Teachers learn to set goals with students

Cooperative process brings Wisconsin school to new heights of innovation and success

BY JAN O'NEILL

Leaving Interstate 94 north of Milwaukee and driving east toward Brookfield, Wis., you cross through flat corn-fields stretching to the horizon, dotted by red barns, a few white farmhouses, and the occasional herd of Hereford cows. Within five miles, though, the scene turns to precisely landscaped suburban homes skirted by straight white sidewalks and tall shade trees. On the edges of this manicured part of the community sits Burleigh Elementary School. The large, modern building has the look and feel of suburbia: new play equipment, grassy open fields, a clean, expansive parking lot. A bright welcome sign greets visitors at the door: "We welcome all parents and visitors. Please stop in our office to introduce yourself and pick up a visitor's pass."

Inside, the hallways are wide, clean, and well-lit. Every 12 feet or so the plain walls are enhanced with large, wildly colorful murals that office and custodial staff designed and children, parents, and staff painted together.

Today, Burleigh is a high-performing school. Teachers and students are

JAN O'NEILL is a co-founder, with Anne Conzemius, of QLD Learning, a Madison, Wis.-based educational consulting and software company specializing in collaborative, data-driven school improvement. You can contact her at Yarmouth Crossing, #188, 2935 S. Fish Hatchery Road, Madison, WI 53711, (608) 251-5393, fax (608) 251-5396, e-mail: jano@qldlearning.com.
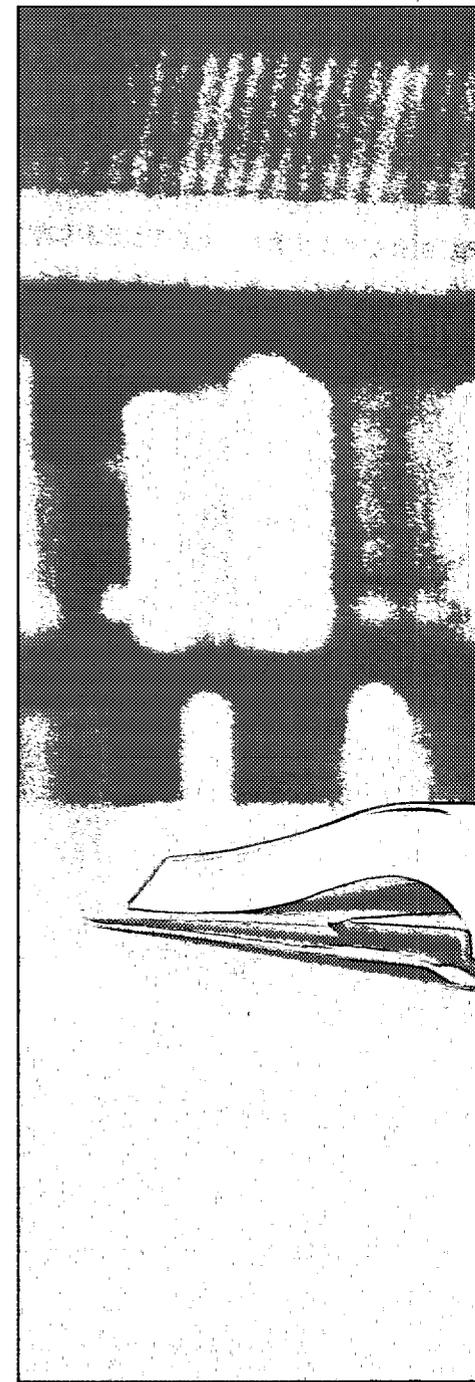
empowered and share responsibility for learning using a goal-setting and monitoring process deemed the SMART (Specific and Strategic, Measurable, Attainable, Results-based, and Timebound) Goals Process. Others in the district view Burleigh as cutting-edge and willing to innovate.

Today at Burleigh Elementary, students set learning goals for themselves and self-assess at every grade level and

"My goal in reading is to ask myself if my reading makes sense or if I'm learning what I need to learn."

— A 4th-grade student

Burleigh Elementary School
Brookfield, Wis.

Grades: Early childhood to 5th
Enrollment: 786
Staff: 125
Racial/ethnic mix:
White:	84%
Black:	6%
Hispanic:	2%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	8%
Native American:	0%
Other:	0%

Limited English proficient: 5%
Languages spoken: 15
Free/reduced lunch: 6%
Special education: 18%
Contact: Bil Zahn, principal
16185 Burleigh Place
Brookfield, WI 53005-2899
Phone: (262) 781-5280
Fax: (262) 790-0302
E-mail: zahnw@elmbrook.k12.wi.us

in every class. They record their work in their journals. Most importantly, students are able to identify what comes next — what skills they need to focus on to reach their goal based on mini-lessons from teachers and the skill work they've done.

