

# Ideas *for* NYC Principals

*A Step-by-Step Approach to Setting Schoolwide Goals  
at DreamYard Preparatory School, 2012–15*

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**Supported by:**

New York City Department of Education  
Office of Instructional Policy

August 2015

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## Executive Summary

**Background: A Three-Year Study of the Citywide Instructional Expectations.** From 2012 to 2015, Eskolta School Research and Design (Eskolta) worked with the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) to develop case studies to explore how the Citywide Instructional Expectations (CIE) impact school leaders, teaching and learning, and, ultimately, student achievement in a set of New York City schools.

**This publication is designed to help principals reflect on their own approach to meeting district-level expectations in their schools through an exploration of the work of DreamYard Preparatory School.**

DreamYard Prep serves 345 students in the Claremont Village section of the Bronx. Virtually 100 percent of these students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. With a large population of recent immigrants from the Dominican Republic, one of every four DreamYard students is classified as an English Language Learner; one out of five receives special-education services. Eskolta’s research suggests that the school’s ability to adopt and adapt to the city’s expectations is accomplished largely through the school’s process for setting schoolwide goals that create a coherent vision.

**The Evolution of Goal Setting at DreamYard Prep.** In the 2012–13 year, Alicia Wargo began serving as principal of DreamYard Prep. This year marked the beginning of the evolution of a collaborative and inclusive process for staff and leadership to define the school’s goals. Over the course of the year, the goal of “relentlessness” imbued the work of the school from staff meetings to classroom expectations. In the 2013–14 year, a goal of “life readiness” built upon the previous year’s work and brought a sharp focus on literacy skills. Rigorous “life readiness” tasks asked students to engage in more and deeper reading and writing. In the 2014–15 year, the goal-setting process asked every teacher in the school to follow a student for a day to more thoroughly understand their experience and use the experience to guide the work of the next year.

**A Step-by-Step Approach to Goal Setting at DreamYard Prep.** While the approach taken at DreamYard Prep will not be appropriate for every school, five key steps appeared central to the establishment of a guiding and coherent vision. The process begins in May of each year when all staff are involved in collecting and comparing data to understand students. In an all-staff professional development (PD) day in June, staff meet to offer suggestions for school goals. The summer begins with the principal generating and sharing a draft of ideas that is concise and thoughtfully aligned to school goals. The summer ends with the principal turning this draft into a PD calendar that clearly shows alignment to schoolwide goals. The final and key step that emerged from the study is one of continually revisiting goals by incorporating them into agendas and tools for staff discussions across the year.

**The guide at the end of this study delves further into these steps to help other New York City principals consider their own approaches to schoolwide goal-setting.** School leaders can use the guiding questions below as they consider how these steps relate to their own experience and inform their planning:

- What structures/practices do you already have in place that can enable powerful goal setting?
- How do you currently engage in goal setting at your school? What schoolwide vision brings your staff together?
- How might you adapt these steps to meet your school’s needs? What ideas do you have to adapt DreamYard’s work? What ideas do you have to build upon it?
- DreamYard experienced success building a collaborative, trusting culture but continues to work toward improving student outcomes. In what ways have challenges at your school been similar?

## Background: A Three-Year Study of Citywide Instructional Expectations

The Citywide Instructional Expectations (CIE) consist of a set of policy recommendations released by the NYCDOE for schools to support students' academic and social-emotional growth and college and career readiness. Over the three years of this study, the CIE focused in large part on introducing the Common Core Learning Standards and the use of the Danielson *Framework for Teaching*. The challenge of translating district-level expectations into school-level change, however, is not an easy one and was achieved with varying degrees of efficacy at schools studied.

From 2012 to 2015, Eskolta conducted interviews and focus groups with staff at DreamYard, documenting as the school's work evolved through three rounds of CIE. This research suggested that a culture of trust, collaboration, and clear vision helped the school integrate the City's expectations meaningfully into educators' practice. **This school's process for collaboratively setting schoolwide goals played a significant role in achieving coherence.**

