

## **The Use of Student Learning Objectives (SLOs) in Teacher Evaluation:**

### **An Executive Summary**

**Robert W. Lissitz, Hong Jiao, Ming Li, Chao Xie, Yoonjeong Kang**

**MARCES, U. of Md.**

Students' achievement data have been increasingly used to assist in teacher effectiveness evaluation. Though advances in value-added models in education make it possible to estimate students' growth in their achievement over time as part of educator accountability systems, the focus has been on the reading and mathematics subjects that serve as the post-test at 4<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade levels where standardized tests at the state level are administered. Using only state test data means that a large part of the teaching force would not be able to participate in evaluations (Marion & Buckley, 2011). Florida (Prince, et. al. 2009, page 5), for example, has calculated that 69 % of its teachers are teaching non-tested subjects and grades. Several states have planned and implemented comparable measures of the growth component of teacher evaluation when state level standardized tests are not available. The *Student Learning Objective* (SLO) is an option to incorporate student performance results into the evaluation of teachers in subjects and grades not assessed by state standardized tests.

SLO is defined as a long-term academic goal that teachers, school administrators, or evaluators set for a group of students, which must be specific, measurable, based on available prior student learning data, and aligned to state standards. It provides opportunities for teachers and evaluators to collaborate under a system based on alignment between instruction, standards, assessment, and evaluation. Built on the experience of the Denver Public Schools, which in 1999 began using SLOs in linking teacher salary to student learning outcomes, districts such as Austin, Charlotte/Mecklenburg, and New Haven as well as States like Rhode Island, Georgia, New York, Indiana, and several others are including SLOs as one of multiple measures for teacher evaluation when establishing their systems of educator effectiveness assessment. More importantly, they are using SLOs as a tool to incorporate measures of student growth for non-tested grades and subjects in their evaluation systems. In this summary, we investigate how SLOs are used for teacher evaluation at both the state and the district level and suggest what considerations states or districts will need to address as they evaluate teachers' performance using SLOs.

## **The Use of SLOs in Teacher Evaluation at the State Level**

Several states have piloted the use of SLOs as part of their statewide systems of educator evaluation systems, including Georgia, Indiana, New York, and Rhode Island.

### *Georgia*

SLOs are used for teachers in all non-tested subject areas from Pre-K through Grade 12. Unlike other states (to be described below), SLOs are developed by district in collaboration with teachers and school leaders. The developed SLOs need to be approved by the state. SLOs must be aligned to state standards, measurable, ambitious but attainable, and derived from baseline performance. Georgia requires that at least three educators participate in the development of assessments used to measure the attainment of SLOs. To accurately decide the attainment level of student learning, districts administer pre- and post-tests to students. District-determined objectives are set using the pretest. Scores from the assessments for all non-tested areas will be used to measure growth and measure teacher effectiveness. Teacher effectiveness is categorized into four levels based on student growth and achievement measured by SLOs: *Exemplary* (greater than 50% of students meet/exceed SLOs; at least 40% met, and no more than 10% did not meet SLOs), *Proficient* (greater than 80% of students meet/exceed SLOs), *Developing/Needs Improvement* (greater than 50% of students meet/exceed SLOs), and *Ineffective* (less than 50% of students meet/exceed SLOs).

### *Indiana*

SLOs are used for all teachers in the state default model, while districts developing their own model can choose to use them. According to the IDOE ESEA Flexibility Request, 20% of a teacher's evaluation is based on student learning objectives and 5% on the school-wide learning measure for the non-tested subjects and grades. Teachers must use state assessments if available, common school or district assessments if there is more than one teacher in a subject/grade, or individual classroom assessments if there are no other teachers in that content area. Assessments must demonstrate alignment, rigor, complexity, and allow students to demonstrate mastery. SLOs are set collaboratively among teachers and approved by principals. All teachers must select two types of learning objectives, which are referred to as a class objective and a targeted

objective. The class objective is a goal related to how many students achieve a content mastery and this objective applies to all students in a class. In a rubric for teacher's performance on the class objective, teachers must determine the proportion of students who must achieve mastery at the end of the year in order to earn each performance level (e.g., *Highly Effective*, *Effective*, *Improvement Necessary*, and *Ineffective*). The targeted objective focuses on low-performing students and teachers can choose the content standards that the objective will cover. Thus the targeted objective covers either all or some of Indiana content standards. Unlike the class learning objective, a teacher's performance on their targeted objective is determined by the extent to which teacher 'impact' on student learning (e.g., outstanding, considerable, some, insufficient impacts). Thus, the evaluator decision on teacher performance is subjective and requires professional judgment. Similarly, teacher's effectiveness on the targeted learning objective is rated at *Highly Effective*, *Effective*, *Improvement Necessary*, and *Ineffective*. During the middle of the course, teacher's progress toward their learning objective is monitored, but unlike Rhode Island (to be described later), teachers and evaluator are not allowed to adjust teacher's learning objectives at this point. Teachers receive a separate rating for the two types of objectives and are evaluated based on combined scores of both ratings.

