

Eyes on the prize

Building the capacity of education leaders to use system-wide goals and drive student success

Richard Eyre and Zoë Despertt
 February 2016

In the first of a series of research briefs focused on the biggest implementation challenges facing American education today, we look at what data from the field can tell us about the extent to which education leaders anchor their work in clear student outcome goals. We also hear from leaders about the impact that defining goals and “trajectories” can have in uniting a system around an effort to make change for students.

Why goal setting matters, and why it matters now

Without a clear statement of what an education system is trying to achieve for its students, those working in the system are essentially rudderless.ⁱ The leadership of a system may be clear about the main policies or initiatives they want to implement, but unless they have said specifically what impact they expect to see on student outcomes, it will be hard for them to say what success looks like for the system as a whole.

In K-12 education, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 mandated a common goal for the entire nation: all students had to be proficient in reading and math by 2014.ⁱⁱ The Obama Administration’s waiver initiative gave states some flexibility in goal setting, while maintaining clear federal parameters. The recent passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) increases that flexibility – and states’ responsibility – even further. The law requires states to set their own long-term goals for proficiency and graduation rates for all students and for each student group. These goals have to require faster improvement for

student groups that are further behind, and states must set interim progress targets aligned with these goals.ⁱⁱⁱ

This paper uses data that the Education Delivery Institute (EDI) has gathered through its “capacity review” process to explore the extent to which state education agency (SEA) leadership teams – and other education leaders in their own contexts – are prepared to make the most of this new responsibility, the challenges they are likely to face and the potential benefits if they succeed.

The “capacity review” methodology

A capacity review is a rapid but thorough review of an education system’s capacity to drive reform and improve student outcomes. Since 2010 EDI has conducted 26 capacity reviews in 21 state agencies, three local education agencies and two systems of higher education.^{iv} During a capacity review, a small review team external to the system gathers evidence via a document review, focus groups with stakeholders and a facilitated self-assessment exercise with the system’s leadership team. The review team then synthesizes the evidence it has collected into a series of qualitative judgments using the [Delivery Capacity Rubric](#).^v For each of the fifteen elements in the rubric the system is assigned a rating on a four-point scale from Red (weak) to Green (strong). The ratings, along with rationales for each judgment and a set of recommendations for action, are then presented to the system leader.

The purpose of capacity reviews is to gather formative feedback for improvement. The review team gathers much of the evidence through candid interviews with stakeholders at all levels – from school principals, to SEA staff, to community

members, to the leadership team itself. As such, the cumulative lessons from all the capacity reviews undertaken to date, aggregated and presented here in an anonymized form, provide a unique insight into the self-reported experiences of education leaders – particularly, SEA leaders.

What capacity reviews can tell us about goal setting in the field

Two aspects of the Delivery Capacity Rubric ask specifically about goal setting.

Defining the aspiration

First, the rubric asks: “does the system have a clearly articulated and shared aspiration?” It breaks this down further into four key questions:

