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Why Alignment Matters

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COMMON CORE

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I watched from across the room as he opened his packet and looked at the test results. Not a single word, just the look of defeat as a single tear “accidentally” escaped from the corner of his eye. In an instant, this confident young man, a natural leader who often spoke up in class, was sucker-punched by failure. 

Why does alignment matter? As one teacher explained to me, “If you don’t give students materials that teach them what they need to know, it is unlikely (or less likely) that they will learn it.”

I felt sick watching him realize that he did not pass the state exams. I immediately looked around the room to

check the faces of my other students. I counted at least three more with the same defeated look. This was a day I dreaded as a teacher, not for me, but for them. In the blink of an eye, lively seventh and eighth grade students lost confidence and began telling themselves that they were failures at school. It terrified me that the erroneous belief could change the course of their lives.

Most educators strive to help their students succeed academically and develop a life-long love of learning. One of the ways teachers prepare students to be successful is by providing instructional materials that reinforce the knowledge and skills their students are expected to learn as articulated in the state's academic standards for each K-8 grade level and high school course. In other words, one way that teachers help their students perform well in class is by providing instructional materials that are "aligned to" the state's standards.

Why does alignment matter? As one teacher explained to me, "If you don't give students materials that teach them what they need to know, it is unlikely (or less likely) that they will learn it. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see that cause and effect relationship."

What is Alignment?

State standards establish the minimum expectations for what students are expected to know and be able to do upon completing each grade level and high school course. Each standard has three components: the content, context and cognitive demand, also referred to as the cognitive rigor or performance expectation of the standard.

- Content describes what the student is expected to learn. Educators often refer to the content as the "noun" of the standard.
- Cognitive demand describes what the student is expected to do in order to demonstrate that he/she has learned the content. Educators often refer to the cognitive demand as the "verb" of the standard. Examples of the cognitive demand of a standard include: understand, ask and answer, describe, analyze, compare and contrast or solve.
- Context describes where the learning is taking place. Examples of the context of a standard include: in informational texts, poems, myths, word problems, lab experiments, investigative questions.

According to most educators, an instructional material is aligned to a standard only if it addresses all three components of the standard in a specified location (e.g., in a lesson, video, page or range of pages).

Are Instructional Materials Aligned to the Standards?

As the former associate executive director of a state school boards association, I kept hearing the following refrain from frustrated school board members, superintendents and curriculum directors: "We purchase instructional materials based on the publisher's claims that the material is aligned to 100 percent of the standards. But, when our teachers start using the materials, they soon find out that the materials address the standards too superficially to be helpful to our students." When I asked what "too superficially" meant, one plain-spoken superintendent explained, "Publishers often align to the noun of the standards. But, our students are tested on the verbs."

Those anecdotes were corroborated by independent analysis, conducted by Learning List, of the alignment of over 400 instructional materials. Just over half, or 54 percent of the materials that publishers claimed to be aligned to 100 percent of the relevant subject and grade level standards were in fact 100 percent aligned. On

average, materials were aligned to 87 percent of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and 88 percent of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). Though the average gap was 13 percentage points, the largest gap between publishers' asserted alignment and Learning List's independent alignment evaluation was 50 percentage points for CCSS-aligned materials and 32 percentage points for materials aligned to the TEKS.

Furthermore, Learning List's analysis revealed that the alignment percentage for an instructional material spanning multiple grade levels could differ significantly at each grade level. Generally, in materials that address grades K-8, the alignment percentage decreases as the grade level increases.

Why the Discrepancy?

Two reasons: publishers and educators have two different definitions of "alignment," and two different motivations for alignment.

Most publishers do a good job of aligning their materials to the content of the standards — what students are expected to know —and as such, they claim their materials are aligned. However, they do not routinely ensure that the material also addresses the cognitive demand of each standard — how the students are expected to demonstrate their knowledge — at the requisite level of rigor for the grade level.

Furthermore, many standards are composed of complex sentences, meaning that a single standard may contain several nouns and verbs. Publishers often believe that if a citation (i.e., a lesson, video, page or range of pages) addresses one or some of the nouns and verbs in the standard, that citation is aligned to the standard. Educators expect that if the publisher lists a citation as aligned to a standard, that citation will teach students everything the standard expects them to know and be able to do. If publishers expect educators to assign multiple citations jointly (i.e., "bundle" citations) to address a single standard, the publisher's correlation should specify the citations that must be "bundled" to fully align to the standard.

Hence, one significant reason for the discrepancy between the publisher's claimed alignment percentage and the percentage determined by Learning List is a difference between publishers' and educators' definitions of what it means for material to be aligned to the standards. Because students do not earn credit for partially correct answers on state assessments, educators do not give publishers partial credit for alignment. If the material is not aligned to the noun(s), verb(s) and the context of a standard, it will not help prepare their students to master the standard. Thus, educators would not consider that material to be aligned to the standard.

Another, more obvious reason for the gap between publisher claimed and independently verified alignment percentages is that publishers and educators have different motivations for aligning materials. High-stakes state assessments have caused educators to focus more acutely on whether instructional materials are aligned to state standards since students are tested on their mastery of the standards. Consequently, to increase the marketability of their instructional materials, publishers have had to start aligning their products to state standards. This is an arduous and expensive endeavor, considering that each state has unique standards. However, the implementation of the CCSS has reduced publishers' costs of aligning materials and thus has increased educators' expectations that instructional materials will be aligned at least to those standards.

Whether materials are aligned to the standards matters to educators because it matters to their students. If instructional materials do not help students learn what the standards require them to know, students are less likely to be successful in school. Consequently, aligning materials to state standards as deeply as educators

need and expect should matter to publishers, too.

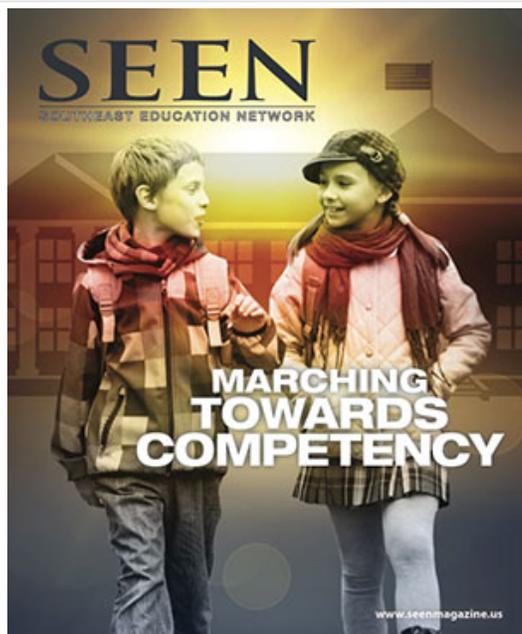
Jackie Lain is the founder of Learning List, an independent, instructional materials review service for schools and districts.

Comments & Ratings



☰ **Comments**

There is no comment.



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