The Benefits of Curriculum Alignment

Essentials on education data and analysis from research authority AEL

By: District Administration

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Auto mechanics perform alignments by lining up the direction of the wheels so the vehicle is pointed in a straight line. Curriculum alignment follows the same principle, with the "wheels" being curriculum, instruction, standards and assessment. Research indicates this kind of alignment can point a school or district toward improved student achievement.

But there's a catch: It can't be done in 30 minutes or less (in fact, it's more a process than an event), and all the work can't be done in one "shop" (different components are done at the state, district and school levels).

Perhaps the complex nature of the task is one reason for existing gaps between what's outlined in the written curriculum, what gets taught and what gets tested. Researchers Blank, Porter and Smithson documented such gaps when they examined math and science instruction in 11 states in 2001. Researchers of the Second International Mathematics and Science Study attributed the poor performance of U.S. students to uneven exposure to mathematics topics in their classrooms.

These and other findings indicate districts are missing out on some potentially significant benefits of curriculum alignment. What kind of benefits? For one, improved student performance on standardized tests can result when teachers carefully align instruction with learning goals and assessments. An analysis of international studies shows implementing and monitoring an aligned curriculum to result in a measurable impact (31 percentile points) in student achievement. Several studies show that alignment "cancels out" more traditional Lining Up for Standards

Do you think having guidelines for what students should learn and know helps improve their academic performance?

Teachers

80%

Parents

82%

Employers

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predictors of student achievement such as
socioeconomic status, gender, race and teacher

effect.

Other benefits include better communication
and collaboration among teachers, helping
them understand how their instructional
decisions contribute to students' overall
learning.

With NCLB calling attention to district
accountability requirements, the role of
curriculum alignment is getting more attention.
District leaders should be aware of the
following:

States, districts and schools have distinct
responsibilities. The state department of
education sees that state tests are aligned with
state standards and state curriculum
frameworks. Many use the Webb alignment
process to align assessments and standards
according to categorical concurrence, depth of knowledge consistency, range-of
knowledge correspondence, balance of representation, and source of challenge (on
test items). The district writes or adopts a curriculum that is aligned with state
documents, supports teachers in delivering it and monitors implementation and
results. The school provides teachers opportunities for periodic review of curriculum
documents, alignment of instructional strategies and classroom assessments to meet
state standards, and relevant professional development.

Teacher involvement is essential. Without teacher buy-in, alignment efforts can be a
fruitless exercise. Teachers should be involved in curriculum development and
alignment, and professional development offerings should address their concerns
(e.g., how to combine individual teaching styles with effective delivery of the
curriculum).

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