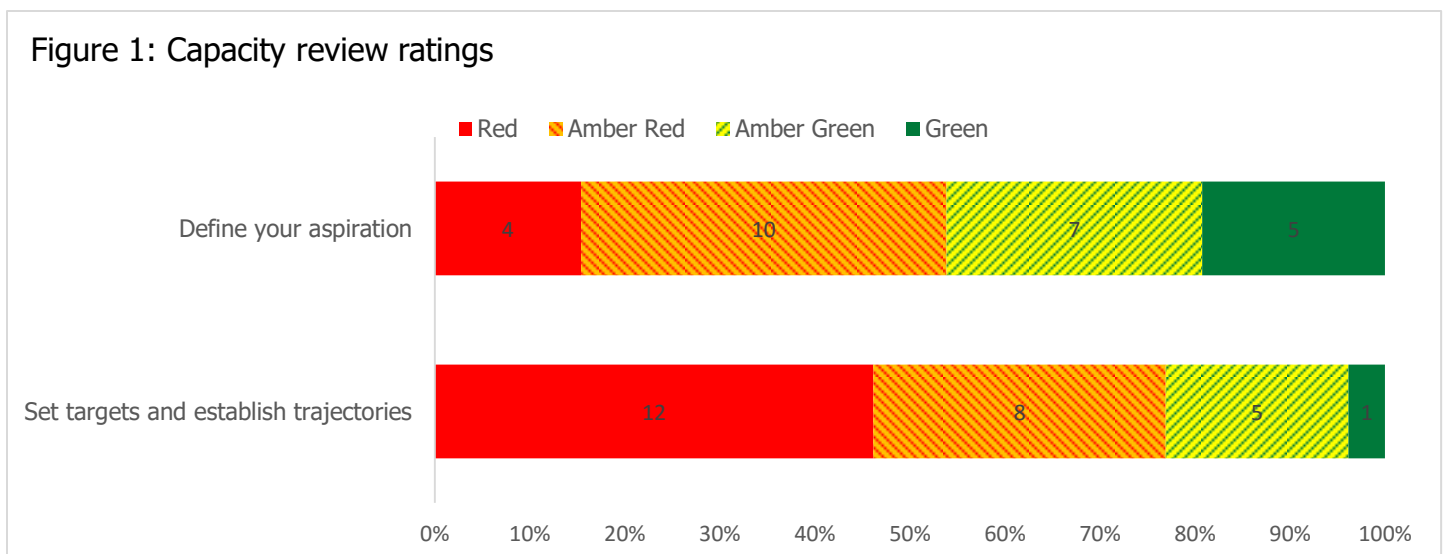
- Has your system clearly articulated an answer to the question “What are we trying to do?”
- Is the aspiration defined in terms of ambitious outcomes for students?
- Is the aspiration translated into a manageable set of goals, each with clear, specific metrics?
- Is the aspiration shared by the relevant stakeholders?

Despite the plethora of federal and state requirements for education systems to report data, these deceptively simple questions frequently proved difficult for capacity review participants to answer in the affirmative. In only five reviews was the system rated Green. The most common rating was Amber Red (closer to weak than strong), while in four reviews the system was rated Red for this element (see Figure 1).

These ratings represent a number of challenges. In a few systems everyone, including the leadership team, struggled to articulate the central things they were trying to achieve. In some cases this was due to the sheer number of priorities that had been set out in various documents and announcements, with staff and stakeholders unclear about how the different pieces fitted together. Even if people could define success in their own role, they did not have a sense of alignment to a collective goal. Sometimes this gave rise to a feeling that the leadership’s priorities were vague and changeable.

In many more systems the overall “direction of travel” was clear – often encapsulated in a mission statement or slogan – but had not been defined as specific, measurable goals. Staff and stakeholders usually knew which outcomes they were trying to change (for example – increasing graduation rates or reducing achievement gaps), but could not say by how much or by when. “I agree with the vision, but I’m still waiting to see what it means for me” was a typical comment from a focus group.

Even where clear goals had been defined they had not always been communicated widely beyond the leadership team. Sometimes the leadership team had communicated with high-level external stakeholders, but had neglected to share the goals with agency or front-line staff. In systems where the goals were not widely shared staff and stakeholders often expressed a genuine desire to know more about them. Conversely, in systems where the goals were well known, staff and stakeholders expressed a sense of shared ownership and mission.



Clarity about what the system is trying to achieve sets the foundation for all implementation work that follows. Broadly speaking, systems that were rated “greener” on this element tended to be rated “greener” across the other 14 elements in the rubric, and visa-versa.

Targets and trajectories

Second, the rubric asks, “have the aspiration and associated goals been translated to concrete end targets and trajectories?” To specify what this means, the rubric goes on to ask:

- Has the system translated goals into numerical targets that are specific, measurable, ambitious, realistic and time-limited (SMART)?
- Has the system created a trajectory – a series of interim targets that plot the planned path of the metric between now and the target date – for each goal?
- Are targets and trajectories rooted in evidence from past experience or research?
- Are targets and trajectories included in the plan(s) and communicated with relevant stakeholders?

