

# Tool: Crafting an Aim Statement

## Overview

The crafting of an aim statement signals the moment when an improvement project shifts gear and moves from analyzing a problem to addressing it. It answers the question “What are we trying to accomplish?” and provides a common goal to link together the efforts and innovations of your team over the course of the next several months. It is a critical tool that future work will build on, so it is well worth the time spent to craft an aim statement that motivates your team and generates consensus.

## Prerequisites

- Completed at least one research tool from *Chapter One: Analyzing a Problem* (fishbone diagram, empathy map, community pulse data)
- (Optional) Completed the *Problem Statement Readiness Check*

## Steps

### 1. Document Review and Early Brainstorm

- Review problem-analysis tools and documents
- Discuss and/or reflect with the following guiding questions:
  - How complex is the problem?
  - Where is the will (i.e., what will galvanize your team and/or school community)?
  - What would an early win look like (6-to-9-month timeframe)?
- Dot-voting/pulse check. If you are working with a team, it can help to narrow down your list of ideas:
  - What part(s) of the problem seems like the most promising place(s) to start?
- Distribute a set number (5–7 is typical) of stickers to each team member and ask your team to place their stickers according to the priority of their choice. Multiple stickers on a single choice are encouraged, but not required (pens can be substituted for stickers to draw dots/checks/etc. if stickers are not available).

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## 2. Introduce Aim Characteristics

An aim is a S.M.A.R.T. goal, meaning it is . . .

**S**pecific and

**M**easurable: You can observe and recognize it.

**A**spirational but attainable: It is important enough to motivate without being so large it intimidates.

**R**elevant: It is connected to the work your team already does.

**T**ime-bound: It should be a target for achieving before the end of this year.

*But wait! Before we jump to old and familiar metrics, it is important to get the scope and the focus right. It's OK to let your aim statement stay "dumb" for a little while longer.*

## 3. Crafting an Aim: Define the Scope

- Choose the right scope for your problem, team, and context by asking yourself the following guiding questions:
  - How complex is the problem?
- The greater the complexity, the smaller scope should be initially. Less complexity means that you can choose a slightly broader scope.
  - What do you already know?
- The more knowledge your team has about the problem, the broader your scope can safely be. If your team is starting out from a position where they aren't experts, it is recommended the scope be narrow and focused.
  - What resources are available?
- If you have a variety of relevant resources to call on, you can be more ambitious in your scope. If you do not have access to any additional resources, then it may help to stay focused on a smaller scope.
- Choose the right scope for your timeline. Reconcile a realistic scope with the long-term goals of school and district leadership and "the fierce urgency of now."
- Use "small dot"/"big dot" aims to reconcile the tensions of different demands. Using the examples below as a guide, decide if it is helpful to set a "big dot" aim first, and then embed a more quickly attainable "small dot" aim within it.

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## 5. Final Check

Discuss the following guiding questions to check your thinking and make sure you have chosen an aim statement that is the right fit for your school and the problem you want to solve:

- Where is the will?
  - What parts of the problem are people most interested in?
  - What is leadership invested in achieving?
  - Where is momentum/opportunity building?
  
- Where can you have the biggest impact?
  - Where do you get stuck?
  - What parts of the problem are most prevalent in your classroom?
  - What parts of the problem are most influential?
  
- Are we being strategic?
  - Aim for early wins!
  - Choose something that you are interested in working on over time!

If this check doesn't reaffirm confidence in the selection, or if more than one option remains, consider taking the question to school leadership. Differences that are technical in nature can be resolved later, often after seeing early results in the data, but a more philosophical disagreement about the desired direction of the work should be sorted out early, and with the support of school leadership.