

What Makes a Goal “S.M.A.R.T.”?

Good goals help educators, schools, and districts improve. The S.M.A.R.T. goals framework is a useful tool that individuals and teams can use to create effective goals and action plans:

S = Specific and Strategic

M = Measurable

A = Action Oriented

R = Rigorous, Realistic and Results Focused (the 3 Rs)

T = Timed and Tracked

Goals with an action plan and benchmarks that have these characteristics are **S.M.A.R.T.**

A practical example some of us have experienced in our personal lives can make clear how this SMART goal framework can help turn hopes into actions that have results.

First, here is an example of not being S.M.A.R.T. with goals:

I will get in shape

Here is an example of getting S.M.A.R.T.er:

Between March 15 and Labor Day, I will be able to run a 5K in under 35 minutes.

The hope is now a goal that meets most of the S.M.A.R.T. framework criteria:

- Specific and Strategic = 5K, 35 minutes
- Measurable = distance
- Action Oriented = run
- Rigorous, Realistic, and Results Focused (the 3 Rs) = running time/distance
- Timed and Tracked = 6 months, under 35 minutes

S.M.A.R.T. enough?

To make the goal really S.M.A.R.T., though, add an action plan and benchmarks. These elements ensure that the goal meets the final criteria—timed and tracked. They also strengthen the other criteria, especially when the benchmarks include process benchmarks for tracking progress on the key actions and outcome benchmarks that track early evidence of change and/or progress toward the ultimate goal.

Key Actions:

- Walk 15 minutes 3x a week; increase time by five minutes a week for the next month.
- Months 2-4, run and walk in intervals 3x a week, increasing the proportion of time spent running instead of walking until able to run for 30 minutes without stopping.
- Month 5-6: Do training intervals and longer runs to increase lung capacity, speed, and endurance until 5K time is below 35 minutes.

Benchmarks:

- For process, a record of exercise.
- For outcome, biweekly running distance and time

S.M.A.R.T. goal statements with action plans and benchmarks will make a difference in schools.

S.M.A.R.T. Goals

S = Specific and Strategic. *What is the target subject area or competency of this goal? For whom?*

Goals need to be straightforward and clearly written, and specific enough to determine whether they have been achieved. A goal is strategic when it serves an important purpose of the school or district as a whole and when it addresses something that is likely to have a large impact on the overall implementation of ACP.

M = Measurable. *How will this goal be measured? Is there a tool?*

If it cannot be measured, it cannot be managed. What measures of quantity, quality, and/or impact will be used to determine whether the goal has been achieved? How will progress along the way be measured? Some benchmarks focus on the process, as in are we doing what we said we were going to do? Other benchmarks focus on the outcome, as in are we seeing early signs of progress toward the results?

A = Action Oriented. *Are there things that we can do to make this happen? What are they?*

Goals have active, not passive verbs. The action steps attached to the goals indicate who is doing what. Making clear the key actions required to achieve a goal helps everyone see how their part of the work is connected to other parts of the work and to a larger purpose. This knowledge helps people stay focused and energized rather than become fragmented and uncertain.

R = Rigorous, Realistic, and Results Focused (the 3 Rs). *Are we setting an ambitious goal that takes our school context into account? Will it benefit students?*

A goal is not an activity—a goal makes clear what will be different as a result of achieving the goal. A goal needs to stretch the school or district toward improvement, but it should not be out of reach. Goals set too high are discouraging, while goals set too low will leave a feeling of emptiness when they are accomplished and will not serve students well.

T = Timed and Tracked. *How will we know if we are on track to reach our goal? When will we measure our progress?*

A goal needs to have a deadline. Deadlines help everyone take action. For a goal to be accomplished, there should be definite times when key actions will be completed and benchmarks will be achieved. Tracking the progress made on action steps (process benchmarks) and outcomes helps educators know whether they are on track to achieve the goal and/or whether they have reached the goal. Benchmarks give educators a way to see progress and celebrate it. They also give educators information they need to make midcourse corrections.