

Friday, October 31, 2008

Professional Self-Development

Why Should Teachers Write and Focus Upon Goals?

Why should teachers write and focus upon goals if they want to become Master Teachers? Why Bother

No one cares, really? Do they?

As long as your students pass the high-stakes, mandated test by one percentage point, you are a hero. In some states, this target could be a scaled score of 71 (out of 100 or more). Sidebar The high-stakes "teacher evaluation" math is skewed and confused. (Despite the fact that evaluating teachers based on students' performance is a misuse of the test.)

For example, if in a classroom of 20 students 19 students score 100 and one scores a 69 (passing score is 70), then the teacher has failed (because not all students "passed"). However if 20 students score 71, then the teacher is a hero because the entire class "passed."

So, what is the target? Is the target a score of 100 (getting every question correct)? Does the teacher provide praise and feel joy and thanksgiving that every student achieves to their potential, no matter the high-stakes test score?

Or, is the target pushing, coaching, training, tutoring every student to reach the "minimum cutting score" (just passing). Does the teacher experience pain, fear, loathing and dread and level criticism toward students that miss the minimum skills bar? Most teachers will draw the same pay if their students meet high-stakes testing targets, or not.

If campus high-stakes pass rates are not achieved, will the teacher draw on the "It's the low quality of THOSE students" card; and blame the students for the "failure?" The benefit of this strategy is that there are often "mutual crying shoulders" of slacker colleagues to commiserate upon. Know what you Want to Achieve, then Develop a Strategy When you know what you want to achieve, you can develop an effective strategy for reaching that goal.

If you don't know what your achievement targets are; you lack an effective way to develop a viable strategy. You end up floating, disconnected, worried, and dismal.

It's the goals and targets that you set that suggest the tactics and drive the strategy that you employ. It's as simple as that.

Without those targets in place, you drift. You allow the textbook to drive instruction. You take the "trail of least resistance" (downhill, downward slide) to the bottom of the heap instead of the summit of satisfaction.

So, set definite targets. Become proactive. What if you Miss your Targets? If you set high targets, but fail to meet them, what happens?

And, how do you feel about yourself when super-high targets are missed? Isn't it better to set achievable, attainable targets (mediocre, average and so you won't be disappointed)?

What happens when you don't meet your goals? What do you tell yourself about your performance and your skills?

The answer is that it depends what you mean by, "Don't meet your goals."

What if you define success as moving toward your goal, rather than attaining a target?

For example, if you set a bank account balance of \$1,000,000.00 as a target (on a teacher's salary? Right!), but only saved \$975,000, did you fail?

If you define movement toward a goal as progress, you could judge nearly reaching a target as "success." If the target means reaching the exact numerical amount, then that same progress would be deemed "a failure."

This works the same way for student scores on the high-stakes tests. If students make tremendous progress, then they should be rewarded and praised for their successes, even if they fall short of the "passing score." Strategy

Change Strategy change is about "tweaking" your performance tactics and the management methods that you employ to improve.

The idea is often co-opted by folks who believe in "formative assessments." This means keeping track of how things are progressing, and if results seem elusive, to make reasoned (informed, rational, research-based) adjustments.

Part of this tweaking strategy is knowing that the track you are traveling is not going to reach the target you set. To do this means setting some number-type indicators as milestones so that you know if you are on track. These indicators must be numbers because other indicator types are imprecise and as ineffective as a rubber ruler, i.e., you can't tell if they are accurate. Sidebar Here is an example of a rubber ruler.

A teacher is stressed and over eats, gains lots of belly fat. He wants to lose weight. By using an elastic tape measure, he can't tell if he is getting slimmer. On the other hand, a fixed target doesn't help either. The person with a 40 inch waist cannot fit into the slacks with a 34 inch waist if his waist size is 36, 37, 35, 39 or 41. All he knows is that the size 34 slacks are too small.

But, targeting the successive holes on a belt (meaningful milestones) could serve to tell whether the diet and exercise routines are producing the desired results. The corollary to setting numerical measures is knowing what caused the change in the number that is measured. Making changes because of a numerical assessment that lacks a reasoned and rational basis is useless. You have to know what aspect of the strategy (or action) caused the target number to change

before you can tell if you are on track. (The change could be accidental or related to outside conditions.) Making changes in strategy, because something is not working requires some knowledge of what does work, and how the results from applying that strategy were atypical (not what you and everyone else expected).

Doing something else (because a strategy does not appear to be "working") only makes sense if you know what measurable strategy does work.

"Shot-in-the-dark" attempts to rectify a non-productive teaching situation seldom produce measurable gains.

Sidebar "Shot-in-the-dark" activity changes are the mark of confused teachers that do lack written goals and don't know where they are going.

They know that previous activities failed, but don't know why. So, they try something new, and another something new, and another, and another…

A Master Teacher knows what strategies work, develops a plan, and sticks to it. A Master Teacher knows that the challenge is figuring out what small, specific changes are needed to guide that plan to success. And, there are other obstacles such as fear that keep teachers from writing their goals and committing to achieving those goals. Overcoming Fear: What Fear? What fear? Answer: The "Twin Fears" are the "Fear of Getting Fired" and the "Fear of Not Knowing what to Do."

Teachers will deny that they hold fears, especially fears about losing their "almost locked into it for life, unless they commit a felony, and maybe note even then" jobs.

