

## Parent Empowerment in Education

### Measuring What Matters

## SETTING TARGETS

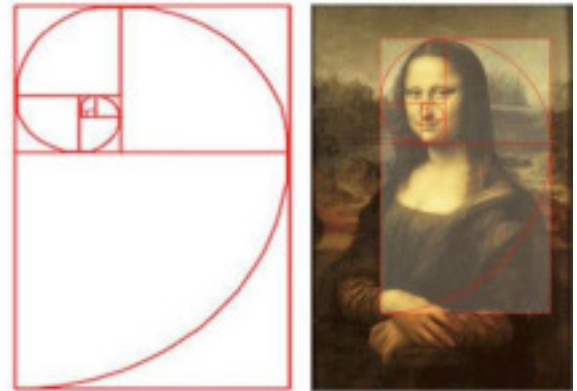
### Target-setting is both an art and a science

A target is NOT the same as a measure of input, output, outcome, or infrastructure. Rather, **a target is the specific performance an organization wants to achieve for any of these types of measures in a specific period of time.**

Setting targets is both an art and a science.

**A target should be what you need to achieve or believe you can achieve, not what you aspire to achieve.**

For example: An organization may aspire to have 2,000 parents turn out to a school board meeting. But, 200 parents (which may be 10x the number who normally turn out) may be sufficient to make the power of those organized parents felt. 200 parents therefore might be the right target (and if attendance exceeds that target it is positive but not necessary).



However, if this is the organization's first effort to organize a major presence at a school board meeting, 200 parents could be too high a target – perhaps achievable eventually, but overly aspirational in the short term. So, in this first effort, the organization sets a target of 100 parents. And, if 100 turns out to be sufficient to influence the school board (likely in combination with a number of other concurrent actions like research meetings, letter-writing, etc.) then that becomes an important data-point in setting targets for future actions at a school board meeting (while also factoring in that a different agenda may face more or less opposition, which in turn influences the amount of power your organization needs to project to those in authority).

Because of the nature of parent empowerment work, **a target will sometimes be an educated estimate rather than cold-hard calculus.** It may be informed by:

- The nature of the impact agenda an organization is trying to achieve.
- Previous experiences, such as: The number of hours spent training teachers that is usually required for them to be effective in conducting house-meetings with parents; the number, type, and/or quality of engagement to enable a parent to take an action to explore more school choices and ensure their child is in the right lotteries; or the number of research meetings with a given number of parent attendees to influence those in a position of authority on a policy decision, etc.
- Benchmarks and counsel from peer organizations (though each organization's local context will be unique).

In thinking about target setting, David Park, Senior Vice President of Strategy and Communications at **Learning Heroes**, reflects that, “*We set targets that support our overall goals and are in reach, but sometimes also stretch us too. Often that means looking at the targets we set last year around reach, engagement and actions, asking if we met them or not – and why or why not – and using this to inform our decision around the targets we set for the year ahead.*”

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## Target-setting is particularly complex within the context of power

Issue and electoral campaigns are about exercising power to change how an education system works or who is in authority over that system (to then change how it works). The requirements of power for these campaigns will be measured relative to the power of those who have an alternative agenda.

Effectively exerting power to influence those in authority (or influence who is elected to positions of authority) is a function of both quantity and quality – and is idiosyncratic to your local context. Exerting power to influence authority in some contexts can require a large number of people taking public action. In other contexts, power comes from having the right few individuals come out in support of your agenda – either publicly or privately – because of their personal or positional influence on those in authority and/or voters.

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## Target-setting is also a source of tension

Target setting can also be a source of tension, both internally within an organization and externally in engaging with funders.