It wasn't always so. Eleven years ago, Burleigh was the lowest-performing school in the Elmbrook School District, with 20% of students achieving below grade level. However, for the last 14 years, the school has been a model of democratic leadership, working to achieve what Linda Lambert terms leadership capacity and others call strong capacity (Newmann, King, & Youngs, 1999).

Teachers at Burleigh have been empowered to speak up, collaborate, and share decision making with each other, the principal, and parents. Burleigh had started making gains, particularly in reading. When staff added goal-setting, they began to see significant changes in achievement.

Then, four years ago, a former board member and parent of a Burleigh student asked, "What would

it look like if part of our vision was that all students have input and ownership of their learning?" Principal Bil Zahn and school staff took up the challenge.

The Burleigh staff had been empowered through their shared governance leadership model. Now, they began empowering students. Staff wanted more involvement than having students help decide classroom behavior rules or giving them leeway in rearranging their desks. The group became convinced that increasing students' responsibility using the goal-setting process they were already familiar with would empower students and raise achievement. They translated the district's SMART acronym into more kid-friendly language — Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Real, and Timeline — and began.

GETTING BUY-IN

Burleigh's data team, a part of its school improvement team, started by asking whether research supported the idea that student involvement improves achievement. The group, made up of grade-level teacher representatives, the principal, and resource staff, read Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam's article, "Inside the Black Box" from *Phi Delta Kappan* (1998), which said that students who understand their learning targets, are engaged in the ongoing assessment process, and receive quality feedback dramatically improve their achievement. They reviewed research (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994) that showed students are motivated to try harder, risk failure, and set higher standards for themselves when they are involved in setting goals and monitoring and evaluating their own performance.

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Some staff and parents were concerned that students might be given too much control, negatively affecting achievement.

Burleigh students improved their achievement from baseline on the state's 3rd-grade reading test.

Baseline 2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	Target 2003-04
90%	96%	93%	96%

Burleigh 2nd-grade students improved achievement on the district reading assessments of letter/sound recognition.

	Baseline 2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	Target 2003-04
K	98% (letters)	97% (letters)	89% (test changed, combined scores)	98% (letters)
	85% (sounds)	92% (sounds)		93% (sounds)
1st	90%	93%	88%	94%
2nd	89%	96%	96%	95%

2nd-grade students improved achievement in reading on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills.

	Baseline 2000-01	2002-03	Target 2003-04
Reading	75%	77%	80%
Language	79%	74%	85%

2nd-grade subgroups showed improvement on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills.

	Baseline 2000-01		2002-03	
	African-American	Special education	African-American	Special education
Reading	56%	39%	61%	63%
Language	57%	38%	76%	38%
Math	54%	18%	54%	49%

4th-grade students improved their reading, language, math, and writing proficiency on the state test.

	Baseline 2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	Target 2003-04
Reading	91%	90%	96%	96%
Language	91%	89%	93%	96%
Math	91%	91%	96%	96%
Writing	32%	52%	Test changed. NA	80%

4th- and 5th-grade achievement on the district writing assessment has also improved:

	Baseline 2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	Target 2003-04
Grade 4	41%	53%	NA	80%
Grade 5	51%	65%	NA	80%

Based on student achievement data from state tests and district assessments, staff determined students needed to improve reading and writing particularly.

cerned that students might be given too much control, negatively affecting achievement. They were concerned that teachers would give up their responsibilities by turning more over to students. The data team attended grade-level team meetings and PTO meetings, sharing the Black and Wiliam article. The district's coordinator of assessment worked with the school faculty, sharing research about student motivation, goal setting, and student-involved assessment. Through Burleigh's shared decision-making model, members from each of the school's shared decision committees — student support, instructional resources, and the action team — discussed the idea within the committees and at their grade-level groups. Conversations were intense and often hard, and they occurred everywhere — at grade-level meetings, in the lounge, at PTO meetings, in the parking lot.

Meanwhile, a number of teachers simply forged ahead and set SMART goals with their students. Working closely with these teachers, the school's learning support coordinator, reading specialist, and instructional resource teacher developed processes, templates, and tools to help the students. (See "Setting SMART Goals" at right.) These materials were developed "just in time" and tested in the classroom, then revised based on what teachers discovered. The teachers shared the lessons with other staff in faculty and grade-level meetings and at every opportunity.

Burleigh's leadership team then asked all teachers to turn in their students' SMART goals to the principal and the resource team for review at the end of the year, with evidence of each student's progress on those goals. The combination of education, communication, support, modeling, and pressure began to bring all teachers and parents on board. Principal Zahn said, "We did it through common

Setting SMART goals

Teachers consider a number of factors when helping students set SMART goals.