**The effects of this coherent vision are evident throughout the years of study.** For example, during the 2013–14 year, the school's goals included an emphasis on using annotation as a strategy to improve student literacy. Rather than existing solely as a goal on paper, however, an observer could see teachers emphasizing annotation in virtually every classroom in the school. A tenth-grade teacher interviewed that year explained, "Across the board, we're all using the same strategy—so there's no mystery. Kids have that resource to use all the time." Reviews of student work provided evidence of student annotation that suggested deeper engagement with text. "We use annotation in every class," a student noted. "When I read, I now look at the question first and annotate what's supposed to be there so when I get to answering the question I know." **As in many areas of the school's work, a line could be traced from the coherent and transparent goals set by the school to the deeper engagement and learning experienced by students.**

Similarly, DreamYard's results from the 2013–14 NYCDOE School Survey provide a window into the school's strength. **Fully 100 percent of surveyed teachers indicated both that they spend time on teacher teams working on instructional practice and that the principal communicates a clear vision.** This coherent vision also translates to a strong culture of trust, as reported by 96 percent of teachers. Nonetheless, the school continues to work at setting goals to improve results to better serve its students.

*Ideas for NYC Principals: A Step-by-Step Approach to Setting Schoolwide Goals at DreamYard Preparatory School, 2012–15* provides an overview of the school's evolving practice in the context of the CIE and connects this approach to a tool based on the school's work. It is intended for other principals to consider how they might approach schoolwide goal setting with their staff.

## The Evolution of Goal Setting at DreamYard Prep

### 2012–2013: Defining a goal that brings the school together

“Relentless.” A visitor to DreamYard Preparatory School in 2012 would first encounter the word on posters on the walls. Then on shirts worn by students. Then on the agenda for staff professional development. Then in lesson plans and student goals. A word repeated not just for show. A word that permeated the lifeblood of the school. A word that captured DreamYard’s first set of schoolwide goals established under the leadership of their new principal, Alicia Wargo.

The 2012–13 year began with a new set of goals that Ms. Wargo worked closely with her staff to create through discussions the prior spring. Out of this work, they established a clear, simple focus for the school: “Being Relentless.” In synthesizing thoughts from her teachers, Ms. Wargo outlined two guiding questions for the school: (1) *How can DreamYard leverage its core value of character to increase student achievement?* and (2) *How can DreamYard increase rigor without leaving students behind?*

In 2012–13, New York City’s Citywide Instructional Expectations (CIE) asked all schools to introduce specific Common Core standards and specific components of the Danielson Framework. Recognizing that her staff’s articulation of relentlessness as a core value tied directly to these expectations, Ms. Wargo integrated two specific instructional foci into the school’s vision: (1) *developing higher-order questions* and (2) *helping students explain their thinking*.

While the content of these goals was important, the process by which they were developed was equally important. One teacher commented, “[The principal] doesn’t make goals herself. We’re a community, and so we make decisions as a community. We gather data, we read books, and we come up with school goals together. What [the principal] does is formalize them with respect to language. But the meat and potatoes is what we come up with during staff meetings.” Another noted, “Goals are always communicated in June prior to the summer and then again in September. We brainstorm ideas during meetings, usually PD [professional development] sessions and department meetings. We all collectively take notes and annotate those notes, and then we use those to create our school goals. Staff weighs in on developing them, and we are constantly revisiting them.”

Having been deeply involved in generating the goal of “relentlessness,” teachers showed evidence of being authentically invested in the Common Core standards they had connected to this goal. Although the City had just begun introducing the Common Core standards in 2012–13, one social studies teacher explained, “I’d say that ninety percent of what I do is Common Core. I don’t have a Common Core unit, I have a Common Core curriculum.”

Requirements from the school’s administration (e.g., all units should be structured with a guiding question and opportunities to demonstrate critical thinking) were described by teachers not as mandates but as supports for high quality instruction. Students were provided packets including content, short-answer questions, and opportunities to demonstrate what they knew, while teachers were expected to

“ [The principal] doesn’t make goals herself. We’re a community, and so we make decisions as a community. We gather data, we read books, and we come up with school goals together. ”

ask students to annotate and support their ideas with evidence. This lesson format could be seen on the walls of a ninth-grade Living Environment class:

*BRAINBUSTER: What do you think mutation means?*

*OBJECTIVE: SWBAT: Analyze the effects of mutations*

*GUIDING QUESTION: How can mutations be beneficial?*

*(Note: SWBAT = Students Will Be Able To)*

### **2013–2014: A goal of life readiness draws a sharp focus on literacy skills**

The 2013–14 year at DreamYard began with a schoolwide assessment of literacy skills, the results of which were then shared with students through conversations with their advisors. This effort to collect data on reading levels was driven by the school’s latest iteration of schoolwide goals. In conversations at the end of the 2012–13 year, building on the emphasis on college and career readiness in the district’s 2013–14 CIE, the staff had identified being “life ready” as their new overarching goal for their students. While the school’s central goal shifted from “relentlessness” to “life readiness,” the principal was careful to build intentionally upon the previous goal, rather than simply discard the old. “It’s so easy if you’re a principal to shift your goals in response to ever-changing expectations, but I don’t,” she explained. “Rather, I try to find a way to incorporate the DOE’s goals into our already-existing goals and not the other way around.”

