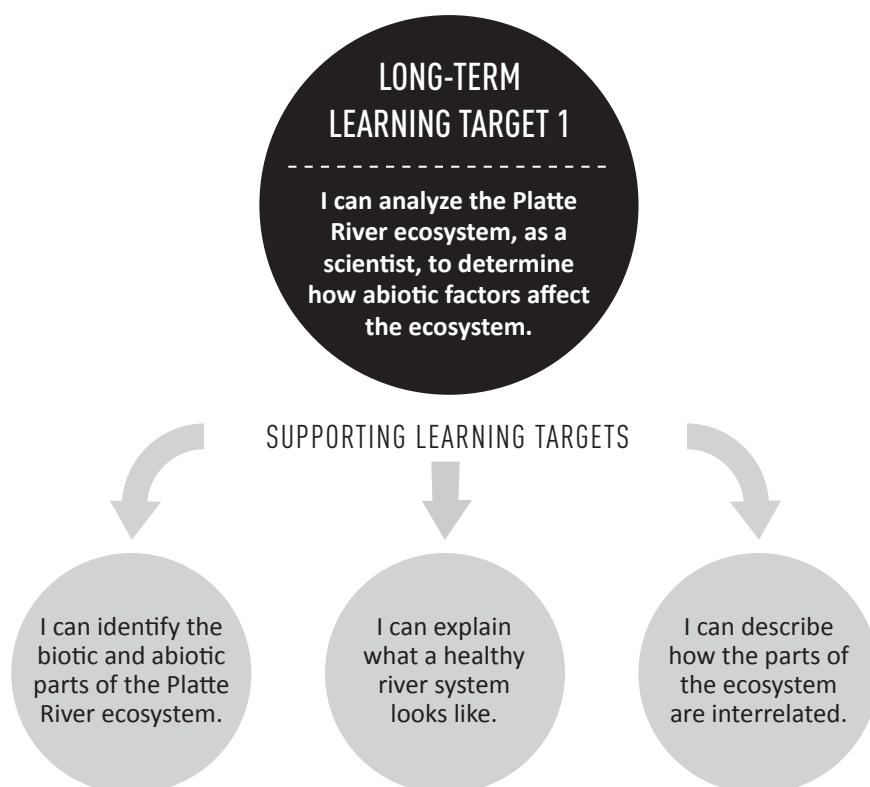
**Identify the supporting learning targets that will guide daily lessons as students work toward meeting long-term learning targets**

Supporting learning targets are the building blocks for meeting long-term learning targets. They "nest" inside long-term learning targets. There are no rules about the number of supporting learning targets, but it is common for each long-term learning target to be supported by three to five supporting learning targets. Supporting learning targets are specific and easily measurable. They guide a teacher's daily lessons. At times a supporting learning target will need to be broken into more specific daily learning targets. Alternatively, often the same supporting learning target, such as "I can ask questions and develop testable hypotheses," will take a series of classes to address. Long-term and supporting learning targets should not be developed by tacking "I can" onto the beginning of a Common Core or state standard. Often, in fact, several standards may be addressed with one learning target.

Continuing with the "We All Live Downstream" learning expedition, we see a good example of creating supporting learning targets to guide the daily work of meeting long-term learning targets that address multiple standards.

**Figure 2: Long-Term Learning Target 1 and Supporting Learning Targets for the "We All Live Downstream" Learning Expedition**



LONG-TERM
LEARNING TARGET 1
- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -
I can analyze the Platte River ecosystem, as a scientist, to determine how abiotic factors affect the ecosystem.

SUPPORTING LEARNING TARGETS

I can identify the biotic and abiotic parts of the Platte River ecosystem.

I can explain what a healthy river system looks like.

I can describe how the parts of the ecosystem are interrelated.

**Identify the character learning targets that students will focus on throughout the learning expedition or unit of study**

Character learning targets are based on school-wide expectations for habits of scholarship and norms for social behavior. If a school hasn't already identified the habits of scholarship that guide student learning, a review of the school's mission statement can be a helpful starting place to identify character learning targets.

