Alignment Matters: A Framework for Advancing Student Learning and Promoting Equity
For the last decade, as a result of shifts in federal, state, and local policies, education leaders have spent countless hours, invested millions of dollars, and pinned high hopes on the power of rigorous academic standards and aligned, high-quality assessments to move the needle on student achievement and close pernicious achievement gaps.

Thanks to those efforts, states across the country have significantly improved the quality of both their K-12 standards and their assessments. These are important levers for building student preparation for college and careers. Yet, standards and assessments don’t magically, by themselves, shift the quality of instruction. They must be part of a comprehensive system that also includes quality curriculum, well-trained educators, a culture of equity and access, and regular and useful data to inform decision making. All of those components must be aligned and reinforce one another to drive student success.

It is an understatement to say that the systemic approach to alignment is hard work. There are, however, some critical factors that district and school leaders can focus on to assess the degree to which their academic system is aligned and whether it will advance learning and promote equity. CenterPoint has developed a framework for evaluating the alignment of academic programming. By using the framework, stakeholders at the district and school level will have a tool to guide important conversations about current strengths and challenges in pursuit of an aligned system that supports student learning.
Our seven components of alignment are:
1. Written Curriculum
2. Taught Curriculum
3. Equity and Access
4. Assessments
5. Culture
6. Talent Development
7. Policy and Strategic Planning

Alignment is not a “check-the-box” exercise. We approach alignment through seven elements that work together to meet to a common goal of effective instruction that drives student learning.

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An overview of the CenterPoint alignment framework is outlined in the next pages.
Written Curriculum

Every teacher having access to and preparation to use high-quality curriculum should be a non-negotiable. The quality of a curriculum, access to aligned instructional materials, and focused professional learning to build educator understanding of the curriculum are all essential components of a successful implementation. A high-quality written curriculum should include, at a minimum, a scope and sequence, goals and objectives, and embedded assessments aligned to standards. Additional curricular tools should include instructional activities and tools along with resources for differentiating instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners. A curriculum should be guided by best practices and research-based strategies, including universal design for learning, offer multiple learning opportunities for all students to achieve standards, be culturally sensitive and equitably accessible to teachers, students, and parents, align vertically (PreK-12) and horizontally (within grade level), and support system wide goals.

Leaders may ask: To what degree does the written curriculum...

- describe with clarity the sequence for teaching and learning of goals and objectives?
- describe and demonstrate clear connections between standards, embedded assessments, instructional learning targets, success criteria, and learning tasks?
- provide resources that are culturally sensitive?
- make clear how to implement activities and learning tasks to build successful learning progressions with ideas for both scaffolding and enrichment?

A national conversation is underway about the importance of high-quality curriculum, thanks to clear findings from years of research, reporting from a number of recent articles, and leadership from organizations like Chiefs for Change and EdReports and states like Louisiana. Across the United States, there is a “curriculum renaissance.” A high-quality curriculum - and the aligned instruction and assessments - can advance student learning and promote equity. Providing educators with high-quality, well-designed, highly rated curriculum - one that sequences learning within and across grades to build students' knowledge, skills, and abilities - is the surest way meet the needs of all students and prepare them for college and careers.
To successfully implement the written curriculum, policies, procedures, and resources must be aligned to help educators deliver instruction with consistency. Peer-to-peer collaboration can help educators understand how the curriculum is constructed, dive deeper into less familiar content, and connect the written curriculum with what they are experiencing in the classroom. It is also important to allow flexibility and choice to empower educators to make decisions that will positively affect student learning and deliver the instruction in a way that supports their student population best. For example, a well designed curriculum can be taught using personalized instruction, small-group instruction, or whole class instruction. Regardless of the instructional model, it is imperative that the taught curriculum be appropriately rigorous for the grade level, include checks for understanding, and provide opportunities for deeper learning.

Leaders may ask: To what degree do lessons observed...

- balance modeled instruction with clear explanations and examples and provide opportunities for students to apply learning to new contexts?
- build student literacy skills using and analyzing quality, grade-level, complex texts?
- promote growth in vocabulary through direct instruction of key terms/academic vocabulary appropriate to their grade?
- require students to engage in productive struggle with challenging tasks and provide opportunities for students to share their thinking (orally and/or in writing) as they solve problems?
- include questions and tasks that are carefully and effectively sequenced to promote deeper learning both within and across the grades?
It is essential that all students have access to an aligned, rigorous academic system that promotes higher order thinking and problem solving. To provide equity and access, a district must consider how structures, policies, and procedures promote or deny students access to opportunities. For example, if students are repeatedly “leveled” into reading groups that do not have access to complex text, they won’t have the opportunity to learn to comprehend complex texts. If students only have opportunities for instruction focused on procedural fluency in mathematics, (e.g. a focus on memorizing math facts), but minimal time to develop conceptual understanding, they will likely not meet the full breadth of mathematics expectations.

