

Drive Student Success with Alignment NOW

Align Your Curriculum, Assessment, and Professional Learning

BY CENTERPOINT EDUCATION
SOLUTIONS

Given the upheaval the pandemic has inflicted on public education this year, school and district leaders will have their hands full as they prepare for the fall. Summer is typically the time when educators reflect on the past year and plan for the next – building schedules, establishing professional learning plans, and deciding how to monitor teaching and learning. But this summer, of course, educators will also be dealing with understanding the depths of learning loss, trauma, and the social emotional needs students face due to the COVID-19 crisis. They will also be developing teaching plans to accelerate learning trajectories and fill in the gaps. What's more, they will be making contingency plans for different possible learning environments – will they need to rotate students between buildings? How will they prepare for the likely possibility of intermittent breaks in school calendars? In short, education leaders have heavy summers ahead.

With all of this on their plates, why should educators focus on a wonky concept like alignment? Because during this time of potential chaos, alignment has actually never been more important.

What is Alignment?

Well, think about your tires. If the tires on your car are aligned, it means they are positioned correctly – and with great precision. A car whose tires are aligned in the same direction moves effectively and is easier to drive. When tires slip out of alignment, the steering wheel might vibrate or feel off balance, or the tires may wear unevenly. Worse, the car may veer to the side, taking the driver off course and making it harder to stay on target.

Alignment in schools is no different. To operate in optimal mode, an educational system should be internally aligned: all of the components need to line up and point in the same direction. The bedrock is a set of rigorous standards that define what students should know and be able to do. Atop that foundation, schools need to place a quality curriculum and matching assessments. The next level up is training and professional learning that connect these components so that educators can make informed decisions based on data that are accurate and reflect what was taught.[i] Just like that vibrating steering wheel, educational alignment gaps create noise in the system and may take educators and their students off course.



To ensure alignment, educators focus on the following key elements:

- Curriculum
- Assessment
- Professional Learning

"To operate in optimal mode, an educational system should be internally aligned: all of the components need to line up and point in the same direction."

[i] "An instructional system is to be driven by content standards, which are translated into assessments, curriculum materials, and professional development, which are all in, in turn, tightly aligned to the content standards." (Porter, 2002).

Assessments:

Aligned assessments cover the concepts in the curriculum, which, again, should be aligned with the underlying standards. To be most effective, the assessments should be administered to match the scope and sequence of the curriculum. When assessments are used in-step with instruction they are measuring what students are learning now, not what they'll learn next or what they learned several months ago. This helps educators quickly pinpoint areas of growth and identify instruction and resources to fill in the gap. With aligned assessments, teachers can use formative, diagnostic, and/or interim data to inform instructional decisions. This not only accelerates student achievement, but also affects the ability to customize curriculum, which will be particularly critical as schools adjust to changes in the instructional environment. Assessments that are not aligned may test only some concepts and leave others out, they may test out of sequence, or they may test things that aren't in the curriculum at all. Results from these assessments can misrepresent student learning, and cause confusion for teachers and parents. The mismatch also may cause a lot of extra work to interpret the data so the teacher can drive the students where they need to go and not get taken off the path.



Curriculum:

Given the challenges that COVID-19 will present for teaching and learning, an articulated, standards-aligned curriculum will be more important than ever. An aligned curriculum covers the letter and the spirit of the standards, giving all students the chance to learn meaningful content that prepares them for the next grade and ultimately for success in college and careers. An unaligned curriculum doesn't fully cover the standards. For example, it may cover only some of the standards or it may cover them all but at a lower level of rigor that the standards require. While curricula may vary in terms of sequencing or pedagogical approach, they should not veer from the standards they cover. For a list of quality curriculum – see [EdReports](#).

Professional Learning:

Finally, aligned professional learning helps teachers improve their practice. By delving into the features of alignment and using data to drive instruction, teachers can strengthen how they engage students in deep learning. This process is particularly effective when teachers work together, and professional learning is connected to both the implementation of the curriculum and results from assessments. Targeted training for district and school leaders and educators is a vital component of every aligned system. When teachers work with peers, they learn from one another and build a shared understanding of the vision and goals for students. Professional learning that isn't aligned to curriculum and assessments may result in a lack of understanding, improper use of assessments, or inconsistent use of data.

Why Does Alignment Matter NOW?

Equity and alignment go hand in hand.

Even before COVID-19, there was inequitable access to rigorous learning experiences that prepare students for the academic requirements of college. [ii]

That reality is going to be exacerbated now.



Alignment is particularly important when there is no time to waste.

As students return to learning (either in the building or virtually) after months of disruption, schools will have to immediately diagnose and triage their needs to ensure students get back on track. If teachers use assessments that are not aligned specifically to the written and taught curriculum, they may misidentify students' needs, and then fail to choose the highest leverage activities and materials to meet them. Aligned curriculum and assessments help teachers quickly identify gaps in understanding and choose curricular tools to reinforce learning. This is especially relevant in a digital environment, when face-to-face learning time may be limited.

