Personalizing School Goals

Often when meeting with principals and coaches I am presented their school improvement goals as a starting point for developing a coaching plan for the school. This is a great place to begin as it starts with student achievement at the center.

Pulling out the goals, I often read something like this.

87% of students will score proficient or advanced on the state standardized test.

My first question is often, “What were last year’s results?” I might get a response of 82%. My next question is, “How many students in 4th grade scored proficient and how many advanced?” Too often someone has to look those numbers up which tells me “being proficient” has been the goal. I might be told that 70% were proficient and 12% advanced. I’ll then ask, ”How would you feel if those students as 5th graders had 80% score proficient and 10% advanced?” With that question, folks realize that they could reach their goal (87%) with a result that was not what they wanted (a drop in advanced).

At this point we identify how many fourth graders scored *advanced, proficient*, and *below proficient*. Then we set goals for how many we would strive to have in each category at the end of fifth grade. Most often teachers want the students who scored advance the previous year to be advanced and they identify some number of students who were proficient to move to advanced. Similarly, they want to move some below proficient to proficient.

I now suggest that they name the students. Here are the students we are predicting should score advanced at the end of the year. For that to happen, what results/accomplishments should they make by December and by March? Now we have benchmarks to measure our progress.

At this point I ask people to describe what students need to spend time doing or experiencing (student behaviors) for that outcome to occur? Now we are ready to plan for teacher

behaviors, actions, and strategies to evoke those student behaviors.
A strategy that some teachers may use is to now engage the students in the goal setting, planning and, most importantly, the work of making the goal a reality.

This planning process creates the “look fors” for coaching by the principal, instructional coach or members of a PLC. Let’s say five students have been identified to move from below-proficient to proficient. The teacher, perhaps working with the coach and members of a PLC, has identified that it is crucial that these students dramatically increase the amount of time spent reading each day. A coach, observing during the teacher’s reading block, knowing who the five students are, tracks the actual time each of the five read during an hour observation. Collecting this observation data once a week over a four week span, the teacher can identify if her strategies are having the desired result.
Imagine that a teacher has decided that several capable students, who are underperforming in her course, need to be challenged and encouraged more directly. She asks her principal to stop by and observe for short periods whenever possible during the next few weeks. Each time recording whatever the selected students are doing and any interaction the teacher has with them. This data provides the teacher important feedback to check her awareness of what is happening and how she is responding.

This kind of planning, identifying the necessary teacher and student behaviors, can turn school improvement plans into results that get celebrated. If the change in behaviors is not observable, it is unlikely the goal will be met. The coaching feedback provides encouragement that changes are underway or signals that additional support for the teacher or students is required.