If systems struggled to define their overall aspiration as a set of outcome goals, they had even greater difficulty in expressing what measurable progress towards these goals would look like. The most common rating for this element was Red; only one system was considered Green for this element at the time of its review (see Figure 1).

In many cases targets had simply not been expressed at the system level, hindering meaningful discussion about progress. As one leader put it: “I hope we’re on track!” Within this group were: systems with no defined goals against which to set targets; those with goals but no quantification of what success would look like in a given time period; and those who had set targets for specific programs and initiatives but not for system-wide goals.

A few systems had lots of targets, particularly at

“I hope we’re on track!”

Capacity review participant

“We now have a focused set of goals and priority strategies which inform everything we do to improve education in Hawai’i”

Hawai’i State Superintendent,
Kathryn S. Matayoshi

the local or school level, but had not translated these into statewide “trajectories.” In other words, they were not clear about how the cumulative impact of everyone’s efforts would add up to overall system performance, or about the contribution that system-level strategies could be expected to make over time. Occasionally, interim targets had been set, but without a sense of whether progress was expected to be slow initially and then gather momentum, or the opposite.

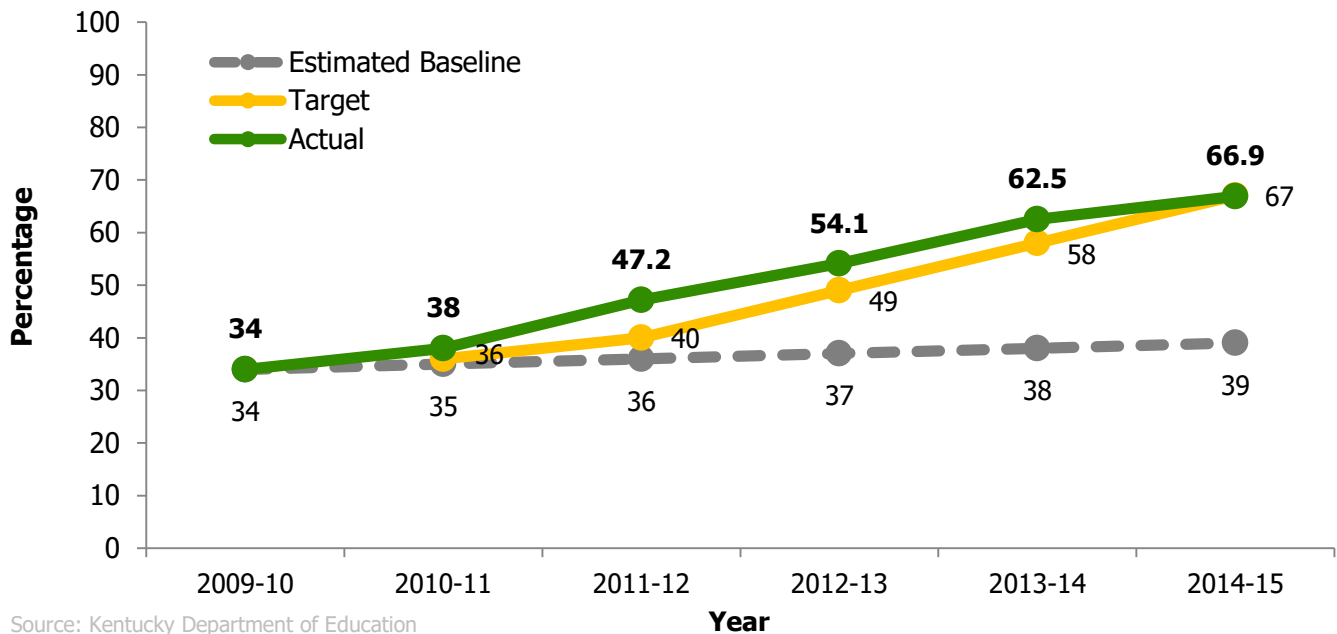
Targets and trajectories were not always communicated, even to people who conceivably had a need to know about them. In systems where this happened, staff and stakeholders sometimes expressed sentiments such as “I don’t really see how my work impacts student achievement,” or “I wish they’d tell me what bar I’m trying to hit.”