Further, to be most useful, the data must “speak the same language” as the standards and curriculum so teachers don't waste valuable time translating results. This includes using the same phrasing, references, and sequencing found in the standards and curriculum tools. Curriculum-aligned assessment reports that provide data in real time help teachers quickly gauge students' strengths and areas of need to make informed instructional decisions.

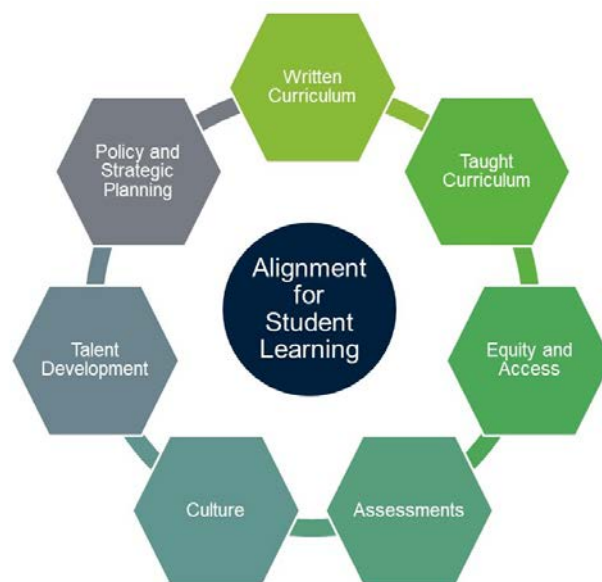
Many leaders already use data to develop, monitor, and refine their instructional plans. This approach is right, but it only works if educators inform their instruction with data from use of assessment tools. Considering the in-classroom learning time lost due to the global pandemic, a rapid response will require understanding of how to translate data from different assessments into action, apply findings to curricular resources, and leverage professional learning to bolster implementation.

[ii] [The Opportunity Myth](#), a report from TNTP (The New Teacher Project), showed the stark reality around inequitable education.

How Do You Check For Alignment?

If you wanted to know if your tires were aligned, your auto mechanic would do a system check. Similarly, CenterPoint's [alignment framework](#) offers an academic alignment checklist.

Using the following points to examine the components of curriculum, assessment, and professional learning your school system has in place will help you determine if your system is aligned:



Alignment in Action - Curriculum

- Does your curriculum match the state standards? How do you know?
- Do educators deeply understand the standards and curriculum? Do they understand the trajectory of knowledge and skills? In other words, do they know what they are aiming for, how their students will get there over the course of the academic year, and how to adjust if necessary?
- Alignment is more than a content match. Do your educators understand the level of performance that indicates students have mastered the content and skills? In other words, do they understand the rigor required to meet the expectation?
- Have your educators considered the curriculum adjustments necessary to supply instruction to students who are below grade level, on grade level, and ahead of grade level?
- Does the curriculum have resources for supporting teachers and meeting students' needs?

Alignment in Action - Assessments

- What are the various assessments being used by educators in your school or district? How and why were they selected?
- Are they the "right tools"? Do they match the purposes and uses they are intended to?
- Do assessment questions or tasks measure the right concepts so that you will understand whether students are learning the content?
- Does the set of assessments you are using cover the full curriculum? Are there gaps? Are there redundancies that would allow you to eliminate some assessments?
- Do the assessments supply the real-time data needed to quickly find learning loss, group students, and develop and implement personalized instructional plans?
- Are the results reported in familiar language that is similar to the standards and curriculum? Do the results lead back into the curriculum or take educators off on a different path?

Alignment in Action - Professional Learning

- Do educators, coaches, and leaders understand their curricular tools? Do they have the requisite assessment literacy to know how to make sense of the results and use them to make instructional decisions?
- Does your school or district use data from assessments to inform professional learning sessions? Can your educators gather and analyze data from assessments to make judgments about students' strengths and needs? Can they incorporate that information into their curriculum-based lesson plans and instructional strategies?
- Does your professional learning plan have clear goals, include stakeholders from all levels, and support in-person and virtual training?
- Is your professional learning plan strategically focused on the key areas where capacity building is needed, especially as related to assessment and curriculum?

Alignment in Action - Putting it All Together

While creating plans for school year 2020–21, school and district leaders can use [this framework](#) to evaluate system alignment and develop concrete action plans. In doing so, they should consider the following **strengths**, **opportunities**, and **next steps**:

- What are the strengths of our school system related to curricula, assessments, professional learning, and implementation practices?
- What opportunities do we have for increasing quality and alignment in academic programming?
- What opportunities do we have to ensure that teachers are assessment- and data-literate?
- When determining next steps, how can we identify potential systemic barriers to student access to high expectations and rich curricula; and recommend actions to remove identified barriers?

Conclusion

Alignment isn't just nice to have – it's a necessity for an effective and equitable system that helps keep all educators and leaders moving in sync towards their collective goals. This is true in the best of times, and it's more important than ever in our current crisis.

