Tools for Instructional Teams and Teachers

Standards-Aligned Units of Instruction

Aligned Instruction

For Your Information...

Alignment is a process of matching up the written curriculum (the one that appears in curriculum guides for a school or district) with the tested curriculum (the one that appears in the tests) and the supported curriculum (the one that appears in textbooks and other resources) to make the taught curriculum (the one the teacher actually delivers) more effective. The alignment process serves two related purposes: It serves as a check on guide/text/test congruence, and it provides teachers with an organizational structure for their own planning (Glatthorn, 1995).

"Alignment is an explicit match between the taught and the tested curriculum" (Schmoker, 2001, p. 53). With the development of state learning standards and state standards-based assessments, aligning the curriculum (what is taught) to the assessment is accomplished by aligning the curriculum with the standards on which the assessments are based.

"One of the chief failings of school systems is the bewildering array of options teachers have for teaching, and the haphazardness this creates. Teachers pick and choose from among these options to teach an increasingly idiosyncratic versus common set of learning objectives and skills—even though common standards are essential to clear communication, coherence, and alignment among instructional effort, resources, and programs" (Rosenholtz, 1991, pp. 17–18). Again, this fretting about a common set of learning objectives, expressed in 1991, has been ameliorated by the development of state learning standards and assessments. But that is only one step toward solving the problem of "haphazardness." The next big step is for teachers to align their "taught curriculum" with standards.

Cotton (2000) has identified alignment as one of the schooling practices that matters most. In her list of the kinds of monitoring of student progress that should be taking place in schools, there are 8 practices listed:

1. Collecting and reviewing student performance data to ensure early identification and support for students with learning difficulties.
2. Establishing and using procedures for collecting, summarizing, and reporting student achievement information.
3. Reviewing test results, grade reports, and other materials to identify problems and taking action based on the findings.
4. Reviewing assessment instruments and methods for their suitability to the students being evaluated, and making changes as needed.
5. Making summaries of student performance available to all staff for their use in planning; making periodic reports to parents and community members.
6. Using assessment methods beyond standardized achievement tests (e.g., performance assessments, portfolios) to enrich their understanding of students' progress.
7. Aligning classroom assessments of student performance with the written curriculum and actual instruction.
8. Routinely checking students' understanding by conducting recitations, checking students' work during seat work periods, assigning and checking homework, administering quizzes, and reviewing student performance data. (Cotton, 2000, pp. 12–13).

Cotton, K. (2000). *The schooling practices that matter most*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Glatthorn, A. (1995). *Developing a quality curriculum*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Schmoker, M. (2001). *The results handbook: Practical strategies from dramatically improved schools*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Rosenholtz, S. J. (1991). *Teacher's workplace: The social organization of schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Units of Instruction

The unit plan is developed by the Instructional Team to define a **unit of instruction** and outline the standards and target objectives (typically grade level) addressed in the unit of instruction. A unit of instruction is typically about four weeks of work within a subject area.

The Instructional Team:

1. Determines the concepts, principles, and skills that will be covered within the unit.
2. Identifies the standards/benchmarks that apply to the grade level and unit topic. Should be explicit within those grade level benchmarks.
3. Develops all objectives that clearly align to the selected standards/benchmarks.
4. Names the objective codes in sequential order.
5. Determines the best objective descriptors.
6. Considers the most appropriate elements for mastery. Discusses this thoroughly, making sure all elements are clear. Name them.
7. Develops pr-/post-test items that are clear and specific and would provide evidence of mastery consistent with the criteria established.

Note: A pre-/post-test is teacher (Instructional Team) created and may include both verbal and written questions and answers as appropriate to the grade level. It is one means for quickly checking each student's readiness for a unit (pre) and mastery of unit objectives (post).

For Your Work...

Step 1: Organize Instructional Units for One Year (or one semester for semester courses)

A unit of instruction is a sequence of lessons tied together. The essential questions give foundation to these linked lessons through big ideas that offer meaning and conceptual understanding. Instituting these questions throughout the unit of instruction links facts and skills to critical thinking and deeper thought. Lively discussions and new understanding of these questions connects to prior knowledge and personal experiences that opens the door of the classroom to other situations and subjects.

In some districts, a curriculum map or scope-and-sequence has already defined unit topics and clustered standards within them. If a current grade-level curriculum guide (or map) is available and answers the following questions, move ahead to Step 2. If, however, something is missing from the current document, complete that piece before taking the next step.

Clarifying questions:

1. What is the length of time of a unit of instruction for your subject and grade level?
2. What "theme" will you give each unit? Think of a catchy phrase or title that will be meaningful to your students.
3. What are the essential question(s) for the units? Essential questions should be written so that students are able to understand terminology in the question. The questions identified for a unit of instruction should be logically sequenced. The collaborative exercise among teacher team members to create essential questions will enrich the content of the unit.

Instructional Units Worksheet

School:	
Subject:	Grade Level:
Length of Class period for this Subject:	Days Per Week:
1. What is the length of time of a unit of instruction for your subject and grade level? (typically 3 to 6 weeks or two per grading period)?	
2. How many units in your school year (typically between 6 and 12) or for the semester for semester courses?	
Title or Theme of Unit	Essential Questions
Unit 1	
	1.
	2.
	3.
Unit 2	
	1.
	2.
	3.
Unit 3	
	1.
	2.
	3.
Unit 4	
	1.
	2.
	3.

Add additional units as needed.

Step 2: Align Units with Grade-Specific (or Course-Specific) Standards

Now that you have organized instructional units for a full year (or semester course), determine all grade-specific standards that will be incorporated in the first unit at this time. (This may include Common Core State Standards, individual state standards/benchmarks as may be determined by the team to fully complement the unit. Also, consider other interdisciplinary opportunities to maximize learning potential, standards application, and a more efficient use of time.)

If you are currently using a map or scope-and-sequence that is fully aligned with grade-specific standards, you may choose to move ahead to Step 3. However, if you haven't accessed the Common Core State Standards before now, this is an excellent opportunity to become familiar and integrate or include with your work.

A word about Common Core State Standards

The Common Core State Standards have been built from the best and highest state standards in the country. English-language arts and math are the first subjects defined by these standards since these subjects represent skills which other subjects' area skill sets are built on. They were developed in consultation with specialists, teachers, and parents across the country. They include rigorous content and application of knowledge through high-order skills. They were designed to ensure that students, regardless of where they live, will be prepared with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in college and the modern work force. If you need assistance in translating terminology fundamental to interpreting the CCSS, please see our Additional Resource section. For more information and the list of standards, go to: http://www.corestandards.org .

Clarifying questions:

1. Which grade-specific standards* will be highlighted in this unit?
2. How can you maximize teaching and learning potential by integrating subject areas and content standards to create interdisciplinary units?

*In the Common Core State Standards each "grade-specific standard" corresponds to the same-numbered College and Career Readiness (CCR) anchor standard that is identical across all grades and content areas. Put another way, each CCR anchor standard has an accompanying grade-specific standard translating the broader CCR statement into grade-appropriate end-of-year expectations.

Which grade-specific standards will you address for the identified units? As a team, begin this process by fully identifying the standards for one unit. Future opportunities to work together will allow the team to complete the other units.

Aligning Units to Standards

Which standards/benchmarks will you address for mastery in each unit?

	Standard Code		Brief Descriptor of Standard/Benchmark
Unit 1			
Unit 2			
Unit 3			
Unit 4			
Unit 5			
Unit 6			
Unit 7			