Recommendations for improvement

The recommendations of each capacity review were specific to the systems in question, but in relation to goal setting a few themes were repeated. Leaders were advised to:

- Define their goals as clearly as possible – translating slogans and vision statements into measurable goals, and setting numerical targets and trajectories where none existed.
- Draw on what already existed and explain how multiple statements of “what we’re trying to do” fitted together – e.g. by explaining the alignment of objectives in existing agency and state strategic plans, Race to the Top plans, ESEA waivers and major policy announcements.

Figure 2: Percentage Kentucky students college and/or career ready



Source: Kentucky Department of Education

- Use the goals as the “architecture” to organize agency plans, assign ownership and establish performance management routines.
- Over-communicate about the aspiration and goals until everybody in the system had a shared understanding of what change they were trying to achieve for students.

The power of setting system-wide goals

For the systems involved, capacity reviews represented a starting point from which to improve. Leadership teams used the ratings and recommendations as a basis for action, often with ongoing support from EDI. Over the last five years, EDI has seen a number of education systems across the U.S. use system-wide goals and trajectories as a powerful lens through which to focus work on their priorities for students.

The Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) sets trajectories for each of the agency’s goals.^{vi} Figure 2 shows the trajectory for the college and career readiness goal between 2010 and 2015. Using this, KDE’s leadership was able to send a clear message about the scale of change needed: to meet its goal the system would need to double the number of students leaving high school ready for college or a career (a huge, but ultimately successful undertaking). The interim targets expressed in the trajectory prompted a regular conversation about

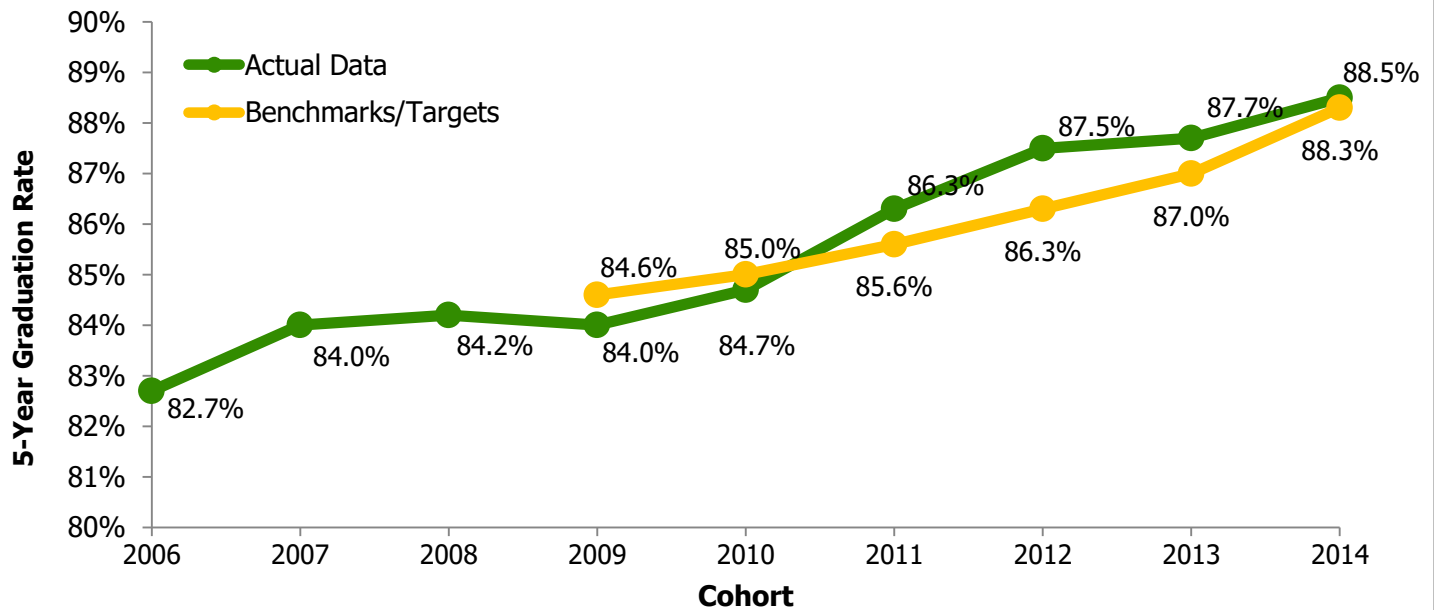
the impact of the department’s strategies in the field and what was needed to stay on track.

