

We're Doing Great Things!

By Cathy Lendosky

As I was first learning and growing as an instructional leader, I realized that, during an observation, I could learn a lot more about teaching and learning by keeping my eye on students, instead of the teacher. When I focused my lens on what students were doing, I was able to see the silent movie of a well-orchestrated symphony of students, protocols, teachers, space, and transitions working in perfect harmony. In contrast, sometimes what I saw felt more like a warm-up/tune-up time with 4th grade band instead of a well-orchestrated symphony. At the same time, I was learning more about the research on instructional best practices, student engagement, gradual release, student ownership, and cultural responsiveness. I felt so enlightened, I was seeing all of the pieces of teaching come together through watching the experience of our students. It felt like "Alleluia! Hope hath sprung eternal and I had such insights to offer my teachers. But why weren't teachers lined up down the hallways to have reflective and vulnerable conversations with me about these life changing insights?

I realized that I needed a new entry point. As I continued to learn and grow, my instructional leadership focus changed. The Instructional Core (complexity of the task/content, student agency and ownership, and teacher expertise) became my lens for every conversation. During some pre and post observation conferences, I became an Educational Yoda, in others I was still feeling like Darth Vader. But in the Educational Yoda universe, conversations about teaching and learning were rich and reflective. Teachers would stop me in the hallway or run into my office to tell me how excited they were about how well sentence stems worked or how long they increased their wait time and with it, the ability to let students grapple with content. Then there were those in the middle who wouldn't pick a side. But every once in a while, when I least expected it, I had Educational Yoda moments with them too and I felt that feeling of hope again!

Teacher by teacher, I worked the soil to grow a culture of reflective conversations around teaching and learning. Even as this happened Student Growth Goals were still a nagging, underdeveloped pathway to teacher and student growth. There were so many roadblocks (indifference, survival, distrust, CBA language, association messaging, flat out resistance to change) to having reflective conversations (with some, not all) teachers. I heard common inputs from across the district:

- "I just pick the same goal every year and change the dates."
- "Pick letter identification, they'll all make growth." (kindergarten)
- "Give the pre-assessment the first week of school. The lower they score, the more growth you'll see."
- "Growth is growth."

I had come to realize that Student Growth Goals (SGGs) had turned into a checkbox. When it came to goals-setting, teachers (many teachers, not all) were going through the motions and checking goals-setting off their list of a gazillion things to do. Then I found out that OSPI saw



this problem and was working to strengthen and revise the goal-setting process. They saw the goal-setting quagmire that was holding up meaningful conversations around student learning. This reignited my hope for meaningful change.

Moving to the district office, I found myself with broader spheres of influence and I was excited to find myself in conversations with folks at OSPI. Well.... I was mostly asking questions that they were answering, but eventually our talks became conversations. As the Revised Student Growth Goals took shape, our conversations became more hopeful and focused on reflection. In my excitement I invited building and district leaders to information sessions in the fall of 2021 and again in the fall of 2022. As a result, *three* teachers in *two* schools tried the initial revised goals on for size. Then, in 2022-23, nine teachers in one school practiced with these newly revised goals. The Principal and Assistant Principal in our practicing school joined Student Growth Goal Collaborative monthly meetings at the Puget Sound Education Service District with administrators across the state. A teacher, their principal, and I presented at the Statewide Student Growth Goal Colloquium and three of our teachers became Washington Education Association SGG trainers! We were respected by OSPI, CSTP and AWSP! We were doing great things!

We were doing great things, and I knew we could do more. So, in my third invite to an information session for building and district leadership in May of 2023 I rebranded my approach. I led with a stronger focus to *promote instructional practice that is culturally responsive, socially, and emotionally literate, and inclusive of each and every student. (Student Growth Goal Rubrics, OSPI)*. Surely, every administrator, building or district, wants to be instrumental in promoting instructional practice that is culturally responsive, socially, and emotionally literate, and inclusive of each and every student, right?! As most of the attendees at this session were building leaders, I created a leadership cohort inviting representation from teams throughout the district office and building leaders. Unfortunately, very few district office leaders attended. I thought, why weren't district leaders lined up down the hallways to get information about these life changing insights? I could feel my bubble of hope and positive expectations on the verge of bursting.

However, I am nothing if not persistent (also known as stubborn)! How do we get traction with our district leadership? I brought in the Washington Education Association to teach their SGG class in June, July, and again in August. This time ninety-three building administrators, teachers, and district staff registered. I felt like there's hope! We are doing great things!

Now, as I step back and write this reflection about our ongoing SGG journey, I do see the numbers of people coming to information sessions and training increasing over time. However, it's still not everyone. We have over 1300 teachers evaluated with TPEP, 102 buildings and 74 district administrators on our leadership team. At this rate, we are going to see an insurmountable bottleneck of needed PD in the summer of 2024.

Deep breath.... What have I learned? While the focus of this work is on teachers and building leaders, I believe that this work sits in the collective responsibility of our district. Our district leaders also need to understand, support, and own this work. Several teachers have used the Revised Student Growth Goals and feel that the process has breathed life into their work. The administrator that initially piloted the revised goals now has nine teachers using them and is a champion of the culturally relevant and reflective process. However, when I think of the best way to leverage my influence, maybe I need to keep inviting district leaders to the process but let go of how they do or do not respond to the invitations. Maybe my time and energy need to remain at the building level. Maybe this is a grassroots change in thinking. My mindset shifted to taking a strengths-based approach because it could lead to more momentum and a more authentic system change as that time approaches.

I keep coming back to something one of our piloting middle school teachers said, "This (SGG process) is going to make veteran teachers love teaching again." This quote anchors my belief that the Revised Student Growth Goals are a critical key to operationalizing equity in our classrooms. One teacher, one administrator, and one district office leader at a time, we ARE doing great things!

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. Teachers, especially beginning educators, must have the safety to be vulnerable learners to try new strategies and grow. Where in the vignette might there be opportunities to build relationships that support this type of safety?
2. The revised Student Growth Goal rubrics favor live conversation between teachers and principals/assistant principals over asynchronous communication. Recognizing that engaging in meaningful evaluation takes time, how can existing time (e.g., required evaluation conferences, teacher team time) be used for conversations and learning about student growth?
3. What else might the author have considered or done?
4. What are the ways in which this author could continue to engage other leaders?
5. Where do you see connections between the authors' learning and your district's plan around implementation of the new student growth goals?
6. What ideas are you taking away from this vignette?

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