Below are the character learning targets for the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades at the Odyssey School in Denver, CO. Not every character learning target can be addressed during a unit or learning expedition. It is up to the teacher(s) to select two or three key character learning targets that are a best fit for the content or the needs of the class. For the "We All Live Downstream" learning expedition, students focused on two character learning targets that were a good fit for the collaborative lab work and fieldwork involved with their study of the Platte River ecosystem, and one that addressed chronic editing errors in their written work:

- Revision: I can use one or more effective tools/strategies to eliminate all editing errors in my final draft.
- Collaboration and Leadership: I can identify when my contribution improved the quality of our work.
- Service and Stewardship: I can apply what I have learned in class by taking action to improve a situation in my community or in the broader world.

| Table 2: Sample Sixth- to Eighth-Grade Character Learning Targets | |
| --- | --- |
| **Responsibility** <br> I can begin to advocate for myself. I can maintain focus. I can complete quality work on time. | • I can demonstrate consistent use of strategies (e.g., my own notes, participation in class, before- and after-school help sessions) to fully engage in my learning. <br> • I can complete quality class work on time. <br> • I can act as an intentional up-stander. |
| **Revision** <br> I can use critical feedback to improve my work. | • I can demonstrate how I know my final draft is my "best work." <br> • I can demonstrate a consistent use of revision strategies. <br> • I can use one or more effective tools/strategies to eliminate all editing errors in my final draft. |
| **Inquiry** <br> I can use the practices, tools, and skills of an academic discipline to investigate, evaluate, form, and test theories. I can use those skills to understand specific situations and make sense of big ideas in that discipline. | • I can develop deep, probing questions and/or theories based on initial research and background knowledge. <br> • I can locate diverse and quality resources that help me answer my questions and deepen my understanding. <br> • I can evaluate and synthesize the information/evidence I find. <br> • I can report findings in a way that helps my audience access them. |
| **Perspective-Taking** <br> I can consider multiple perspectives and their implications in terms of justice, freedom, and human rights. | • I can make use of diverse opinions to help me make sense of the world. <br> • I can use conversation to gain understanding of others' ideas and not just as a way to voice my ideas. <br> • I can explain how my understanding of an issue has been altered/deepened after investigating an opposing viewpoint. |

| Table 2: Sample Sixth- to Eighth-Grade Character Learning Targets | |
|---|---|
| **Collaboration and Leadership** <br> I can engage positively with others to learn things and create work that is larger and deeper than I could create on my own. | • I can identify when our work improved because of the contribution of a peer. <br> • I can identify when my contribution improved the quality of our work. <br> • I can implement leadership strategies and evaluate their effectiveness. <br> • I can walk my talk by being a good role model. |
| **Service and Stewardship** <br> I am crew. I can do things to care for my environment and my community. I can make connections between my actions and the global community. | • I can make choices that result in leaving a positive trace in the environment (classroom, school, nature). <br> • I can apply what I have learned in class by taking action to improve a situation in my community or in the broader world. <br> • I can demonstrate care for my buddy. |

The Common Core State Standards in ELA and Literacy and Mathematics offer descriptions of students who meet the standards and are thus ready for college or career. The descriptions closely align with the habits of scholarship identified by the Odyssey School and many other Expeditionary Learning schools. In fact, actively teaching these "habits" is what will enable students to become the students described by the Common Core—independent learners who are able to critique the reasoning of others, value inquiry and evidence, and persevere in solving problems.

**Consider the rigor of learning targets**

Learning targets should also address the cognitive learning that students engage in. The framework of knowledge, skill, and reasoning as three types of learning targets is a helpful starting place for analyzing what teachers expect a student to understand and do.[3] All three types of learning targets are important. Through analyzing learning target type, teachers can make informed decisions about instructional sequencing and make good estimates about how much time students will need to reach proficiency with a target. They are also better equipped to select effective assessments.

| Table 3: Knowledge, Reasoning, and Skills Learning Targets | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Target Type** | **Knowledge** | **Skill** | **Reasoning** |
| **Explanation** | Knowledge, facts, concepts to be learned outright or retrieved using reference materials | Use of knowledge to perform an action. Demonstration is emphasized. | Thinking proficiencies—using knowledge to solve a problem, make a decision, plan, etc. |
| **Sample Verbs** | Explain, describe, identify, tell, name, list, define, label, match, choose, recall, recognize, select | Observe, listen, perform, conduct, read, speak, write, assemble, operate, use, demonstrate, measure, model, collect, dramatize | Analyze, compare/contrast, synthesize, classify, infer, evaluate |

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[3] Adapted from *Classroom Assessment* for *Student Learning: Doing it Right–Using it Well* (p. 64), by R.J. Stiggins, J. Arter, J. Chappuis, and S. Chappuis, 2006, Portland, OR, Educational Testing Service.