### *New York*

SLOs are used for all teachers in non-tested grades and subjects. The state has identified a list of pre-approved assessments, though districts can choose to utilize district, school, or classroom-level assessments. Student learning objectives must cover a majority of the teacher's students and be developed using baseline assessment results. New York state requires eight elements to be included in SLOs, which are student population (which students are included?), learning content (which standards (CCSS/National/State) are used?), interval of instructional time (what is the instructional period covered?), evidence (what assessments are used?), baseline (what is the beginning level of student's learning covered by SLO?), target (what is the expected outcome?), criteria (how do evaluators determine student performance?), and rationale (why choose this SLO?). At the end of the year, teacher's effectiveness on the SLOs is rated at *Highly Effective*, *Effective*, *Developing*, and *Ineffective*. Assessments used for SLOs cannot be scored by teachers or principals. Teachers who have multiple SLOs are assessed on each SLO separately and then each SLO assessment results are combined with proportionate weight.

### *Rhode Island*

In Rhode Island, teachers are required to set two to four SLOs and these SLOs are developed by teams of administrators, grade-level teams or groups of content-alike teachers considering students' prior achievement. These SLOs should be aligned to the district and/or school's goals or school improvement plan. School administrator finalizes each teacher's learning objectives using three criteria, which are priority of content, rigor of target, and quality of evidence. Teachers and evaluators agree on SLOs at the beginning-of-year conference. At the mid-year conference, educators and evaluators will review available student learning data and reexamine the SLOs to determine if adjustments should be made. Adjustments may be made if objectives have already been met and/or are not sufficiently ambitious, or if the objectives are too ambitious. Teacher evaluation will be based on students' progress on the established SLOs, as determined by an end-of-the-year principal review of the selected assessments and their results. Evaluators rate each individual objective as Did Not Meet, Met, or Exceeded. After rating each objective individually, the evaluator makes a holistic judgment about the teacher's overall impact on their student's learning using the SLO Scoring Guidelines.

### **The Use of SLOs in Teacher Evaluation at the District Level**

Several large school districts have adopted SLOs as part of their educator evaluation and/or compensation systems.

### *Austin, Texas*

SLOs are used at the district level in Austin, Texas, and also used state-wide. SLOs are used as part of the district's strategic compensation initiative. The SLOs are in specific areas within state or national standards that have been identified as a high need based on a thorough review of available data. All SLOs are set and approved after collaboration and consultation with colleagues and administrators. Teachers will each create two SLOs and receive financial incentives for meeting one or both of these goals at the end of the school year. SLOs are based on the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) and are established and implemented through a multi-step process. First, teachers examine their current students' performance data and identify two areas of greatest need. Next, pre-assessments are administered to students in

their selected areas of need. Third, teachers examine assessment results and set rigorous SLO targets for student performance by the end of the school year. Teachers propose two SLOs that must be reviewed and approved by the campus principal and the central office SLO team. Each SLO must indicate performance targets students will meet by the end of the school year and how student performance will be assessed. At least one SLO must target students in an entire course, and the second may target either a specific group of students or all the students in a course. Finally, at the end of the year (or semester, for semester courses), students take a post-assessment to determine if they, and by extension their teachers, met the previously established growth targets.

#### *Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina*

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg System (CMS) developed its own value-added metric in 2009-2010, with the goal of ultimately being able to provide a value-added score for every teacher. CMS customized the state-developed rubric by creating additional indicators for each standard and sub-standards for teacher practice. In addition to tackling the issue of developing value-added scores for teachers whose classes are not included in the state assessments by piloting summative assessments (end-of-year and end-of-course assessments) in non-tested grades and subjects in the spring of 2011, the system is also exploring other metrics to measure teacher effectiveness, such as student surveys, authentic assessments of student performance and work. The goal is to define, pilot, and assess all possible measures by June 2013, so that they can be fully implemented and integrated into teacher evaluation ratings in the school year 2013-2014. Teachers review baseline data and develop pre- and post-assessments, targets, and instructional strategies in consultation with their administrators. Teachers receive financial incentives for meeting these goals. Teachers could set up to three SLOs and earn \$1,400 for each goal met, for a total possible bonus of \$4,200.