Building upon previous work on lesson structure and questioning for critical thinking, the staff arrived at the conclusion that the goal of life readiness demanded that they help their students develop Common Core–aligned literacy skills. By capturing and sharing students’ baseline reading levels, teachers were able to provide appropriate texts and individual support, as well as emphasize growth over time. Across classes teachers began introducing and reinforcing reading-comprehension strategies with a specific focus on annotation.

“I don’t care what anyone thinks, I’m just gonna read,” one student exclaimed after seeing his Lexile reading scores at the outset of the 2013–14 year. Later in the year, another student explained to a visitor how she had increased her reading level and understanding: “Sometimes if I read too fast, I would add words to the sentence, but if I read at a slower pace, then I’d understand.”

Visits to the school across the 2013–14 year made it clear that this change did not happen magically. Ms. Wargo asked department heads to play a facilitative role, helping their teams take ownership of each aspect of the school’s life-readiness and literacy initiative. To help them do this with their departmental teams, she first did it with department heads themselves as a team, modeling the process in a meeting that she led. A glimpse into this meeting in the early fall of 2013–14 provides insight into how the goal of life readiness seeps thoughtfully into conversations about literacy, rigor, and learning.

*Ms. Wargo had sent out an e-mail requesting that each department head “bring one example of student work, lesson, or unit plan that you feel was most successful in achieving our school goal of*

**Supports, not Mandates**

Requirements from the administration (e.g., all units be structured with a guided question and opportunities to demonstrate critical thinking) were described by teachers **not as mandates but as supports** for high quality instruction.

*literacy and/or life readiness and one example of student work, lesson, or unit plan that was not very successful in terms of meeting our school goals.”*

*The History Department head brought copies of a pre-test U.S. history packet in which an eleventh-grade student wrote detailed and thoughtful annotations in almost every margin. Ms. Wargo facilitated the meeting using a basic protocol for looking at student work—the other teachers offered observations, then questions, then feedback.*

*The history teacher highlighted his emphasis on reading strategies as he explained how students received up to five points for their annotations regardless of whether they answered the questions correctly. He noted that, as a result, “they’re being more involved with the text throughout. So you can’t copy annotations, whereas a student could take this packet and copy the answers—they ‘did it,’ but that’s not going to have a direct impact on their learning. But with the annotations—it’s more of a multiple-entry-point strategy; really anyone can do it, but it also forces them to make the text their own.”*

*“So the only extended writing is on the last page,” another department head offered as a critique, “and it seems like her annotation is meatier than her extended responses. So I’m questioning this because I had this student last year. I know she can write well. I’m wondering how she could incorporate the information from her annotations more.”*

*Ms. Wargo probed, “Do you have any suggestions for how that could happen?” The conversation continued with suggestions and ideas from teachers as they sought to deepen the questioning and depth of reading required for the work.*

*Ms. Wargo wrapped up by connecting the discussion back to the schoolwide goal. “The piece that needs to be pushed, and pushed schoolwide, is how are we extending thinking, how are we taking this to another level of making students life ready? Let’s be thinking about maybe breaking it up. Or asking them to do more writing, maybe eliminating some of these questions and having a page connected to the essential question or a thematic essay.”*

*Following a series of such meetings looking at student work, the department heads took the protocol back to their individual departments and facilitated similar conversations among their colleagues.*

## **2014–2015: A new round of goal setting as the school seeks to improve graduation rates**

As the 2013–14 year was winding down in May, DreamYard teachers began collecting data for the 2014–15 schoolwide goals in a pattern that was now familiar to them. The first step in the multistep process — which is illustrated in more detail in the next section — was the “Follow a Student for a Day” protocol: each teacher trailed a student and observed exactly what he or she did throughout the course of the entire school day to gain realistic insight into life as a student at DreamYard. Using a graphic organizer, the teachers collected data and took low-inference notes, which they shared with colleagues at staff meetings and retreats. One teacher explained, “We share our data. What did we notice? Where did we see students succeeding? Where did we see students struggling? And we have a conversation around what’s happening instructionally in our classrooms, but also around what’s happening in the day-to-day life of our students.”