However, just labeling learning targets as knowledge, skill, or reasoning can oversimplify the issue of rigor. Teachers need to also consider the complexity of students' tasks and assessments linked to learning targets, and a cognitive rigor matrix (see below) is a useful tool. Once teachers have learning targets and an associated task or assessment in mind, they are ready to use the matrix. The first step is to identify the type of thinking a task requires, using Bloom's Taxonomy. Next, consider how deeply students need to understand the content, and take into consideration how complex or abstract the content is.

Knowing where a task falls on the matrix can inform backward planning, helping teachers ensure that the learning targets will scaffold students' learning appropriately. Using the matrix also pushes teachers to consider tasks that fall in the "Extended Thinking" column, emphasizing real-world application, cross-discipline connections, problem-solving, and creative thinking – all important aspects of the Common Core State Standards and Deeper Learning.

| Table 4: Cognitive Rigor Matrix with Sample Tasks | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Bloom's Revised Taxonomy** | **Recall and Reproduction** | **Basic Application of Skills/Concepts** | **Strategic Thinking and Reasoning** | **Extended Thinking** |
| **Remember** | Recall or locate basic facts, details, events | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| **Understand** | Describe/explain who, what, where, when, or how | Explain relationships, summarize, identify main ideas | Explain, generalize, or connect ideas using supporting evidence | Explain how concepts or ideas specifically relate to other content domains |
| **Apply** | Use language structure or word relationships to determine meaning | Obtain and interpret information using text features | Apply a concept in a new context | Select or devise an approach among many alternatives to research a novel problem |
| **Analyze** | Identify whether information is contained in a graph, table, etc. | Distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information | Analyze interrelationships among concepts, issues, or problems | Analyze complex/ abstract themes or perspectives |
| **Evaluate** | N/A | N/A | Justify or critique conclusions drawn | Apply understanding in a novel way, with justification |
| **Create** | Brainstorm ideas about a topic | Generate hypotheses based on observations or prior knowledge | Develop a complex model for a given situation | Articulate a new voice, new knowledge or perspective |

**Align standards, learning targets, and assessments**

Learning targets inform a cycle of curriculum development, instruction, and assessment. Clear learning targets derived from state and Common Core standards can help teachers make decisions about what to teach and how to assess learning. Teachers should identify assessments for each set of long-term and supporting learning targets. They should take care to select assessment methods that are appropriate for the type of learning target a student is working toward. For example, an extended written response may not be appropriate for a teacher to assess the learning target "I can collect specific accurate data in metric units." A performance assessment, on the other hand, may be just right for this skills-oriented learning target. Table 5[4] below shows possible assessments based upon the type of learning target. (For more on how formative and summative assessments create a body of evidence with which students demonstrate proficiency, see the Standards-Based Grading booklet.)

> "As a professional, I am making a determination of what is most important and measuring student success based on a body of evidence. I design assessments that demonstrate mastery of content and collect evidence that helps me to determine whether or not the student has met the target. The evidence also points to where students may need additional support or extension. All the work along the way informs me about whether or not the students are understanding or may need re-teaching or coaching."
>
> *–Aurora Kushner, Tenth-Grade Biology Teacher, Springfield Renaissance School, Springfield, MA*

| Table 5: Selecting Assessment Methods Based on Type of Learning Target | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Selected Response** | **Extended Written Response** | **Performance Assessment** | **Personal Communication** |
| **Knowledge** | **Good match**–for assessing mastery of elements of knowledge | **Good match**–for evaluating understanding of relationships among elements of knowledge | **Not a good match**–too time consuming to cover everything | **Match**–can ask questions, evaluate answers, and infer mastery, but a time-consuming option |
| **Skills** | **Not a good match**–these two methods can assess mastery of prerequisite knowledge, but do not tell the evaluator that the student can use the skill itself | | **Good match**–can observe and evaluate skills as they are being performed | **Good match**–when skill is oral communication proficiency |
| **Reasoning** | **Match**–only for assessing understanding of some patterns of reasoning | **Good match**–written descriptions of complex problem solutions provide a window into reasoning proficiency | **Good match**–can watch students solve some problems and infer reasoning proficiency | **Good match**–can ask students to "think aloud," or can ask follow-up questions to probe reasoning |

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[4] Adapted from *Classroom Assessment* for *Student Learning: Doing it Right–Using it Well* (p. 191), by R.J. Stiggins, J. Arter, J. Chappuis, and S. Chappuis, 2006, Portland, OR, Educational Testing Service.