#### *Denver, Colorado*

SLOs are part of the district's compensation and evaluation system. Teachers create two SLOs informed by baseline data in collaboration with their principals. These objectives must be aligned with school and district priorities. Teachers and principals revisit these goals mid-year to discuss progress and meet at the end of the year to assess whether objectives have been met.

### *New Haven, Connecticut*

Under the new teacher evaluation system (2010), New Haven evaluates teachers not only based on students' performance on standardized tests, but also based on whether or not students reach goals decided upon by teachers and principals at the beginning of the school year. SLOs are used for teachers for whom at least two district assessments and growth data are not available. Teachers and instructional managers identify an appropriate number of goals and ensure targets have sufficient alignment and rigor. Quality student learning goals should be set across grade-levels, subjects, and student types, and guided by the following principles:

- Goals should be oriented on student growth.
- Teachers should have two goals, at least.
- Goals should be aligned to meaningful standards.
- Targets should be ambitious but reasonable.
- Scoring should be validated when possible.

Prior to the goal setting, teachers and instructional managers select two to four measures and targets informed by baseline data from formative diagnostic assessments. If they do not agree to the goals, district staff will mediate and resolve the goal setting. Teacher scoring is based on three components: instructional practice, professional values, and student performance. The first two are based on observations by administrators. The third one includes a standardized test, where applicable, and other measures, i.e. whether or not students achieve goals agreed upon by teachers and administrators at the beginning of the year. At the end of each year, all teachers will be assigned a rating that indicates their level of performance on a five point scale for each component. These individual component performance ratings will be synthesized to assign a final summative rating to each teacher.

### **Conclusions and considerations**

Although the SLO approach varies across states and districts in their specific details, the implementation process is similar in most, though not all States and school districts. Before the start of the school year, one or more SLOs are set by teachers, school administrators, or districts with appropriate assessment tools. In most states, SLOs and their corresponding assessment tools must be approved by states, districts, or schools. At the end of the year, teachers and their

evaluators assess student performance level based on SLOs and teachers are rated using pre-determined performance levels. Given the reviews on SLO approaches by state and district levels, it seems that states or districts need to address the challenge of ensuring rigorous and high quality of SLO process as they evaluate teachers' performance using SLOs.

One of the biggest issues in maintaining the quality of an SLO process depends on the quality of the measurement used to determine students' beginning performance level as well as end-of-year performance level. Many states and districts are fully aware of this. Some states identify a list of pre-approved assessments for districts or schools to measure students' performance or require districts or schools to go through an approval process on assessment by states. However, in some states, tests developed by an individual teacher or a group of teachers can be used to measure student's growth. In this case it is especially important that states or districts ensure the quality of the measurements.

Compared with the large amount of work put into the end-of-year performance measurement component of the SLO, many states and districts pay much less attention to measuring students' beginning performance level in these non-tested subject areas. In most cases, it is not clear how students' beginning performance level is to be determined. Even though some states recommend using multiple sources of evidences such as prior achievement test scores, grades, and classroom work, etc., determining students' beginning performance level is usually quite subjective. It is often not clear what data or assessment should be used to accurately assess a students' beginning performance level. Since SLOs that are based on a growth model require some measure of a students' prior assessment data, states and districts should ensure a high quality of measure at the beginning and the end. A helpful example of measuring students' beginning performance comes from Georgia. In Georgia, districts administer an assessment to measure students' beginning performance level and then use the results to develop SLOs.

Another issue is comparability. Even though the SLOs for each school and classroom are supposed to be aligned with State or District Standards, SLOs for the same course and the same grade may vary across schools. In addition, since the achievement level of an SLO set by teachers/administrators is based on an individual student's ability level, meeting the standard set by SLOs in one school may have a different meaning from that in other schools. Even within a school, teacher evaluation using SLOs may not be comparable across teachers because each teacher has a group of student with a different beginning level of learning. In these cases,

teacher's effectiveness measured on the SLOs may not be comparable across teachers and schools.

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