DreamYard staff then collectively analyzed the data and used the information to further develop and refine their goals for the upcoming year. For example, one teacher explained, “We noticed [while following a student] that many students were not engaged at certain times, so during our meetings we tried to come up with strategies to address this issue.” Another teacher shared, “I noticed a student went

to the bathroom in every class and was therefore missing tons of instructional time. So we started using a planner where teachers would sign how many times students were leaving class to use the restroom. We try to use what we learn to come up with uniform strategies [across all classrooms] that will then inform policies.”

Ms. Wargo collected this information in a staff meeting in June and used it to develop a clear, concise document that was neatly outlined and aligned to the schools’ goals to increase graduation rates. She shared it with her staff prior to summer break, and again when school began in September. “I hand them a list of goals for next year and then I open PD that September with the same document, but with the goals more concretely spelled out. I align our PD map to all areas of our goals,” she explained.

As the 2014–15 year opened in September, DreamYard staff members were actively engaged in a meeting about the school’s objectives for the year. The entire staff had a copy of the goal-aligned PD schedule for the year. As the year progressed, practices and decisions could regularly be traced back to this set of consistent goals. As one teacher explained, “It’s just like teaching. If you hear something enough, it’s bound to stick. And we then remember why we’re trying to meet these goals. For example, we’re trying to raise graduation rates. It’s one of our goals, and we’re constantly talking about it. How can we ever forget something so important?” Another explained the importance of the regular repetition of goals at the school: “If this goal had just been casually mentioned at the beginning of the year, I wouldn’t have taken it to heart. But it was a big priority and came up over and over again. I had no choice but to test [the goal] out, even if it was outside my comfort level.”

Many on DreamYard staff agree that, above all else, it is the overarching sense of community that drives the work. One teacher elaborated, “We have really productive PD and staff meetings. Opening it up to conversation about our goals has been really helpful. [Ms. Wargo] always has an activity that makes it all seem connected. It’s in our consciousness all the time.”

## Step-by-Step Guide to Goal Setting at DreamYard Prep

From 2012 to 2015, Eskolta School Research and Design conducted interviews and focus groups with staff at DreamYard Preparatory School. Three years of studies at the school suggest that a clear vision combined with a culture of collaboration and trust helped the school to integrate New York City’s Citywide Instructional Expectations (CIE) into teaching practice. The school’s process for collaboratively setting schoolwide goals played a significant role in achieving coherence. This step-by-step guide is designed to help principals explore their own approach to schoolwide goal setting through a study of the work at DreamYard Prep.

Teachers report that by participating in goal creation with the steady guidance of a thoughtful principal, they have a better understanding of *why* the goals were created and also a sense of *responsibility* for their goals, which motivates them to align their classroom practices to the goals. “Developing goals is very collaborative — we notice things in classrooms and observations, and then we identify things that need to be improved upon and seek out ways to improve them together. This is how our goals are created,” explained one DreamYard teacher. The school’s goals thus serve as a connection between the district’s expectations of the principal and the teachers’ expectations of their students.

The steps on the pages that follow are based on the work of DreamYard Prep and are designed for other principals to explore how they use schoolwide goal setting to achieve success. School leaders can use the guiding questions below as they consider how this school’s approach can inform reflection and future planning:

### Guiding Questions for Reading

- What structures/practices do you already have in place that can enable powerful goal setting?
- How do you currently engage in goal setting at your school? What vision brings your staff together?
- How might you adapt these steps to meet your school’s needs? What ideas do you have to adapt DreamYard’s work to your school’s work? What ideas do you have to improve upon it?
- DreamYard experienced success building a collaborative, trusting culture but continues to work toward improving student outcomes. In what ways have challenges at your school been similar?

**Collaborative Goal Setting**

“Developing goals is very collaborative — we notice things in classrooms and observations, and then we identify things that need to be improved upon and seek out ways to improve them together. This is how our goals are created,” explained one DreamYard teacher. The school’s goals thus serve as a connection between the district’s expectations of the principal and the teachers’ expectations of their students.