Leaders may ask: To what degree...

- do all students have opportunities to engage in challenging tasks aligned to on-grade-level content standards?
- do teachers support students with personalized instruction to help them meet grade-level expectations?
- do teachers provide differentiated learning supports to allow for all students to engage in deeper learning tasks?
- is equity supported by availability and/or use of curriculum and aligned resources?
- do teachers welcome broad participation and diverse opinions in their classrooms?
Not all assessments are created equal. High-quality assessment tools provide actionable, accurate, and reliable information about students’ understanding of key concepts and skills while minimizing testing time. These data enable educators to build a roadmap for helping all students master college- and career-ready academic content. A comprehensive suite of assessments should include summative (end of unit, end of course), interim (progress monitoring throughout a course of study), and formative assessments (checks for understanding during instruction). All the assessments should be aligned to the written and taught curriculum - along with the underlying college and career readiness standards - to enable data-driven instruction within and across the school system.

Leaders may ask; To what degree...

- do teachers use formative assessments daily to gauge student mastery and determine next steps for instruction?
- do school and/or districts use interim assessments to monitor student progress toward meeting state and/or district standards?
- are the assessments aligned to both the content and performance expectations of the standards?
- are the assessments aligned to the curriculum scope and sequence?
- are the assessments fair and free from bias?
- are the assessments accessible to all students?
- do educators know how to use the appropriate assessment data to make instructional decisions?
Culture matters. The culture should foster rigorous academics and a supportive environment for educators and students. A strong culture that recognizes the importance of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) encourages a sense of belonging and provides both educators and students space to take risks and explore new ideas. Educators who have aligned tools are better equipped to support their diverse student populations. The alignment and rigor of written, taught, and tested curriculum within a culture for learning advances equity through high expectations for all students.

Leaders may ask: To what degree do our school and classroom cultures...

- build student independence as learners?
- set high expectations for all students?
- foster peer to peer collaboration among students and teachers to share ideas and problem solve?
- allow for risk-taking designed to build student independence and agency?
- foster a sense of belonging for all students and the adults who educate them?
- help to prepare all our students for college and careers?
- show our educators and students they are valued and supported?
Leaders may ask: To what degree...

- do we retain our staff year over year?
- do we provide mentorship opportunities to help develop our new educators and leverage the expertise of our experienced educators?
- do we provide opportunities for all educators and support staff to learn and grow?
- are we providing targeted professional development by content area and/or grade levels?
- do we support new educators with additional tools and resources to reduce turnover?
- do we encourage peer-to-peer collaboration and provide time and space necessary to facilitate these conversations?
- encourage hiring of a diverse range of highly knowledgeable and skilled teachers across dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, and political beliefs?
District and school policy must be clear and reinforce and support high academic expectations. When policies are codified and clear, the result is consistent teaching practices that are less affected by leadership turnover. Districts should conduct intentional reviews of policies and procedures each year to establish alignment of key initiatives with budget priorities. To ensure the policies are well implemented, leaders should develop detailed communications plans, including engaging key stakeholders throughout the process, to confirm rollout is smooth and that key stakeholders are engaged and committed. Successful implementation of policies and procedures helps ensure educators have what they need to teach and helps to create the learning environments needed to promote success for all students.

**Leaders may ask: To what degree ...**

- do the board policies support alignment of the written, tested, and taught curriculum?
- are the policies developed with engagement from of a variety of stakeholders to plan holistically — rather than “in silos” or isolated groups?
- do the policies promote aligned, strategic planning and implementation of critical initiatives?
- do the policies have buy in from stakeholders at the district, school and classroom level?
- do the policies create or remove barriers to student success?
What do you do with this framework?

School and district leaders can use this framework as a tool to evaluate system alignment and develop concrete action plans to improve areas of challenge and build on areas of strength. For example, one large district in the Midwest that we have worked with used this framework to conduct a comprehensive academic review of all its curricula, assessments, professional learning, and implementation practices. The review helped to identify:

- Strengths and opportunities for increasing quality and alignment in academic programming;
- The degree of systemic coherence in implementing academic programming;
- Potential systemic barriers to student access to high expectations and rich curricula; and
- Recommended actions to remove identified barriers.

Based on this review, the district is now undertaking a multi-year initiative to build staff capacity to select, refine, and implement high quality curriculum and assessments. This approach has allowed the district to meet two needs simultaneously:

1) build frameworks and supports to ensure the curriculum teachers implement meets the level of quality, rigor, and alignment; and

2) meet local requirements, such as the need for teachers to be actively engaged in curricular decision-making.
After completing the system alignment review, the district used the findings to build understanding and support for important system-wide changes that would drive greater student achievement.

