

Why Alignment Matters

Setting the Standard

States began adopting academic standards during the 1980's.¹ The practice became more widespread as a result of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, signed into law in January 2001.² A decade later, forty-six states and the District of Columbia adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in English language arts and mathematics, though some states have recently disavowed their adoption of the CCSS. The standards movement gave rise to high stakes state assessment and accountability systems intended to ensure students' mastery of the standards.

The confluence of state standards and high stakes assessment and accountability systems have focused educators on the fact that using standards-aligned instructional materials is critical to students' success.

The Importance of Using Standards-Aligned Instructional Material

In many schools, textbooks (now more commonly referred to as instructional materials) are the *de facto* curriculum. Studies have shown that 80 to 90 percent of classroom and homework assignments are textbook-driven or textbook centered.³

Why are teachers so dependent on instructional materials? The reasons vary.

80% of the curriculum is driven by the textbook.

- Instructional materials are especially helpful to beginning teachers, because the materials explain which information to cover and how to teach it.⁴ Some materials even provide explicit scripts for teachers to use in their daily lessons.
- Educators teaching outside of their certification may rely on textbooks because they lack content expertise in the subject they are teaching.
- Driven by pressure from the state's accountability system, some administrators require teachers to use the district's "approved" instructional materials, which they believe to be aligned to state standards and the state tests.
- Finally, some teachers rely on instructional materials because they lack the time to create lesson plans or look for "outside" instructional resources to supplement their instruction.⁵

¹ <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/1984/02/22/05340029.h03.html>.

² http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reprints/2009/RAND_RP1384.pdf, p. 4.

³ *Technologies Supporting Curriculum Access for Students with Disabilities*. Wakefield, MA: National Center on Accessing the General Curriculum; *Primary Teachers' Beliefs About the Use of Mathematics Textbooks*. Jamieson-Proctor & Byrne (2008); Jackson, R. M. (2004).

⁴ <https://www.teachervision.com/curriculum-planning/new-teacher/48347.html>.

⁵ The Mad, Mad World of Textbook Adoption, The Thomas B. Fordham Institute, p. 1.

Teachers' heavy reliance on instructional materials underscores the need to ensure that the materials reinforce the knowledge and skills articulated in the state's academic standards. As one teacher explained, "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." Many states enforce that tautology by laws and/or policies requiring districts to certify annually that they have provided their students with instructional materials aligned to the states' academic standards.⁶

What is Alignment?

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

Each Standard Has Three Components:

- ✓ Content
- ✓ Context
- ✓ Cognitive Demand

Content describes *what* the student is expected to learn. Educators often refer to the content as the "noun" of the standard.

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, and investigative questions.

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.*

To help prepare students to master a standard, the instructional materials must address *all three components* of the standard.

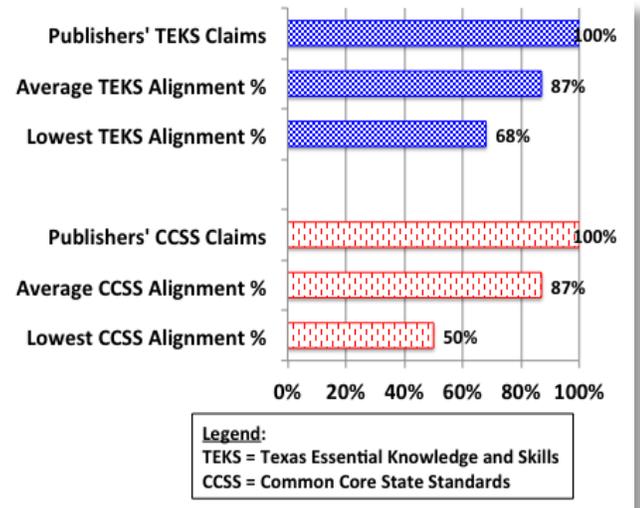
When Is An Instructional Material Aligned to a Standard?

Superintendents and curriculum directors often lament: "We purchase instructional materials based on the publisher's claims that materials are aligned to 100 percent of the standards. However, 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 asked what "too superficially" means, one plain-spoken superintendent replied, "Publishers often align to the noun of the standards but not to the verbs. Our students are tested on their mastery of the verbs, as well."

⁶ http://www.arkansased.org/public/userfiles/rules/Current/Final_Instructional_Materials.pdf, §5.0; Section 31.004, Texas Education Code; 2014 Florida Statutes, Title XLVIII, Chapter 1006, Section 1006.283.

Learning List’s independent analysis of the alignment of over 500 instructional materials corroborates the administrators’ statements.

- Just over half (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 aligned to the content, context and cognitive demand of all of the standards.
- On average, there was a 13 percentage points gap between the publisher-asserted alignment percentage and the alignment percentage verified independently by Learning List.
- The size of the gap varied significantly from product to product, with the largest gap being 50 percentage points for a CCSS-aligned material and 32 percentage points for a material aligned to the TEKS.



Furthermore, Learning List’s data show that for instructional materials spanning multiple grade levels, the alignment percentage often differs significantly from grade level to grade level. For example, for materials that address grades K-8, the alignment percentage generally decreases as the grade level increases.

Why the Discrepancy?

There are several causes for this discrepancy.

[1] The definition of “alignment”:

There is not a single, industry-standard definition of “alignment”. Learning List has observed that publishers typically align their materials to the content of the standards (what students are expected to know), and consider the materials aligned. Often, however, the materials do not also address the cognitive demand of each standard (what the students are expected to do) at the requisite level of rigor for the grade level. Thus, educators would not consider those materials to be aligned to the standards.

Furthermore, many standards are composed of complex sentences, meaning that a single standard may contain several nouns and verbs. Publishers often list a citation as aligned to a standard as long as a citation (i.e., a lesson, video, page or range of pages) addresses one of the nouns and/or verbs in the standard. Educators, on the other hand, 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.

Because students do not earn credit for partially correct answers on state assessments, educators do not give publishers partial credit for alignment. If a material is not aligned to [all of] the noun(s), verb(s) and to the context of a standard, it will not help prepare their students to master that standard. Thus, educators would not consider that material to be aligned to the standard.

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[2] Multiple Contributors:

Often, publishers hire people other than the authors of the content to develop the correlation document (a document that lists the specific location(s) in the material where each standard is addressed). The process of developing a correlation is inherently difficult, particularly if the person correlating did not write or is not intimately familiar with the content. The result may be a correlation that incorrectly identifies whether and where the material aligns to each standard.

[3] Different Motives for Alignments:

Publishers use correlations for marketing purposes; educators use correlations as a roadmap through the material. Traditionally, publishers aligned to standards only materials that they intended to submit for state adoption. High-stakes state assessments have caused educators to focus more acutely on whether all instructional materials are aligned to state standards. Consequently, publishers have started aligning many more products to state standards. Aligning to standards is an arduous and expensive endeavor. Thus, time and cost constraints may result in correlations of limited depth and precision.

Bottom Line: Alignment Matters

For the last thirty years, states have adopted standards prescribing what students should know and be able to do. The federal NCLB Act, state accountability systems and, most recently, states' adoption of the CCSS have heightened the education community's awareness of the importance of using standards-aligned instructional materials.

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 of them, they are less likely to be successful in school.

Learning List's independent analysis has shown that some materials are aligned to 100 percent of the CCSS or 100 percent of the TEKS. However, many resources are not as deeply aligned as educators and their students need them to be. Educators would be well-advised to trust but verify publishers' alignment claims carefully before investing in new instructional materials.