

# SMART PARTNERS

TEXAS DISTRICT TRANSFORMS LEARNING THROUGH GOALS AND COLLABORATION

By Rick Albritton, Terry Morganti-Fisher, Jan O’Neill, and Sigrid Yates

Four years ago, Gilmer (Texas) Independent School District Superintendent Rick Albritton saw a pressing need. A rural district with 65% poverty, Gilmer was known for producing students who excelled in extracurricular activities but did not do as well academically. A year earlier, in an effort to encourage teachers to work together and to provide time for the many district and campus initiatives, the district provided teachers with 50 minutes of planning time daily in addition to 45-minute conference periods — a costly investment. But teachers didn’t use the time effectively because they didn’t know how to work collaboratively. Albritton was determined to change that. “I didn’t exactly know how, but I knew I had to find an answer,” he said.

Albritton’s quest took him to an institute by Anne Conzemius and Jan O’Neill, co-founders of QLD and co-authors of *The Handbook for SMART School Teams* (Solution Tree, 2002) and *The Power of SMART Goals* (Solution Tree, 2005). Albritton discovered QLD’s “turbo” meeting skills, which seemed to provide an answer for better use of planning time.



Photo by JAN O’NEILL

Vanessa Lowrey moves cards representing third graders through zones. The Gilmer, Texas, teacher has since moved to another district.

With Albritton’s encouragement, curriculum director Sigrid Yates led a district team to the institute, where she discovered two concepts that seemed even more critical than meeting skills:

- “Initiativitis,” which O’Neill describes as “everyone working very hard on multiple initiatives, spending lots of time in professional development, but failing to get desired results”; and
- Tracking students’ progress on SMART goals using color-coded zones.

“We had provided hours and hours of staff development,” Yates said. “All of those professional development plates were spinning, and we were working hard to keep them from falling. That was our problem. We lacked the structure to focus professional development, and we had failed to give teachers time to implement. We were expecting the impossible from our teachers and ourselves.”

Yates understood that writing a SMART goal was not enough to improve achievement, but when she saw QLD’s system for monitoring progress, everything came together. Yates and her team learned that the SMART goals process goes far beyond improving collaboration time. Ultimately, it builds shared responsibility for student learning at the student level.

Albritton and Yates saw that they needed a solution that aligned with Gilmer’s continuous improvement philosophy, and, just as important, that would not be just one more attempt at systemic change. “We knew we couldn’t do it all,” Yates said. “And we wanted a partner who would help us build capacity. QLD seemed to fit our needs.”

After deep dialogue with Albritton, Yates, and others in the district, the QLD team saw that, in addition to aligned and updated curriculum, formative assessments, and collaboration time, a number of intangible success factors were also already in place:

- A cohesive board with a shared vision of excellence whose members trusted Albritton and Yates;
- A seasoned curriculum director (Yates) who was knowledgeable about Learning Forward’s standards, Texas standards, and assessment policies and best instructional practices; and
- An instructionally focused superintendent (Albritton) who understood the difficulty of accomplishing deep systemic change.

Gilmer and QLD agreed that the primary goal was to build leadership capacity so that when QLD left, the SMART goals process would be so embedded in Gilmer’s culture it would be “the way we do things around here.” Structures, systems, and



A 7th-grade Gilmer student sets goals in math.

policies would support ongoing implementation and monitoring. Gilmer’s administrators, principals, and teachers would own the change.

The district and QLD saw the need for a multiyear, collaborative partnership built on openness and candor. It was important for those in the district to understand that QLD’s consultants weren’t coming in as experts who would be solely responsible for planning and implementation. Nor would they be just another set of hands responsible for implementing activities the district planned. Rather, their role would be collaborative, as Peter Block (1981) describes: “The key assumption underlying the collaborative role is that the [client] must be actively involved in data gathering and analysis, in setting goals and developing action plans, and finally, in sharing responsibility for success or failure” (p. 21).

Early on, the relationship was a challenge for teachers and principals. However, as elementary principal Connie Isabell noted, “We had to figure it out. We had to roll up our sleeves. And because of that, we had ownership over what we discovered.”

A strong partnership between district and consultant is based on trust, which grows over time. A respectful communication style was key to building and maintaining trust. QLD’s consultants were careful to frame their comments as suggestions, e.g. “This is just an outsider’s perspective, but have you considered...?” The QLD team also built trust by validating prior knowledge, listening without defensiveness, and adjust-

### GETTING SMART ABOUT GOAL SETTING

QLD defined the SMART goal concept for educators using these words.

**S=Specific and strategic**

**M=Measurable**

**A=Attainable**

**R=Results-based**

**T=Time-bound**

Learn more about the process and find useful templates and tools in the November/December 2007 issue of *Tools for Schools*, available at [www.learningforward.org/news/issueDetails.cfm?issueID=219](http://www.learningforward.org/news/issueDetails.cfm?issueID=219).

Year	Campus	Campus ratings
<b>2005-06</b>	Elementary Intermediate Junior high High school	All acceptable
<b>2006-07</b> First year Gilmer ISD experimented with SMART goals on its own	Elementary Intermediate Junior high High school	Unacceptable Recognized Acceptable Acceptable
<b>2007-08</b> First year of contract with QLD	Elementary Intermediate Junior high High school	Recognized Acceptable Acceptable Acceptable
<b>2008-09</b> Second year of contract with QLD	Elementary Intermediate Junior high High school	Recognized Acceptable Acceptable (missed Recognized by 2 students and 2 questions) Acceptable (missed Recognized by 1 student)
<b>2009-10</b> Third year of contract with QLD	Elementary Intermediate Junior high High school	Recognized (anticipated, based on scores) Acceptable (anticipated, based on scores) Recognized (anticipated, based on scores) Exemplary (anticipated, based on scores)

ing plans to fit Gilmer's needs. For example, the junior high school had begun implementing the SMART goals process the previous year and had learned important lessons along the way. QLD welcomed their voices and adjusted learning and coaching to match where they were on the journey.