**First, not all measures can have targets - especially at first.** An organization may care about tracking some measures to inform their work but may choose not to set a target for them. Particularly in the case of a new effort (and new measures), organizations will sometimes track initial performance without setting a target to establish a **baseline** they can then use to set a target in the future. For example, an organization beginning to conduct house meetings may use this first cycle to track how many people show up, learn from this initial experience in executing house meetings, and then use this knowledge to set a target for future efforts. Mina Kumar, Chief Program Officer at **Families Empowered**, cautions, “*Setting targets without first building a baseline is meaningless, and can even be destructive because they set unrealistic expectations, which only serves to disenchant supporters and (worse) frustrate staff.*”

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— Mina Kumar  
Chief Program Officer  
Families Empowered

**Organizations sometimes also feel pressure to immediately set really high targets (occasionally called BHAGS or “Big Hairy Audacious Goals”) which – while aspirational – are not actually achievable.** Starting out setting modest targets isn't glamorous to funders and allies. Organizations can feel pressure to promise to fly before running or even walking and commit to targets that aren't

achievable. However, setting targets sets expectations. It presumes a judgement on what is necessary and achievable. Explicitly laying out a BHAG as (a) aspirational and (b) over a long period of time can be motivating and presents less of a risk. But then the organization would be well served to lay out a more specific target or set of targets that are meaningful stepping-stones to that BHAG and achievable in a shorter timeframe around which it is rallying people and resources.

**Target setting is also a function of time.** Parent empowerment work happens in campaign cycles over time, and it is reasonable to set targets that grow over time as organizations learn from both their successes and setbacks.

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## Target-setting is nonetheless important and valuable

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— David Park  
SVP, Strategy and  
Communications  
Learning Heroes

**Target-setting establishes expectations both internally and externally**, becoming a rallying point for an organization and its allies (again, ideally with targets that are achievable). *"We know from our work with behavioral scientists that committing to a plan is a key driver in getting people to follow-through with a specific action or behavior,"* observes David Park from **Learning Heroes**.

**Target-setting determines the deployment of scarce resources.** The effort required to organize a campaign to get 10,000 people to sign a petition is different than 1,000 people. Nonprofits are always operating in an environment of scarcity, and target-setting can help an organization maximize the value of its

talent, time and money by ensuring it is allocated (but not over-allocated) against the most important need.

**Setting targets lets you critically test what is required for success in planning before committing to it.** Setting a final target of campaign success allows you to then backwards plan in your wiring-diagram of campaign inputs, outputs, outcomes, and infrastructure. You can identify the targets you need to achieve at each step and determine if you think those targets across your campaign plan are really achievable before you commit to them.

In execution, **setting targets at key points in your wiring-diagram can help you know whether you are on- or off-track to achieve your impact agenda**, and ideally in time to make adjustments to your targets if your efforts are off-track. By tracking a monthly target toward a campaign level target, an organization will be more likely to know early if it is tracking toward success. And if the organization is not tracking toward success, a monthly target makes it more likely that the organization can respond in time to address the shortfall.

## A final caveat: Actual performance can be more important than the target that was originally set

For all of our emphasis on target-setting, at the end of the day actual performance is what matters most. A target is what you believe you need to achieve at various points in your wiring-diagram to succeed.

However, a target may be set higher than is in fact necessary to succeed. Jonathan Klein, Founder and CEO of **GO Public Schools**, shares that, *"If we find 15 parent leaders are working together and are on track to win an issue campaign, we aren't concerned that four months ago we thought it would require 20 parent leaders. It becomes more important for us to focus on supporting those 15.*

*Spending time finding and developing 5 more leaders just to hit that target would actually be counterproductive. But we also know that if we had only found 5 parent leaders to drive this work, it very likely would NOT have been sufficient in terms of the number of leaders engaging directly with people in authority or getting the number of other parents to turn out and follow them in other actions. Hitting a specific target on one measure ultimately only matters if it makes or breaks your progress towards a larger measure of success."*

**"Hitting a specific target on a given measure ultimately only matters if it makes or breaks your progress toward a larger measure of success."**

— Jonathan Klein  
Founder and CEO  
GO Public Schools