## Engaging Students in Using Learning Targets on a Daily Basis

Writing good learning targets takes time and care, but it is only the beginning. The practice really gains traction when students internalize the value of learning targets and use them to assess their progress. The accompanying video shows students at the Odyssey School in Denver, CO engaged in discussing and thinking about their classroom learning targets as a part of everyday life in their classrooms. As a result, they have a strong sense of responsibility and capability.

While it can seem daunting at first, getting started with learning targets in one classroom or team can happen through a series of manageable activities. The following table illustrates the who, what, and why of using learning targets in everyday practice.

| Table 6: The Who, What, and Why of Learning Targets | | |
|---|---|---|
| **What Do Teachers Do?** | **What Do Students Do?** | **What's the Result?** |
| Craft lessons linked to supporting and long-term learning targets aligned to Common Core and state standards. | Understand how daily structures and routines help them reach long-term learning targets over time. | Lessons have purpose and direction. Students take learning seriously. |
| Post the learning target in a visible, consistent location. | Write the target down in a notebook or learning target tracker. Reflect on how the target will help them to reach their goals. Complete a "do now" activity that gets them immediately engaged with the learning target. | Students have greater engagement in each day's lesson. Class begins productively. |
| Discuss the learning target at the beginning of a lesson with students. (Or wait until later in order to build anticipation and a sense of discovery.) | Say the target out loud and explain the target in their words with a partner or small group. Discuss specific vocabulary words in the target. Discuss how they will demonstrate that they've met the target. | Students can articulate a clear vision of both the learning target and the assessment method. |
| Refer to the learning targets throughout the lesson to help students understand the purpose of what they are doing. | Articulate how each activity is helping them move closer to achieving the learning target. | Students are engaged in the lesson because the purpose of their work is clear. |

| Table 6: The Who, What, and Why of Learning Targets | | |
|---|---|---|
| **What Do Teachers Do?** | **What Do Students Do?** | **What's the Result?** |
| Align activities throughout the lesson to support students in reaching the target. | Make distinct progress toward the target as they complete activities. | Students can see the results of their efforts. This leads to increased achievement and engagement. |
| Check for whole-class understanding. | Self-assess where they are in relation to a specific learning target using quick visual signals like thumbs or cards. | Teachers and students can make informed decisions about next instructional moves (e.g., offering/attending an additional guided-practice session before moving into independent practice). |
| Check for individual understanding and use data to make decisions about next instructional steps. | Turn in work (e.g., exit tickets, reflection journals, quick quizzes) that demonstrates where they are in relation to one or more learning targets. | Teachers can make informed decisions about next instructional steps related to individual students (e.g., oral or written feedback, differentiated materials, and/or instruction in the next lesson). |
| Create the summative assessments that will evaluate whether students have met the targets. | Understand how they will be assessed from the beginning of a learning experience. Prepare to do their best in meeting the targets. | Learning targets aligned with formative and summative assessments enable effective communication about what students are learning. |

# School-Wide Implementation

## School Leaders: Supporting the School-Wide Implementation of Learning Targets

The practice of using learning targets is both a foundation for all student-engaged assessment practices and a vehicle for deepening teaching and learning across a school. It takes skillful and collaborative leadership to facilitate probing discussions, examine data, decide on content and priorities, and build the key structures that support the full implementation of learning targets.



*Collaborative leadership facilitates the school-wide implementation of learning targets.*

Learning targets have the potential to tie into almost every important school structure—student-led conferences, portfolios and progress reports, celebrations of student learning, graduation ceremonies, professional development plans, and school improvement plans. The more they are used throughout a school, the more power they will have. Every significant activity should be supported through clear and actionable learning targets. Every aspect of a school can be connected to student learning and promote students' articulation of their learning to parents, families, and community members.

**Key leadership actions**
**Initial phase**
- Analyze state and Common Core standards in faculty teams. It is essential to understand the standards well before developing curriculum maps and learning targets.
- Create curriculum maps across all grades and content areas, clarifying what standards are assessed at each grade level. This is typically a task completed by a school leadership team, with teachers providing input and feedback.

- Implement whole-faculty professional development to examine, discuss, and develop quality learning targets.
- Ensure that teachers have time and support, through ongoing professional development structures, to craft long-term and supporting learning targets from standards, and match assessments to learning targets before each chunk of instruction begins.
- Establish the school-wide practices that ensure that learning targets are communicated and understood by everyone. This encompasses small daily practices like posting learning targets and discussing them at the beginning of a class, as well as larger school-wide practices such as aligning grades and report cards with learning targets.
- Collaboratively critique summative assessments during professional development and provide feedback to ensure that learning targets drive instruction and act as the framework for assessments.
- Create school-wide habits of scholarship, clarifying appropriate learning targets for each grade level related to the school's code of character. Determine how progress toward these targets will be tracked and communicated in a way that supports, engages, and holds all students accountable.