### STEPS TO SCHOOLWIDE GOAL SETTING AT DREAMYARD PREP

1. **May:** Collaboratively collect data to understand students.
2. **June:** Convene planning meeting for staff to offer suggestions for school goals.
3. **July:** Generate and share a draft that is concise and thoughtfully aligns staff input and district expectations.
4. **August/September:** Develop a PD calendar that shows alignment between schoolwide goals and PD.
5. **Ongoing:** Revisit goals by incorporating them into agendas and tools for staff discussions.



## **I. May: Collaboratively collect data to understand students.**

Before staff can set goals for the coming year, it is important that the principal create the opportunity for them to think deeply about learning in the school. At DreamYard, all staff members engage in a “Follow a Student for a Day” experience in which teachers follow one student for an entire day—into classrooms, through halls, at lunch, and elsewhere. (See Figure 1, a template for recording observations.) The principal supports the work by providing coverages for that day. This provides staff with a rich picture of students’ experiences, grounding their work in a deep knowledge of their students as individuals.

Figure 1. Template for Collecting Student Data

Follow a Student for a Day Data Collection Sheet			
Student Name:			
Time	Location	Observation of Student	Observation of Environment

## **2. June: Convene planning meeting for staff to offer suggestions for school goals.**

Once staff have gathered data (in this case through observations of students), it is important to give them the opportunity to have their ideas heard so that they feel trusted, and to draw upon prior goals to ensure consistency and continuity from one year to the next. At DreamYard, the principal uses a full-day professional development (PD) meeting in June for a full-staff discussion of goals. This PD incorporates three major elements:

1. **The principal poses guiding questions** to help encourage critical thinking among staff.
2. **Teachers share their observations** within small mixed groups, and, based on their findings, each group develops a list of areas in which the school is strong and areas in which the school needs to improve.
3. Each group shares their lists with the larger group and uses these observations to **identify steps needed to address areas in need of improvement**. These steps then inform the school’s goals for the following year.

### 3. July: Generate a draft of goals that is concise and thoughtfully aligns staff input and district expectations.

The principal is careful to strike a balance between gathering input from staff in developing goals and maintaining responsibility herself for defining goals. Following the staff retreat, she compiles notes to create a clear, one-page document summarizing school goals in under 200 words and sends it home with staff at the end of the year.

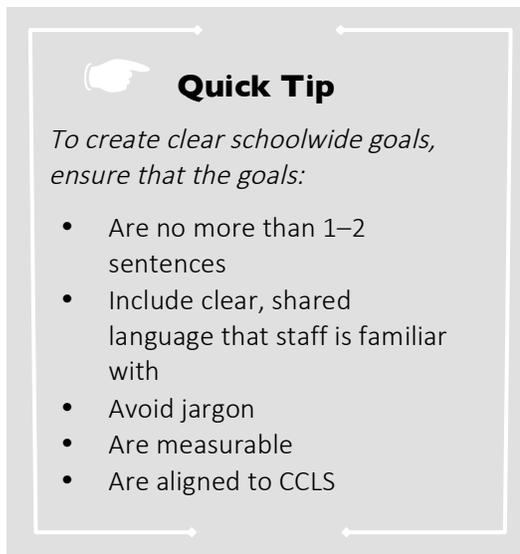
When asked what makes these schoolwide goals “stick” with them throughout the year, DreamYard teachers praise the principal’s ability to set goals that are both *clear* and *consistent*. To maintain clarity regarding schoolwide goals, the principal adheres to the guidelines highlighted in the box to the right, making goals brief, familiar, clear, and reflective of high expectations.

In particular, she stresses the importance of brevity, explaining, “I give one document that explicitly, clearly states our goals. It’s color-coded and simple and easy to read. I don’t give them a fifty-page document.”

In consolidating ideas into a brief set of goals, the principal is well aware of the CIE and is able to find connections between her staff’s suggestions and the district’s expectations. She reports that it is not difficult to find such connections: the goals her staff generates from experience naturally connect to the expectations as outlined by the City.

