Shifting the Mindset Around Setting Goals

As MDE was conducting listening sessions about the process in ASSIST prior to building MICIP, one of the major complaints was the size of the plans. Depending on the size of the district, these could approach one hundred or more pages. When districts and schools were first required to use ASSIST for their continuous improvement plans, goals were typically focused on academic achievement.

At one time, plans required goals in all five academic areas, with each goal also having multiple objectives, including separate objectives for every student group (at that time called subgroups). Eventually ASSIST also accommodated goals in culture and climate and other related areas.
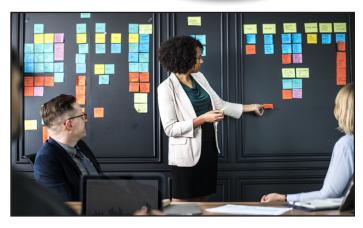
Due to the number of goals and objectives, it became virtually impossible to monitor all the associated strategies and activities, one reason those plans frequently did not achieve their objectives. Research also showed that, while there were frequently many actions identified in the plans, what was missing were the systems to support those actions.

Enter MICIP: Systems Goals

One of the major ideas behind MICIP is to write goals at a higher level, including at the systems level, to address identified challenges or opportunities for growth. This also requires engaging in a rigorous root cause analysis process to ensure that goals are written to address the actual "why" of the data and not just the "what." It's conceivable that one "why" might address a number of "whats."

So what might that look like in practice?

Let's assume a district previously had separate achievement goals for multiple content areas. Might the root cause process indicate an instructional system issue or a possible curriculum system issue that, if addressed, could impact achievement in

multiple content areas? If some differentiation is needed, might the district identify separate end impact targets in the various content areas?

Suppose a district has five goals around writing a guaranteed and viable curriculum in five different content areas. Might the district synthesize the five goals into one by addressing them as a curriculum systems issue, with differentiated strategies and/or activities for the various content areas, if needed?

Similarly, a district had goals around behavior, attendance, and tardiness. After using both the fishbone and five whys to conduct root cause analysis, the district discovered that the "why" ended up being a system issue around student support. Writing a goal to address this broader idea with differentiated strategies not only impacted behavior, attendance, and tardiness, but it improved the entire student support system and ended up positively impacting student achievement.

Because of its design, MICIP also encourages a systems approach across grade levels.

A district found that it did not have a consistent process for monitoring. Root cause analysis indicated the lack of aligned assessments. Rather than writing goals targeting each assessment or each grade span, the district wrote one goal around building a coherent assessment/data system and applied it across multiple levels.

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Finally, as a district looks at the role that supporting systems play – e.g., transportation, food service, building and grounds, finance, etc., - it's important to remember that these systems are not ends in themselves; in the end, they are in place to support students and student achievement. E.g., Might improving transportation be addressed to support student attendance? Rather than those systems having their own goals, it might be possible to include their improvement as strategies or activities under systems goals that are more directly tied to instruction.

In many instances, it may be true that less is more.

Better to focus on a few goals that are manageable than on many goals that are not. Not everything a district is addressing needs to be part of a continuous improvement plan.

Simply writing goals at a systems level does not guarantee that all challenges will be solved or opportunities for growth will be met. However, doing so does increase the chances that the continuous improvement plan will be more manageable and will allow the necessary time for monitoring and adjusting, and these are practices that eventually should help lead to more positive outcomes.