

BREAKTHROUGHS IN PEDAGOGY

by MISSY DIRKS



Unpacking an SLO

Welcome to Breakthroughs in Pedagogy, ActionLine's new series written by members to improve and deepen educators' understanding of practice-related issues.

Student learning objectives (SLOs) are now required of educators in every county as part of the teacher–principal evaluation process. MSEA's commitment to supporting educators' success with SLOs includes membership in a national consortium of NEA state affiliates working to develop, refine, and share best practices to make the SLO process more meaningful than simply compliance. Guest writer Missy Dirks is a member of the team representing Maryland.

FIRST STEPS: ASSESSING DATA AND STUDENT NEEDS

I start with the class curriculum I'll be using for my SLO. I look for "power standards," a standard that encourages continued learning in my subject or one that other standards build onto later. I also look for trend data, if it exists. I value collaborating with my colleagues to discover if the data reveals areas of weakness that we should highlight as a concern. Then I look at baseline data to build my target group. This data can be a common assessment or a performance-based assignment that lets me know where my students are currently in understanding the standard.

CONSIDERING STRATEGIES AND RESOURCES

I review how I've taught the concept in the past and research what's available from my district and school. Fellow teachers are often my best resources and talking with them about their own strategies and resources is collaboration at its best. I study the level at which my students are currently achieving, knowing that I may need to go back to resources for earlier grades to help me fill in the gaps of their baseline understanding. When I'm working with a group of high achievers, I may need to research other or additional resources to accelerate their program.



SLOs
MEASURE
GROWTH

MID-PROCESS: ADJUSTMENTS AND MODIFICATIONS

I include multiple points where I can assess how the learning process is unfolding. Depending on the standard it may be a performance assessment, a classroom assignment, a discussion process, or more standardized pen and paper formatives. If students are progressing more quickly than anticipated, or all students are hitting my target before the midway point, I adjust my targets higher as I may have underestimated their growth. If students aren't making progress that will get them to my original targets, I reevaluate my plan for the remainder of the SLO interval. I look to see if I can isolate a specific part of the standard that the students are having trouble with so I can be strategic about adjustments. If I need help, I look to other teacher specialists or content experts.

WORKING WITH AN ADMINISTRATOR

When an SLO really focuses on teaching and learning, adjustments frequently need to be made. That's why our district has a mid-SLO conference between teacher and administrator built in to our schedules.

Research has shown that when an SLO is static it is not nearly as effective as one that is studied throughout the interval. Students are all different individuals, so even the best researched plan will need adjustment. When I go to my administrator for the mid-SLO conference, I bring artifacts that show where my students are and a plan or ideas for what I believe needs to be adjusted. Together we look at the new plan and, if proposed, new targets. If the mid-SLO conference has passed and something needs to be adjusted, I request an additional conference with my administrator.

SLO PROCESS ON INSTRUCTION AND PRACTICE

Sometimes district or state data is simply too global to pinpoint where students are having problems and if you're looking at a standard in a year-long or semester-long course it's hard to see how a specific strategy or resource is helping or hindering student progress. The SLO process provides focused and specific feedback on student understanding. Since an SLO is a narrowly focused snapshot of student learning, it is easier to use the SLO data to drive instruction.



Missy Dirks is a member of MSEA's SLO Cadre and newly elected president of the Frederick County Teachers Association. There are two MSEA SLO Cadre representatives in every county who are available to share their expertise with colleagues, administrators, and parents. Contact your local association for more information.

**SLOS ARE
COMMON
CORE-BASED**