*Well-organized displays illustrate the progression of student work over time, leading to work that clearly demonstrates mastery of learning targets.*

- Model learning targets in the professional working culture of the school (e.g., professional development sessions).
- Exhibit students' work and explicitly link this work to learning targets. Label work so that family and community members walking through the school understand what is on display and what learning targets were met. Work can be accompanied by rubrics to explain the criteria for the product.

**Expanding implementation**
- Provide time for "diary mapping"—retrospectively documenting what content and skills teachers actually assessed. Content and skills maps require refinement once they are created, and diary mapping provides a "reality check" against the ideal. The process also allows teachers and leaders to analyze assessment data from state tests, cross-referencing achievement with what was emphasized at a classroom level.
- Observe and discuss teachers' and students' use of learning targets by analyzing video clips during professional development or holding school-based classroom labs.
- Put standards-based grading in place by aligning grade books, progress reports, and other school structures (e.g., portfolios and student-led conferences) with learning targets. (See the Standards-Based Grading booklet for more information on this topic.)
- Develop a faculty grading guide that explains how the school's grading and reporting system works, and communicate how assessment works to families.

## Case Study

### Getting started with learning targets at the Odyssey School in Denver, CO

When the Odyssey School began their work on assessment several years ago, they thought it was going to be a year-long focus. They quickly realized that assessment needed to be a multi-year plan. For Liza Eaton, teacher and instructional guide, a key turning point was when she realized the power of student involvement in the process. "I started realizing it wasn't just about me and my planning. I had been writing the targets on the board, but we weren't necessarily using them. Then I developed a self-assessment tool and in using it, kids started to understand where they were in relation to the target." As the process of using learning targets with students expanded, the school began to see achievement results. "That year our state test scores went up a ton, and they stayed up. All of a sudden we realized the power of our assessment work. Not just through what we saw in our classrooms, but in numbers."

At Odyssey, getting the structures established took some time and has been central to their progress. There is school-wide professional development from 1:45 to 4:00 every Friday, during which the staff focuses on a school-wide goal and topics that support that goal (e.g., how to make a good standard-target-assessment plan, and how to support students in self-reflecting with accuracy). A newer structure supports teachers with an hour of instructional coaching every week, and school-wide labs create opportunities for peer observation with a particular instructional focus. It's clear that refining their assessment practices has been a professional learning journey with twists and turns. As Liza Eaton says, "From the outset it seems easy and linear, but then you get into it and discover it's messy and hard. If the students are not getting to the target, and that's a pattern, then you have to teach differently. On the other hand, there are immediate results that you see in your classroom."

# Common Challenges

**Learning targets that are owned by the teacher, but not by the students**
Build student ownership. Many teachers succeed in creating and posting learning targets; some schools even require this practice. But posting learning targets and reading them aloud are not enough. Teachers and students should discuss the learning targets to ensure that students fully embrace and understand them and can collaborate with the teacher in tracking them.

**Learning targets vs. "doing" targets**
Focus on learning. As mentioned earlier, learning targets should describe what students will learn as a result of a lesson, expedition, or unit of study, not what they will do as the task–"I can use metaphor to convey a complex emotion," *not* "I can complete/fill out my note catcher."

**Learning targets that are too complex**
Watch your language. Aim for clarity when crafting learning targets. Those that pack in too much information may confuse students or make a teacher second-guess the intended learning and assessment. Watch out for learning targets that contain the following: two verbs (e.g., I can identify and analyze); compound content (e.g., I can describe the ecosystems of coral reefs and forests); broad scope of content (e.g., I can evaluate continuity and change over the course of U.S. history).

**Learning targets that are too big or too small**
Get the scope right. Often it can be challenging to create long-term and supporting learning targets that efficiently pace life in the classroom and stimulate rich learning. Long-term learning targets should be tied directly to standards, and each may take one to two weeks to address completely. Nested within each long-term learning target, supporting learning targets (typically three to five) guide the daily lessons that support students to meet standards. Careful planning and practice will help teachers craft targets that don't try to cover too much or that are overly narrow.