For example, in the 2017-18 school year, the district:

- engaged a full set of stakeholders in planning for curricula and assessment changes;
- held a multi-week curriculum workshop for design and development of curricular implementation resources with more than 100 teachers;
- piloted interim/benchmark assessments; and
- selected a new learning management system to support the adoption of new curricula.

In the 2018-19 school year, they began a phased implementation of new, high-quality curriculum in English language arts and mathematics for several grades with embedded assessments. In addition, the district is providing additional supports for Title 1 schools throughout implementation. The district is also engaging stakeholders in next steps such as planning for new curricula and assessments in additional grade levels, a multi-tiered system of supports, and beginning science and social studies curricular shifts as needed. Over the course of the multi-year project, the district’s focus continues to be on building district-level and school-level staff capacity to sustain improvements over the long haul. In figure 2 below, we share an example of what a district-level system review could include:

**Figure 2: Sample Alignment Review Data Gathering Chart**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BUILDING BLOCK</th>
<th>STRENGTHS</th>
<th>OPPORTUNITIES</th>
<th>NEXT STEPS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Written Curriculum</td>
<td>Adopted new curriculum in 2018</td>
<td>The educators new to our district in 2019 and beyond need training on the use of the curriculum to ensure sustainable consistency and opportunity to learn for all students</td>
<td>Consider 1-day face to face and web-based, asynchronous training in use of the written curriculum for all new teachers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taught Curriculum</td>
<td>Some PLCs are focused on consistent delivery of the written curriculum</td>
<td>Across the schools, there is not a consistent delivery of the written curriculum, though people recognize the need for this consistency.</td>
<td>Consider how district plans for the upcoming year allow for ongoing professional learning in use of best practices in translating the written curriculum into the taught curriculum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity and Access</td>
<td>District leaders recognize that student outcome data and walk-through data indicate discrepancies in equity and access for students of color</td>
<td>Review the system and schools’ strategic plans to ensure proper address of issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion.</td>
<td>Consider how the budget should reflect a renewed focus on building staff capacity in diversity, equity, and inclusion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>Adopted curricula have embedded, quality formative assessments.</td>
<td>The district will review the quality of its benchmark assessments and alignment to the standards and their curriculum scope and sequence.</td>
<td>Consider revisions to current benchmark assessments to allow for greater alignment to the curricular scope and sequence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Teacher perception surveys indicate that teachers feel a sense of “belonging” to the educational community.</td>
<td>Students, especially young women in STEM fields, need to increase their sense of belonging to the educational community.</td>
<td>Consider how to increase female participation in STEM academic opportunities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talent Development</td>
<td>Teachers with 10 or more years of experience indicate they are unlikely to seek positions outside of the district within two years.</td>
<td>Teachers with fewer than 3 years of experience indicate they are likely to seek positions outside of the district within two years.</td>
<td>Consider mentoring programming, especially in mathematics where student outcomes need to grow and where there has been high teacher turnover amongst teachers with fewer than 3 years of experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy and Strategic Planning</td>
<td>The district has a well-worded, clear definition of what is meant by the terms “curriculum, instruction, and practice.”</td>
<td>Many school staff are unaware of the definitions of the terms curriculum, instruction, and practice, and their school improvement plans require revision to include policy levers.</td>
<td>Consider providing a professional learning opportunity for building leaders to build capacity in their use of key terms and ideas from district policy linked to curriculum, instruction and practice, when supporting school-wide strategic planning.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Taking Action

We think alignment is critical so it should be made a priority in every district. It is not just nice to have - it’s necessary to advance student learning and ensure equity. The system alignment framework can help guide the conversation and ensure each stakeholder has an opportunity to contribute. Even as shifts in programming are implemented, districts should continue to monitor implementation in light of the full system, and with key stakeholders that see the aligned systemic vision.

Looking To The Future

Taking a systemic approach that builds alignment into all aspects of academic programming is a critical but difficult step to take. The goal academic alignment is an educational system where all the tools, resources, and staff work together to provide engaging data-driven instruction that creates meaningful learning experiences that reinforce high expectations for all students. As part of our work with more than 60 school districts in 16 states, we have seen strong alignment among curriculum, assessments, and instruction accelerate student learning and create equitable outcomes for all students.

About CenterPoint Education Solutions

CenterPoint is a non-profit organization that is committed to educator excellence and student success. We provide customized services and resources to support diverse schools, districts, and states in implementing high-quality curriculum, aligned assessments, and strong professional learning that builds the capacity of teachers and leaders to support high expectations for all children. CenterPoint currently works in 16 states impacting 160,000 educators and 1.6 million students. We are deeply committed to improving teaching and learning for every teacher and every student.

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