

# Effective Goal Monitoring

## ABOUT GOAL MONITORING

### What is Goal Monitoring?

Too often in public education, leaders do not pay attention to what's working and what's not working. The result can be a revolving door of initiatives / programs / silver bullets that drain resources, frustrate staff, and fail students. Breaking this cycle requires having clearly agreed upon data, a predictable cadence of reviewing the data to see what's working/not working, and the expectation that this information impacts what happens next. This is the purpose of monitoring. (see [Effective Information Requests](#))

Goal monitoring is a conversation between the board and superintendent that provides boards the opportunity to evaluate the alignment between the community's vision for student outcomes (goals) and current student performance/growth (reality). While goals and reality may not match perfectly, it only becomes problematic when there is no evidence of student growth. And even if students aren't yet growing and making progress, that's only catastrophic if the superintendent doesn't have sufficiently aggressive strategies in place for helping students make progress.

### How is Goal Monitoring beneficial?

In addition to clarifying student and superintendent performance, monitoring -- when done effectively -- confers several other organizational benefits:

- **Lead by Example:** What happens in the boardroom is more likely to be echoed in the classroom. Board behavior sets the culture for an institution. If board members want a culture where teachers are open and reflective in their craft, they set the stage for that by demonstrating what it looks like for the board and superintendent to be open and reflective -- grounded in student outcomes data -- in their craft as well.
- **Clarify Strategies:** When the board receives monitoring reports from the superintendent, the report should be at a 6th grade level and include how the superintendent will respond to the data. If the data says things are slightly off track, the superintendent's strategy should reflect that. If the data says that performance is completely off track, the superintendent's strategy should reflect the urgency that the current reality demands.
- **Communicate Expectations:** By investing at least 50% of the board's time each month into monitoring progress toward the vision, the board makes clear what the priorities of the entire organization are expected to be. This is a powerful tool for creating organizational alignment.
- **Superintendent Evaluation:** With each monitoring report the board is conducting a micro assessment of superintendent performance which creates an opportunity for the superintendent to make adjustments. As a continuous improvement strategy, providing this regularly recurring feedback loop is a superior approach to the outdated concept of merely conducting annual performance evaluations.

## BEFORE GOAL MONITORING

Once SMART goals about student outcomes have been adopted, effective goal monitoring requires four main ingredients: monitoring calendar, monitoring report, superintendent participation, and board member participation.

### Effective Monitoring Calendars

Before boards can begin effective monitoring, they should adopt a 36-60 month schedule that describes which goals will be monitored during which month. The board will typically have the superintendent draft a calendar since the administration knows when student performance data is freshly available throughout the year. Nevertheless, it remains the board's monitoring calendar, not the superintendents. Qualities to look for include:

- It should span the entire length of the goals -- if the goals are five year long, the calendar should be five years long as well
- It should include all of the board's goals and guardrails
- It often includes all board trainings, board-led community trainings, board-led community listenings, board self evaluations, board-led superintendent evaluations, and statutory votes
- It should schedule each goal to be monitored at least four times throughout the year, and each guardrail at least one time per year (on 12 month cal)
- It should schedule one or two interim goals to be monitored each month, no less and definitely no more than three
- It can schedule as many interim guardrails to be monitored during a month as the board wants
- It should never suggest that goal monitoring reports be placed on the consent agenda, but guardrail monitoring reports may be on consent
- It should clarify that boards will monitor goals during every month of the year that the board meets

## Effective Monitoring Reports

Here are four qualities to ask about the 1-5 page monitoring report before the board can begin progress monitoring (if the answer to any of these is “no”, hand the report back to the Superintendent and have them complete it before proceeding -- likely at the next regularly scheduled board meeting):

1. **The Goal:** Does it clearly show which specific goal / interim goal is being monitored?
2. **The Data:** Does it clearly show data for the 3 previous reporting periods (preferably on a line graph)? Does it clearly show the current reporting period? Does it clearly show the target reporting periods (annual targets and deadline target)?
3. **The Interpretation:** Does it clearly show the Superintendent’s understanding of system performance relative to the goal?
4. **The Evidence & Plan:** Does it clearly show supporting documentation that evidences the Superintendent’s understanding of system performance? If the school system is not at target or the Superintendent’s understanding of system performance indicates implementation is not on track, does the monitoring report clearly describe systemic root causes, strategic responses (including rationale), and any needed next steps?

## Effective Superintendent Participation

How superintendents show up in the monitoring conversation has a huge impact on the conversation’s effectiveness. A few guidelines include:

- **Don’t Hide the Data:** The student performance data being presented during the monitoring conversation should be easy for most parents to understand. As such, monitoring reports should be only 1-5 pages at most, and should be written at no more than an 6th grade reading level.
- **Don’t Sugar Coat the Data:** The data is the data. Whatever it says is what it says -- good, bad, or ugly. Never suggest that the data is saying anything other than what you believe it to be saying. If the school system is off track, say that; don’t talk around that. Sugarcoating loses trust.
- **Align Monitoring with Managerial Action:** Data in monitoring report should reflect what staff are looking at to gauge the district’s effectiveness. There should be no need to create data for a monitoring session that isn’t otherwise being considered by the superintendent and cabinet.
- **Be Prepared:** Many superintendents rehearse for monitoring conversations by having their teams throw every conceivable question at them before the board meeting. This is a wise practice not only because it helps with the monitoring conversation but because it can help surface managerial issues and solutions that might not otherwise come up.
- **Don’t Be Defensive:** If the student performance data is disappointing, then it’s natural that board members would be disappointed. Unfortunately, not all of them will manage their disappointment in a mature, adult, and effective manner. Even if this happens, don’t get defensive.