**Learning targets that are not used on a daily basis**
Use it or lose it. Learning targets must be displayed, referred to, owned by the students, and worked toward in a meaningful way. Learning targets that exist only on paper don't support students' engagement, motivation, and learning.

**Learning targets that are poorly distributed across knowledge, reasoning, and skill**
Mix it up. Learning targets should reflect different levels of thinking, from the foundational knowledge level (name, identify, describe) to higher-order skills (analyze, compare and contrast, and evaluate). Check to see that sets of learning targets fall into all three categories.

**Learning targets that are not linked to a powerful context for learning**
Make them meaningful. Learning targets are most powerful when they guide learning experiences that are engaging for students and are part of a compelling curriculum that requires critical thinking and problem solving.

**Learning targets that are mismatched to assessments**
Check the alignment. The method of assessment should match the learning target. A target that asks a student to analyze would be assessed not with a multiple-choice quiz, but rather with a written response or verbal teacher-student conference. Well-matched assessments are both effective and efficient.

**Learning targets that miss the heart of the Common Core State Standards**
Get to the heart of the matter. If learning targets and assessments touch on standards but don't address them fully or deeply, teachers will miss an opportunity to help their students develop the critical thinking skills required by the Common Core State Standards.

**Learning targets that are different for different groups of students**
Ensure rigor and equity. In a classroom geared toward all students meeting standards of proficiency, the learning targets themselves should remain consistent for all students while the instruction employed to help them meet the target is differentiated to meet the needs of a diverse range of learners (with the possible exception of students working toward an IEP-based diploma that calls for curriculum modifications, or for those participating in other alternative pathways).

# What to Expect

As with all student-engaged assessment practices, learning targets take a while to take root in a school. With time, reflection, and collaboration the practice gains significant power to influence student learning, family engagement, and teacher practice.

**Beginning**
During the beginning phase of implementation, which may last a year or more, schools and teachers focus on the basics of creating learning targets: determining priorities, clarity and accessibility of language, using learning targets in daily lessons, involving students, and communicating with families.

Indicators:
- Teachers have rich conversations about state and Common Core standards and what they require.
- Teachers have a better sense of direction when designing instruction, because their priority learning targets are clear.
- Learning targets are visibly posted in classrooms and used to guide daily lessons.
- Students are able to articulate more specifically what they are learning, what their strengths and weaknesses are, and how they know this. This usually leads to more engagement.
- Families have more information about what concepts and skills their children are learning.

**Intermediate**
As a school deepens its implementation of learning targets, structures and practices are refined. Attention is paid to character learning targets and assessment. Checking for understanding becomes a more central focus of professional development. Schools go deeper in prioritizing and contextualizing standards, using both long-term and supporting learning targets, and aligning standards, targets, and assessments.

Indicators:
- Students come to expect knowing what the learning targets are and how they will be assessed. They ask for them. Motivation and engagement usually increase.
- Long-term learning targets frame curriculum units, and supporting learning targets guide daily lessons.
- Teachers create effective plans that align standards, targets, and assessments. Learning targets are clearly derived from standards.
- Checking-for-understanding strategies are used extensively in all classrooms.
- Assessment methods match learning target types.
- Character learning targets are visible and part of each teacher's curriculum and assessment.

**Advanced**

When a school reaches an advanced stage in this work, there is a seamless connection between learning targets and student-engaged assessment practices more broadly. Students are fully engaged in the assessment process. School-wide structures are firmly in place to support consistent implementation.

Indicators:
- Students adeptly track their progress and make decisions alongside the teacher about next steps. They own the learning and the assessment process.
- Students use assessment information to further their learning (particularly in higher grades).
- There is a standards-based grading system in place centered on long-term learning targets and character learning targets.
- Students view assessments and grades as a way to help them learn, not as something done to them.
- Parents, students, and teachers have detailed conversations—referencing character and academic learning targets—about students' strengths and areas for improvement. Students often lead these conversations in student-led conferences.
- Teachers and schools continually deepen and align the standards, learning targets, and assessments.
- Teachers and schools are proactive in the way they support students in meeting learning targets in their schools. Teaching and support structures are intentional.



*As the practice of using learning targets takes hold in a school, students take more ownership for assessing their progress.*

# Resources and References

**Core Practices in Action Videos**
All videos accompanying this booklet can be found at vimeo.com/channels/
corepractices

**References**
Stiggins, R., Arter, J., Chappuis, J., & Chappuis, S. (2006). *Classroom Assessment* for
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