As part of its strategic planning process with the state board, the Hawai’i State Department of Education (HIDOE) drew on its various guiding documents (Race to the Top plan, ESEA waiver) to come up with three statewide goals (each with defined metrics and targets)^{vii} and six strategies for achieving them. HIDOE aligned all existing planning processes to these non-negotiables. The goals and strategies were pre-populated in the planning documents for local “complex areas” and schools to complete, with each complex area and school also retaining flexibility to articulate additional goals and strategies that were important to them. State Superintendent Kathryn S. Matayoshi has commented that “We now have a focused set of goals and priority strategies which inform everything we do to improve education in Hawai’i, and [performance management] routines that build

“That target was our lodestar”

Matt Deninger, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Figure 3: Massachusetts high school graduation rate



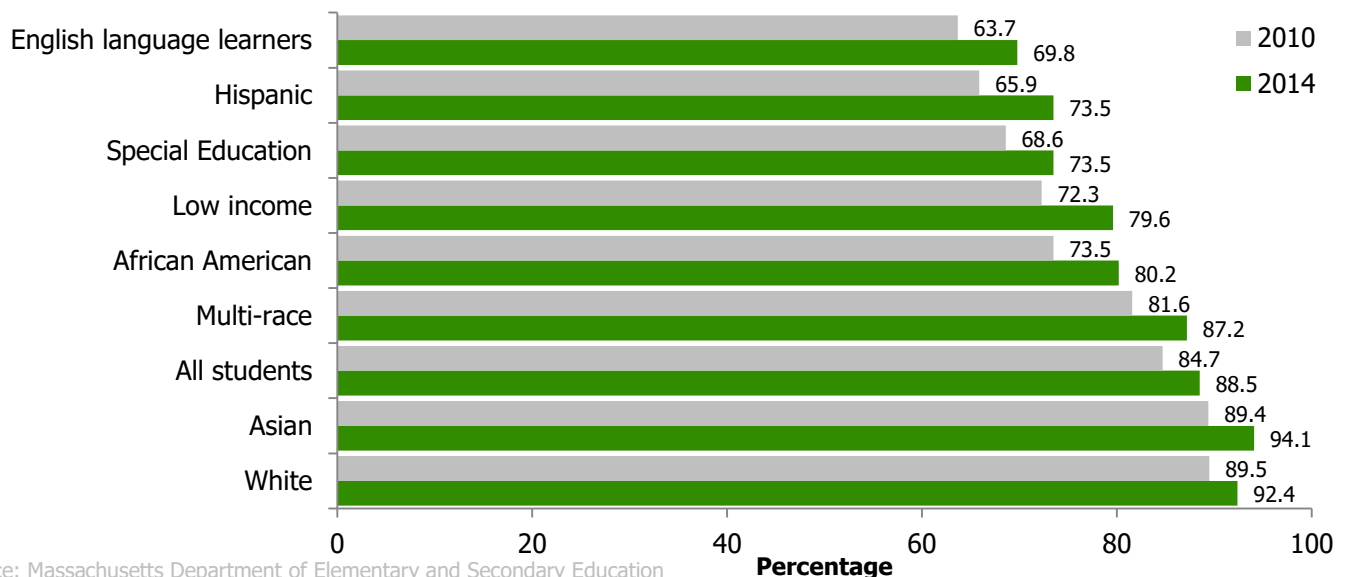
Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

shared team accountability for results that move the needle on our strategic goals. This has contributed significantly to the major improvements in student outcomes that we've seen in recent years."^{viii}