It is common knowledge (an Urban Myth?) that school district can't dislodge "bad" teachers from their jobs, even with dynamite. This belief holds sway and is bolted into everyone's consciousness, especially in states with large memberships in teachers' unions.

But whether this scenario matches reality is irrelevant when compared with the terrors and scary worries that inhabit the inner landscape of a teacher's thoughts and feelings.

Every teacher knows colleagues (or has heard about the friends of colleagues) that were either "fired," forced to resign, or "made to feel so miserable by a principal" that they left the campus (or the teaching field).

And, principals and school district administrators are "rumored" to attend lawyer-taught courses on how to use "within-the-law" methods of ridding a campus of the "deadwood, driftwood, rotten wood, and wood that just doesn't match the decor (or campus decorum)."

Fear of being fired? "My Union and I laugh at you!"

Maybe such bravado masks a teachers' real feelings of vulnerability. Probably not.

However, the fear of not knowing what to do to improve is real and palpable.

Teachers are plagued with vying theories and repackaged instructional fads. Professors and pundits promulgate ever more intricate "solutions" from the podium and the PowerPoint presentation.

These "authorities" believe that they are "teaching experts." And many believe that they alone possess the "secret" of successful teaching. Each expert wants teachers to change, but change to the way that the expert thinks is crucial.

It is amazing that so many experts fail to figure out that change is personal and must be tailor-made for the person that is making the change.

Change is difficult and change also takes time. Besides, the pace of institutional change makes the snail and sloth seem like speedsters by comparison. And teachers must work within the constraints (sometimes choking strangle holds) of those institutions.

The lifecycle of implementing a viable educational reform (that really takes hold and delivers student achievement and instructional gains) is 20 Earth years.

The path from Newbie to Master Teacher takes three (or more) years. The Path toward Self-Improvement Goals Knowing what to do by identifying a path to success through the forest and thickets of hidden possibilities can seem bewildering.

And, what if, stuck in this maze of conflicting, competing, mutually canceling theories; a teacher doesn't know which direction represents "the way out?"

The answer is that teachers must write their own goals. Those goals then act like a compass.

But, writing goals is different than writing lesson plans…the documents that are submitted to campus administrators or department chairs.

One way that these differ is that lesson plans describe goals for student learning, i.e., what the students will do to learn.

The goals that teachers must write are statements about what the teacher will do to be more effective. These are teacher's targets. Targets that teachers must commit to, and targets that teachers must constantly recommit to, like an every day renewing marriage vows! (And almost as important for your long-term teaching success. A Supportive Other After writing personal and professional goals, teachers need to find a sympathetic and harmonious other to share these goals with.

But this sharing needs to be of the "once the honeymoon is over straight talk, hold you accountable-type;" not the "Your doing great and your perfect in every way" type of support.

This kind of support comes from a friend or partner, not from a mentor (because the mentor-mentee relationship is unequal, with the mentor being the higher-up expert).

A mentor sets targets and makes suggestions of what changes need to be made, while a supportive partner focuses upon set of accomplishments that the teacher sets for himself or herself. (Big difference!)

This unequal relationship is also the reason that the supportive relationship cannot develop between the teacher and the

professional that evaluates them. (The evaluation/ supervisory roles and the supportive friend/ partner roles (between district administrators and teachers) would represent a dual relationship. Translation: Teachers (can't/ don't/ shouldn't) trust the people that evaluate them by revealing inside information about their personal goals.)

However a trusted colleague, a friend, or a family member that understands teaching can keep a teacher on track by asking for a progress report, and by asking "tough questions." The key is that the support person focuses on the goals that the teacher wrote for themselves. This is the teacher's agenda, not someone else's agenda. Supportive Questioning: Taking to Task What questions will this supportive person ask?

This should be obvious. "What specific steps did you take today toward the goals that you wrote for yourself?"

"Did you do what you committed to do?" "Did you follow through?" "What did you learn?" "What are you going to commit to do next?" The Concrete Goals are Written, Now, What do I Measure? Teachers must identify countable milestones of observable indicators that can be recorded.

These are the items that can be counted and recorded.

These are related to exactly what attitudes, knowledge and skills (of yours) that you are targeting for improvement.

These are not items like students' grades, students' attendance or other student-centered items.

These are the specific teacher-centered items that demonstrate to yourself that you are moving forward, seeing progress, and indicators that enable you to say positive things to yourself about your personal improvement.

But teachers are busy, and school day distractions abound. So, the number of indicators must be kept small, preferably five or less.

Sidebar The reason for keeping the number of indicators for measuring personal performance to five or less is due to the limits of our Span of Consciousness (the number of discrete items that we can hold in conscious awareness at one time; i.e., keep track of). These items are held in conscious awareness through a process of item switching.

These indicators must be personal, meaningful and specific.

And because these indicators are personal, they need to match your favored sensory processing mode (favored learning style, favored Multiple Intelligence).

And because there are so many variables, stock checklists and "one goal fits all" approaches always fail.

The goals that teachers write for themselves must really be for themselves.

Summary Writing personal goals and specific improvement targets is crucial if you want to become a Master Teacher.

Writing specific goals is more powerful than just thinking about what you want to do.

And, finding the right partner who will hold you accountable in a supportive way also accelerates your progress on the path to improving your performance.

Writing personal goals is a crucial tool for professional advancement. Focus upon, review and recommit to your goals by using this tool, daily.