For example, in 2013–14 staff at DreamYard identified the need for classroom activities and opportunities for self-reflection to help push students’ metacognitive thinking. These suggestions were mirrored in elements of the CIE that emphasized using evidence (called for in the first Common Core writing standard) and engaging students in formative assessment and feedback (called for in component 3d of the Danielson Framework). Finding easy alignment between her staff’s suggestions and the City’s expectations, she was able to identify the school’s first goal, connecting it to their overall “life-ready” mission: “To design life-ready tasks aligned to CCLS that are executed at the end of every unit, that drive daily instruction, and that provide opportunities for self-reflection and feedback.”

The principal then consolidates suggestions into goals in three specific categories: academic development, social-emotional development, and college and career readiness. These three routine categories provide consistent structure for staff aligned to citywide language. The principal and her teachers emphasize the importance of creating goals that synthesize various ideas into a brief, concise document that can be shared with staff, students, and parents. (See Figure 2, a sample goal template.) *In this way, the frequently-referenced document mobilizes the school community to pursue their goals and aligned vision.*



**Quick Tip**

*To create clear schoolwide goals, ensure that the goals:*

- Are no more than 1–2 sentences
- Include clear, shared language that staff is familiar with
- Avoid jargon
- Are measurable
- Are aligned to CCLS

Figure 2. Template for Outlining School Goals

Mission		
<p><i>[Here, the principal condensed the school’s overarching mission to a concise title.]</i></p> <p><b>Life Readiness</b></p>		
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Academic Goal</b></p> <p><i>[Here, the principal identified an academic aspect of the mission based on staff suggestions.]</i></p> <p>To design “life-ready” tasks aligned to the Common Core standards can be used at the end of every unit, that drive daily instruction, and that provide opportunities for self-reflection and feedback.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Social-Emotional Goal</b></p> <p><i>[Here, the principal identified an academic aspect of the mission based on staff suggestions.]</i></p> <p>To build a stronger culture of tolerance, acceptance, and diversity.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>College/Career Goal</b></p> <p><i>[Here, the principal identified an academic aspect of the mission based on staff suggestions.]</i></p> <p>To ensure that all students have an articulated Life Plan that starts in ninth grade and is refined each academic year.</p>

 **4. August/September: Develop a PD calendar that clearly shows alignment between schoolwide goals and PD.**

By September, DreamYard teachers are already familiar with schoolwide goals for the year. As one teacher stated, “There are never any surprises when it comes to the goals. We helped write them, so we know exactly what we’re doing when we kick off the school year.” In order to help staff continually return to the goals, the principal explicitly connects the year’s professional development (PD) calendar to the goals.

Over the summer, she lines up the full year’s PD calendar to the goals and to resources she has identified at the end of the year. In laying out the PD calendar, the principal uses the schoolwide goals to drive each topic and ensure that each PD’s focus is aligned to district expectations and, ultimately, student achievement. (See Figure 3, a sample template.) At the top of the PD calendar is a list of schoolwide goals in large, bold letters. Beneath the list of the goals is a list of resources, including books and materials, to which teachers will refer in PD. The calendar is organized by color-coded columns, each of which represents a specific goal so teachers can clearly see which PD topics are tied to each goal.

Figure 3: Template for Aligning PD Calendar to Goals

<b>[School Name] Professional Development Map</b>			
<b>School Goal 1:</b> statement of goal importance/objective			
<b>School Goal 2:</b> statement of goal importance/objective			
<b>School Goal 3:</b> statement of goal importance/objective			
<b>List of Resources to Support School Goals (e.g., books, articles)</b>			
<b>Month</b>	<b>School Goal 1</b>	<b>School Goal 2</b>	<b>School Goal 3</b>
September			
October			
November			
December			
January			
February			
March			
April			
May			
June			
July			



## **5. Ongoing: Revisit goals by incorporating them into agendas and tools for staff discussions.**

In the classroom, thoughtful repetition of core concepts can help make them “stick” in students’ minds. The same is true for teachers. Thoughtful reiteration of the school’s core goals makes them more likely to be integrated into teachers’ practice. The principal incorporates school goals into virtually all meeting agendas and various tools used in the school so that they are routinely emphasized in five key venues:

- PD sessions
- Staff meeting
- Department meetings
- Grade-team meetings
- Debriefs of classroom observations

The principal allots time during each PD to review DreamYard’s goals, assess where the school is in the process of meeting those goals, and enlist the staff’s help with any problem solving. “Asking us to be engaged with the goals and the problem solving around them helps [the goals] stay with us,” one teacher observed. “It’s a forced connection to our daily practice.”