Matt Deninger – planning and implementation coordinator at the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education – explains how conversations over time about the department's high school graduation goal led to iterative improvements, and prompted action to reduce inequities (see Figures 3 and 4). "That

target was our lodestar," says Deninger. "We had formulated a reform strategy – called MassGrad – and had begun implementation in 2010. When we were 'off track' at the beginning, we used that information as a catalyst to refine elements of the reform strategy that weren't fully working as well as they could have. When we got 'on track' in 2011 and beyond, we used the information as a catalyst to scale our efforts to reach even more of our most at risk populations. Whether we were 'on' or 'off' track, it was the target and the associated milestones along the trajectory that forced us to reflect, refine, and engage in rich conversations

Figure 4: Massachusetts high school graduation rate by sub-group



Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

about the work that ultimately led to improvements, both in the services we provided, and the outcomes we wanted.”

The specific tools and approaches different systems used to set goals^{ix} and establish trajectories^x are discussed in further detail in the 2015 book, *Deliverology in Practice*,^{xi} and on [EDI's website](#).

An opportunity not to be wasted

In his bestselling work on organizational health, Patrick Lencioni argues that three key functions of a leadership team are to create, reinforce and over-communicate clarity.^{xii} One might assume that the task of creating clarity around what an education system is trying to achieve for its students – at the state level or otherwise – is too easy to deserve much attention. However, the overwhelming lesson from the capacity review experience is that effective goal setting is tough but worthwhile.

It is tempting to think of goal setting (and especially the construction of trajectories) as a technical, statistical exercise. But this misses the point. A system's goals express its level of ambition; they spell out what matters most; they make a powerful statement about how much the system values achievement for all students and equity for underserved groups. Goal setting is a core leadership function, and something in which all education leaders should invest time and effort.

The increased flexibility for SEAs to set goals under ESSA represents a great opportunity. If more SEA chiefs and their leadership teams define clear goals (not necessarily limited to the minimum requirements of the legislation) and put these at the heart of their agencies' strategic planning, they will have created a potential rallying point for everyone seeking to improve outcomes for students in their states. In doing so they will have signaled an important shift in focus: from a compliance role to one of leadership.

Richard Eyre is Director of Research and Delivery at EDI.

Zoë Despertt is a Research Intern at EDI.

www.deliveryinstitute.org

Notes

ⁱ Barber, M., Rodriguez, N., & Artis, E. (2015). *Deliverology in Practice* (p. 12). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/no-child-left-behind-overview-definition-summary.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Detailed-Overview-of-Every-Student-Succeeds-Act.pdf>

^{iv} In all but one case EDI conducted a single review. The exception is an SEA where EDI conducted three reviews over several years. “Capacity review” is used in this paper to refer to reviews conducted using the Delivery Capacity Rubric; the capacity review methodology has also been used by EDI to conduct reviews against other rubrics.

^v <https://www.deliveryinstitute.org/delivery-resources/1b-review-current-state-delivery> (The rubric has been refined over time, but the core principles remain the same. All quotations in this paper are drawn from the most current version of the rubric.)

^{vi} KDE actually go as far as publishing trajectories and progress updates for all their goals on the department's website: http://education.ky.gov/CommOfEd/CDU/Pages/Delivery_Reports.aspx

^{vii} <http://www.hawaiipublicschools.org/VisionForSuccess/AdvancingEducation/StrategicPlan/Pages/home.aspx>

^{viii} Barber, M., Rodriguez, N., & Artis, E. (2015). *Deliverology in Practice* (inside cover). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

^{ix} <https://www.deliveryinstitute.org/delivery-resources/1a-define-your-aspiration>

^x <https://www.deliveryinstitute.org/delivery-resources/3c-set-targets-and-establish-trajectories>

^{xi} Barber, M., Rodriguez, N., & Artis, E. (2015). *Deliverology in Practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin

^{xii} Lencioni, P. (2012). *The advantage: Why organizational health trumps everything else in business*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.