## Effective Board Member Participation

Goal monitoring, like board governance in general, is not always intuitive. It is easy to inadvertently conduct monitoring in an ineffective manner. Here are a few guidelines to follow to increase the likelihood of effectiveness:

- **Do Your Homework:** Board members should arrive at board meetings having already read the monitoring report, having already shared technical and tactical questions with the superintendent, and having already come up with at least three or four [SMART Questions](#) each regarding the monitoring report (see *During Goal Monitoring* below).
- **Understanding Reality:** The desired result of monitoring is to understand the current reality for your students as compared to the vision you’ve adopted for them (goals). Whether you enjoy the current reality isn’t the point of monitoring; whether or not you fully know the current reality is.
- **Keep the Conversation Going:** If the superintendent presents a monitoring report that is missing the prerequisites (see *Before Goal Monitoring* above) or that fails to clarify for board members the extent to which reality matches the goals, consider tabling the conversation and giving the superintendent a chance to fix it and re-offer it at a subsequent meeting, instead of choosing not to accept it and ending the discussion.
- **No Gotcha Governance:** Adopt a monitoring calendar that shows which goals will be monitored during which months and that spans the full term of the goals -- for five year goals, the calendar should be five years. Then ensure board members adhere to the monitoring conversation rubric below.
- **Don’t Offer Advice:** Monitoring is never an opportunity for board members to provide advice to the superintendent regarding what should/shouldn’t be done about student outcomes. It’s also not about liking/not liking the superintendent’s strategies.

## DURING GOAL MONITORING

Monitoring is about understanding the extent to which reality matches the Board’s adopted goals / interim goals. Monitoring is never about offering advice or recommendations; most of monitoring is about understanding where we are and how we got here. The Board’s attention is focused on what’s true for students, not on what adults are/aren’t doing. Here are observations to look for / questions to ask that support effective progress monitoring. Notice that

none of these questions offer advice concerning which inputs/outputs the Superintendent should select; these are SMART monitoring questions, not managing questions. (see [Effective Question Asking](#))

Current Performance Questions			Future Performance Questions
What do we know about the students mentioned in the report?	What do we know about the data mentioned in the report?	What do we know about the root cause of the student data in the report?	What adult behaviors need to change in response to the student data?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who is struggling the most?</li> <li>• Who is growing the most?</li> <li>• Who is not moving?</li> <li>• Which students are not included in this data?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is currently happening?</li> <li>• What else do we need to know about this?</li> <li>• How and what did we learn?</li> <li>• What are the strengths?</li> <li>• What are the limitations?</li> <li>• Where do gaps exist between student groups?</li> <li>• What's working? Not working?</li> <li>• What do you see as accounting for &lt;anomalous data in report&gt;?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why is it working in this area?</li> <li>• Why is it not working in this area?</li> <li>• How did we learn about this issue?</li> <li>• Why such significant growth?</li> <li>• Why was there no growth?</li> <li>• What do we need to know about?</li> <li>• Why do gaps between student groups exist?</li> <li>• Why is &lt;data point a&gt; so much &lt;higher or lower&gt; than &lt;data point b&gt;?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can we replicate what is happening in ___?</li> <li>• Given what we know about __, what are you going to do to speed up the progress?</li> <li>• What evidence suggests that your new strategy is going to work?</li> <li>• How are we going to address ___ (issue not resolved)?</li> <li>• How might changes show up in the future (budget, etc.)?</li> <li>• How can the board help?</li> </ul>

### Ineffective Questions

- Any statements or questions that are really just board member opinions or recommendations about what the superintendent should do
- Any statements or questions that don't reference the data mentioned in the monitoring report.
- Any statements or questions that aren't actually questions but that are just statements or opinions
- Any statements or questions about what will happen next that aren't grounded in previously asked questions about where students currently are and how students got there

## AFTER GOAL MONITORING

### To Accept the Monitoring Report or Not?

Once the board has completed the monitoring conversation, it must choose whether to accept or not accept the report based on three questions: 1) does reality match the vision, 2) is there growth toward the vision, and 3) is there a strategy and plan sufficient to cause growth toward the vision?

- If the answer to all three is yes, then the board can accept the monitoring report confident that data is accurate & the superintendent is performing.
- If the answer to only one or two of these questions is yes, the board may opt to table the matter (see *Keep the Conversation Going* above).
- If the answer to all three is no, the board should consider voting to not accept the report. Note: This vote informs the superintendent that they have failed to meet the expectations of monitoring.

### To Change Goals or Not?

Once the board has completed the monitoring conversation, it's also appropriate -- though not required -- to ask whether or not the goal is still an appropriate representation of the community's vision for what students should know and be able to do. This inquiry should not be taken lightly; goal monitoring is most effective when the goals only change after their term has expired or they are accomplished. Frequently changing goals makes it almost impossible to adequately assess superintendent performance and to avoid wasting school system resources. If the board believes that the goal is no longer appropriate, it should create a plan to start the board-led community listening process over again and then begin the community listening process from scratch. Because goals represent the vision of the community, no new goals should be adopted without first going through this process.

