



Aligning Curricula and Standards in an Era of Accountability

by

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Since the 1960s, local schools increasingly have been joined by federal, state, and district educational agencies and professional organizations in partnerships to transform and reform American schools (Cohen, 1995). Particularly since 1965, with the enactment of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), federal policy, undergirded by federal funds, has strongly influenced American schooling, even though it is acknowledged that education is primarily a state and local responsibility.

With the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB Act), President George W. Bush expects that educational reform strategies and principles that will help close the achievement gap between disadvantaged and minority students and their peers will be implemented and incorporated into American classrooms. These strategies and principles include (1) increased accountability for states, school districts, and schools; (2) greater choice for parents and students, particularly those attending low-performing schools; (3) more flexibility for states and local educational agencies (LEAs) in the use of federal education dollars; and

(4) a stronger emphasis on reading, especially for our youngest children.

One aspect of the accountability strategy requires states to implement statewide accountability systems that cover all public schools and students. These systems must be based on challenging state standards in reading and mathematics, annual testing for all students in grades 3 through 8, and annual statewide progress objectives ensuring that all groups of students will reach proficiency within 12 years. Associated with these systems of accountability is a system of rewards and sanctions for schools based on the performance of their students and the progress they make yearly toward meeting the standards.

Inherent in the NCLB Act, though not explicitly stated, is the assumption that the assessment that is used as a criterion for measuring school effectiveness is, itself, a fair and valid representation of what was *intended* to be taught as defined by the locally developed, standards-based curriculum. This “alignment” does not occur automatically among the different types of curricula, yet the extent of alignment that exists among them plays a major role in reaching the desired performance and achievement

outcomes for all children.

Types of Curricula

Glatthorn (1999) discusses eight types of curricula and how they might be aligned to serve and teach students better:

1. **Hidden curriculum or the unintended curriculum** is what students learn from the school’s culture and climate and related policies and practices. It includes such elements as use of time, allocation of space, funding for programs and activities, and disciplinary policies and practices. It has a powerful impact on students. An activity with little time allocated to it communicates to students that the activity is not really important.
2. **Excluded curriculum** is what has been left out of the curriculum, intentionally or unintentionally.
3. **Recommended curriculum** is what experts in the subject field advocate. The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, for example, has had great impact on mathematics curricula throughout the United States.

4. **Written (or Intended) curriculum** is the document produced by the state education agency, the school system, the school, and/or the classroom teacher. It specifies what should be taught.
5. **Supported curriculum** is the curriculum found in textbooks, software, and multimedia materials. It has a strong influence on what is taught. Often, teachers use the textbooks as their curriculum guide.
6. **Tested (or Assessed) curriculum** is the curriculum that is embodied in state tests, school system tests, and teacher-made tests. It has a tremendous influence on what teachers teach. Due largely to teacher accountability, teachers focus more on what is in the tested curriculum than what is in the written curriculum.
7. **Taught curriculum** is the curriculum that the teachers actually deliver to students.
8. **Learned curriculum** is what students learned as demonstrated by their performance on tests and other assessments.

Alignment of Curricula

Which curricula should be aligned? According to Glatthorn (1999), the written and recommended curricula should be aligned so that they reflect the recommended standards of professional organizations. The excluded and written curricula should be aligned for the purposes of complementing the learning process. Glatthorn notes, for example, that for many students, English may be a “second language”; therefore, such a consideration should be taken into account in designing the language arts curriculum. If the equity principle were

applied, English as a second language would be an essential consideration and would be included in the written curriculum.

The supported and written curricula should also be aligned, yet recent studies have revealed that too often the overlap between these two types of curricula is relatively small; as little as 25% of the content of a state curriculum guide appeared in the state-adopted textbook (Glatthorn, 1999). The tested and learned curricula should also be aligned. Information from this alignment should help teachers become aware of students’ weaknesses so that an instructional program that is responsive to their needs can be developed. The alignment of the taught and tested curricula is very important because it directly affects the learned curriculum.

Finally, there should be alignment between the taught and learned curricula, where gaps can occur frequently. The gaps are due to several factors. Environmental factors may distract the students from learning. Teacher factors that are manifested in planning, classroom management, and instruction contribute to the alignment (or misalignment) of the taught and tested curricula, leading to shortcomings in the learned curriculum. And third, student factors such as disabilities, peer influence, lack of motivation, and emotional problems also play an important role in the alignment of the taught, tested, and learned curricula.

Conclusion

Investigating and reporting on the extent to which there is agreement among the major types of curricula in an educational delivery system is an extremely important undertaking, especially in this era of high-stakes testing and

accountability. The consequences of leaving such evidence undiscovered and unreported is too great for local schools, and especially for the children who are too often placed at risk of becoming victims of educational policies that are well-intended but poorly developed, implemented, or enforced. As with all types of educational reform, an important question that deserves a credible answer is whether the strategies and principles intended for implementation and incorporation are making a difference in (1) the type or quality of instruction experienced by students and (2) the level of student achievement that results from that instruction. At a minimum, it is important for local, state, and national policymakers to have data that reveal whether the assumptions inherent in the statements of their policies and enactments are indeed supported by reality.

At Howard University, a team of researchers from the School of Education’s Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk (CRESPAR), in collaboration with the Laboratory for Student Success—one of ten federally funded regional educational laboratories—is investigating alignment issues related to the written, taught, tested, and learned curricula in some of our professional development schools. A report of the findings will be shared with all stakeholders.

References

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- Glatthorn, A. A. (1999). Curriculum alignment revisited. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*, 15(1), 26-34.