1. **Self-reflection.** Ask the student to think about: What am I doing well? What do I need to do to improve?
2. **Goal setting.** The student plans what to do.
3. **Rationale.** The student explains why he or she chose the goal.
4. **Action plan.** The student describes strategies and steps he or she will use to complete the goal. The student names resources to use to reach the goal.
5. **Timeline.** The student decides how much time to spend working on the goal, including setting progress checkpoints when goals have longer time frames.
6. **Evidence.** The student describes how he or she will know when the goal is reached: What will it look like? What work might I collect?
7. **Implementation.** The student carries out his or her plan.
8. **Reflection.** The student is asked to reflect: Did I reach my goal? How do I know? What went well? What gave me trouble? Did I use or follow my action plan? What is my next step in this area?

sense and dialogue. We had to make it risk-free, too. We always said if something wasn't working, we'd throw it out. But success breeds success. Over time, everyone began to get more and more excited by the process. Kids were learning; kids were engaged."

Based on student achievement data from state tests and district assessments, staff determined students needed to improve reading and writing particularly. These subjects would give a focus to the areas for which students wrote their own SMART goals.

To begin the process, the teachers wrote schoolwide three-year SMART goals by grade level:

• 96% of 3rd graders will score proficient or advanced on the state reading test by 2003-04. The baseline in 1999-00 was 90%.

• 98% of kindergarten students will achieve letter recognition and 93% will achieve sound recognition by 2003-04. The baseline in 1999-00 was 98% and 85% respectively.

• 94% of 1st graders will achieve at or above grade level on the district

reading assessment by 2003-04. The baseline in 1999-00 was 90%.

• 95% of 2nd graders will achieve at or above grade level on the district reading assessment by 2003-04. The baseline in 1999-00 was 89%.

• 80% of 2nd graders will be proficient in reading, and 85% will be proficient in language, as measured by the Iowa Test of Basic Skills in 2003-04. The baseline was 75% and 79% in 1999-00.

• 96% of 4th graders will score proficient or advanced on reading, language, and math subtests of state standardized tests by 2003-04. The baseline was 91% for all tests in 2000-01.

• 80% of 4th graders will score proficient or advanced on the writing subtest of the state standardized test by 2003-04. The baseline was 32% in 2000.

• 80% of 3rd-, 4th- and 5th-grade students will be proficient on

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theme / IDEAS THAT WORK

the district writing test in 2003-04. The baseline was 41% for 4th graders and 51% for 5th graders in 2000-01, 62% for 3rd graders in 2001-02 (there is no data for this test for 3rd grade in 2000-01).

The leadership team devised a professional development strategy to help the school achieve these goals. For example, the reading specialist worked with all K-2 staff on early reading. Faculty from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee collaborated with teachers, providing courses, program support, and research-based materials. In addition to committing to their own professional development in effective strategies for teaching reading, math, and writing, teachers committed to teaching students how to use SMART goals to improve their reading, math, and writing. Three members of the school's resource team along with grade-level leaders guided teachers as they developed processes and tools to help the children set and monitor SMART goals. (See "A 4th Grader Reflects on Goals" at right.) The teachers even set SMART goals for the process:

> **"It's the relentless nature of this goal setting that reinforces the kids to continuously work to improve,"** one teacher said.

• 100% of K-3 students will demonstrate growth by setting and achieving a SMART goal in reading.

• 100% of 4th- and 5th-grade students will demonstrate growth by setting and achieving a SMART goal in writing in a content area.

The teachers worked during weekly grade-level team meetings to define "good quality writing," "strong reading skills," and "strong math skills" so students would have a clear picture of their learning targets. They developed exemplars to use with students to help them uncover for themselves what constituted quality.

When teaching each lesson, teachers first would tell the students the

A 4th grader reflects on goals

At the end of the year, students were required to complete a survey that helped them reflect on their SMART goals. One 4th grader responded:

• My goal:
To ask myself if my reading makes sense, or if I'm learning what I need to learn.

• I reached my goal.
Yes.

• I think goal setting helped me improve.
Yes.

• My evidence:
My monitor/clarify sheet is my evidence. My parents and teacher talked to me about my goal.

• This is what I learned from the goal-setting process:
That if you set a goal and work at it, you could really reach it and become better at something.