Some of the most powerful trust building came through the work of the steering committee, composed of central office administrators, principals, and teachers. Meeting four times a year and facilitated by QLD's Terry Morganti-Fisher, the committee monitored and guided implementation and recommended adjustments to the system. The steering committee used QLD's multifaceted SMART Solution Measurement System to evaluate implementation data on process, leadership capacity, and student results. Because the committee consisted of those responsible for implementing the process at the school level, a collective responsibility for districtwide implementation emerged. For example, the steering committee responded when it was discovered that items on the district benchmark assessments weren't measuring what was needed to monitor progress on a SMART goal. The items were immediately revised. Such highly responsive actions went a long way toward building trust throughout the district.

The most important trust builder was the success of the SMART goals process. During the first year, student results

### RESULTS BRING TRUST IN PROCESS

When at-risk students began coming to school motivated learn, and bored high achievers began to re-engage and refocus, Gilmer's teachers and administrators truly began to trust the SMART goals process.

The Texas Education Agency, Texas' state education department, rates schools and districts as unacceptable, acceptable, recognized, or exemplary. Eighty percent or more of every student subpopulation must meet standards in every subject area and at every grade level for a campus to be recognized, 90% must meet standards to be exemplary. From a capacity-building perspective, seeing the positive results from the SMART goals process (summarized in the table above) was a powerful motivator for teachers, administrators, and board members.

improved on all campuses. The real breakthrough began in the second year and deepened in the third year as students began analyzing their own data, setting and monitoring their own SMART goals and adjusting their strategies to increase the rate of progress.

In alignment with Learning Forward's standards, QLD

focused professional learning support on ongoing implementation. Yates and Albritton attended every learning session so that they could provide knowledgeable support related to organization and instruction. Their participation was critical, signaling to the organization that this is most important.

Learning sessions were held on-site and focused on building capacity of school leadership teams (principals and teachers) to lead the SMART goals process on their campuses. Each session was followed by on-site and virtual coaching, guided by an evidence-based rubric that informed the team and QLD coach about where the campus was in the process and where it needed to go next. Leadership teams learned how to establish a strategic focus by analyzing their school data to determine the greatest area of need to be addressed by their SMART goals. Teams learned protocols for identifying the most promising instructional practices in alignment with their SMART goals and adopted processes for engaging teachers in deciding how to learn those practices. They also learned how to track student progress on their SMART goals by using zone analysis, positioning students in one of four zones after each assessment, then sharing the results with students so they could set their own goals.

Capacity building and progress monitoring extended to the board. The board of trustees and administrators met annually with O'Neill and Morganti-Fisher to review their return on investment through the lens of QLD's SMART Solution Measurement System evaluation tool. The group could see that the SMART goals process was responsible for teachers improving their professional practice. By the end of the third year, it was also clear that the process was becoming institutionalized.

At the campus level, professional learning was ongoing as daily teacher-led team meetings focused on which students needed help, which students needed to be more challenged, and how teachers could help each other. "We're all listening to new strategies and figuring out together how we'll use them in our classrooms," said veteran teacher Penny Wise. "And now we all share between disciplines. If I find something that's working, I share it now. It's no longer about my kids, or those kids — it's about our kids."

Classroom teachers began reporting that students who had never experienced success at school were now focused, engaged, motivated, and willing to keep trying to achieve their learning goals. Teachers experienced the same excitement. Greg Watson, the high school principal, said, "Goal setting is just the normal way we do business now."

Building capacity was always the goal, and involving everyone in the process helped achieve systemic change. During the third year, QLD consultants trained six internal coaches to continue supporting the SMART goals process. There are structures, resources, processes, and systems in place to sustain and leverage the professional learning QLD brought to the district. Now Gilmer ISD is fully equipped to continue the process.

The steering committee, with new members, has been renamed the 2010 Team. The 2010 Team continues to ensure focused implementation throughout the district, meeting quarterly, listening to teachers and principals, adjusting support as needed. The team will use the SMART Solution Measurement System to measure depth and breadth of implementation, and meet annually with the board of trustees and administrators to share results. Team members will continue to build their knowledge of continuous improvement by applying the tools from *The Handbook for SMART School Teams*. The district has hired a principal who retired this year to coach the campuses and work with the six internal coaches. A new principal will learn the SMART goals process by attending training outside the district.

Based on feedback from new and veteran teachers, new teacher orientation is being redesigned to cover less but go deeper into SMART goals and progress monitoring. Teacher teams will then be responsible for their professional learning during the year, as they meet to formulate goals, monitor progress on the zones, and adjust strategies. Principals will meet with their teachers to help develop professional learning goals and plans based on their specific student needs. Board members have officially renewed their commitment to support the process. When it's time to bring on new members, the board will actively support candidates who share their vision and commitment. While there will inevitably be changes at all levels, a core belief system has been fully developed to sustain the process.

Gilmer board member Jeff Rash says, "Results look phenomenal. Not only do we have state-of-the-art facilities, we now have a great academic program. All the best teachers want to work where they're appreciated and recognized for their work, where they have good facilities and great success, where they're not frustrated all the time. Our academic success is going to help our recruiting. Now we'll get to pick from the cream of the crop. That helps sustain this process for generations to come."

## REFERENCES

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