• I will set goals on my own in the future.
Yes. I've found out that goals can really help you.

target of the lesson (e.g. creative and expressive word choice), follow the explanation with a mini-lesson, and then ask the students to evaluate their own work based on the target and the exemplar. Students created SMART goals at the beginning of each unit that incorporated the language of the skills being taught, as well as the targets. For example, one student wrote, "My goal in reading is to ask myself if my reading makes sense or if I'm learning what I need to learn."

Because instructional strategies were so targeted, specific and clear, the children and their teachers could see which skills a student had mas-

tered and which needed work each time the children assessed their work. Routine assessment is a key component of the process. As Black and Wiliam note, "When anyone is trying to learn, feedback about the effort has three elements: recognizing the desired goal, evidence about present position, and some understanding of a way to close the gap between the two." Teachers checked students' SMART goals progress through daily and weekly observations, performance tasks, and short paper and pencil assessments. These formative assessments best demonstrated students' learning as they sought to create quality work, assessed themselves, and received feedback from their teachers and peers. Teachers also assessed the school and grade-level SMART goals through district- and state-level standardized tests.

As the students showed evidence of their learning, teachers grew more confident in the students' ability to achieve. One 2nd-grade teacher didn't believe one of her students could achieve computational fluency. She worked with him to continue setting goals, taught mini skill-based lessons, and reviewed his self-assessments. The child's intrinsic motivation kicked in as he was allowed to become responsible for the learning process, and by January, he had reached the benchmark for his grade. "It's the relentless nature of this goal setting that reinforces the kids to continuously work to improve," one teacher said.

RESULTS

Four years later, student goal setting is a routine at Burleigh Elementary. And although they fell short of some of their SMART goals for 2003-04 by a small amount, teachers cite progress, particularly for minority and special education students.

Rather than criticizing themselves for not achieving all their goals, the

teachers immediately began working in grade-level teams to dig into the data to determine which areas were strongest and weakest for which students. They used early release days, time when students attended specials, and half- and full-day substitutes to collaborate. With the support of the resource team, they developed action plans to specifically address the needs of struggling learners at each grade level. For example, they decided they needed additional staff development on giving writers quality feedback and would provide guided reading in class five days a week to 1st and 2nd graders performing below grade level.

Marge Willms, Burleigh's instructional resource teacher, says the greatest opportunity emerging from the process is that teachers are differentiating their instruction more. Students are selecting strategies using goal-setting worksheets that are directly tied to their individual SMART goals, and teachers are directing specific mini-lessons to build those skills. Students are more aware of what they're working on. They can tell a visitor, for example, "I'm working on word choice" in writing, or "I'm working on sounding out letters" in reading.

Principal Zahn points to at least three positive outcomes:
- **Kids are more committed to try-**

Resources

- *Building Shared Responsibility for Student Learning,* by Anne Conzemius and Jan O'Neill (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2001).

- *The Handbook for SMART School Teams,* by Anne Conzemius and Jan O'Neill (Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service, 2002).

ing harder.

In regular classroom visits, Zahn notes students are more deeply engaged in writing, and their journals show how they intend to achieve their goals for particular lessons.
- **Students are tuning in more to teachers' mini-lessons.**

Students have set clear goals for themselves on daily "I Can" goal sheets, and they write about the lessons in their journals, both demonstrations of what they are learning.
- **Teachers are able to critique and challenge the students in ways beyond what they had in the past.**

As they came to understand and define "quality feedback," the feedback has become timely, explicit, and tied to goals and student learning content. They have higher expectations based on more individualized knowledge of students' abilities, and students are working to the higher levels. They have been able to identify students who continue to struggle and work with them in small, skill-based groups to provide additional intensive instruction.

CONCLUSION

Sustaining improvement and building capacity for ongoing learning is a key challenge for schools, particularly high-performing schools facing increasing pressures from the No Child Left Behind Act. The effectiveness of Burleigh's efforts to have students share responsibility for their learning goes even beyond test scores. The more teachers see their hard work paying off, the more effective they feel and the higher their expectations for students (Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). When Zahn asked Burleigh's teachers last year if they wanted to drop student goal setting from their to-do list, teachers replied, "Why would we even go there?"

The process has become as embedded in the school's culture as

shared leadership. Burleigh Elementary is a high-capacity school where learning is ongoing and shared by teachers and students alike.

"It seems that the focus of everything that we are expected to do these days is aimed at increased academic student achievement as measured through standardized tests," Zahn says. "We recognize the need for additional measures of student learning. The SMART goal process targets increased student achievement, but also teaches our children a process that will prepare them to achieve in all aspects of life."

The lesson has hit home. As one 4th grader wrote in reflecting about her SMART goal, "I learned if you set a goal and work at it, you could really reach it and become better at something. I've found out that goals can really help you."

> **The process has become as embedded in the school's culture as shared leadership.**

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