

Los Angeles Aligns Instruction with Essential Skills

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The Los Angeles Unified School District, like many other districts, recently developed a K-6 continuum of essential competencies in reading, language, and mathematics, and instituted a yearly survey of these essential skills at each grade level. The nationwide trend to define, assess, and report basic competencies recognizes that traditional norm-referenced achievement tests are rather insensitive to the effects of classroom instruction, and that grade level competency tests provide a more accurate and useful picture of a student's accomplishments.

Defining and testing essential skills does not, however, result in improved instruction and higher student achievement. It has been documented that teaching to defined objectives is quite different from simply covering text material and that teachers need considerable help and support in adjusting their instruction.¹ So in collaboration with the Southwest Regional Laboratory for Educational Research and Development (SWRL), the Los Angeles schools

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initiated a Curriculum Alignment Project.

Curriculum Alignment

A curriculum is composed of objectives, instruction, and assessment. When all three match—that is, instruction and assessment focus on stated objectives—then the effects of schooling are usually both understandable and impressive. When these three elements are not aligned—that is, district curriculum guides state one thing, classroom instruction focuses on something else, and standardized tests reflect neither—then the effects of schooling are difficult to determine and therefore difficult to improve.²

By instituting its grade level continua of basic objectives and its yearly surveys of these skills, the Los Angeles Unified School District matched assessment with objectives.

The goal of the project described here has been to align classroom instruction, the third part of the curriculum, with the other two.

The Curriculum Alignment Project began in the spring of 1979, concurrent with the first yearly Survey of Essential Skills (SES) test at each grade level in all of the district's 435 elementary schools. The SES results showed considerable proficiency on the part of the district's pupils but also showed that many children had room for improvement. If teachers were to plan and conduct instruction for the following school year in the same way they had in the past, there would be little reason to expect marked increases. So we asked, "What can teachers do better or differently so that more pupils will acquire the essential competencies defined on the continua?"

The three-year Curriculum Alignment Project began with SWRL staff working with two low-income area schools, one in south-central and one in east Los Angeles. The student population of one school was nearly all

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Black and the other nearly all Mexican American. The first task was to find out what principals and teachers at these schools needed to do to effectively align their instructional programs with the district's continua so that inservice materials and other resources could be developed that would allow the district to implement the curriculum alignment process in additional schools.

Curriculum Alignment Process

Traditionally, teachers managed to group and place students for textbook instruction and cover as much ground as time allowed before the end of the school year. Because standardized testing produced little of the information needed by teachers to plan instruction, there had been little on which to base evaluation and improvement of instructional programs.

Now, however, the game has changed. Teachers are directed to teach a list of essential competencies for which the district will test students at the end of the year. In order to teach these competencies at acceptable levels, teachers need the principal's assistance and support and help with the following tasks:

1. *Matching instructional materials and activities with essential skills.* When teaching specified competencies, teachers may need more than a single text. When using only one text, several essential skills may not be covered (most textbooks are full of information that is "nice to know"). In addition, few classes can complete a year's worth of text material in a school year. Since pupils tend to learn what they practice, there is little hope that pupils will do well on competencies for which they receive little or no instruction.

We found that teachers want help identifying where continuum skills appear in their textbooks. If textbook and continuum skills are correlated, teachers can be sure to see that these skills are taught during the year. Teachers also need help locating or developing instructional materials and activities on the continuum skills that are not adequately addressed in their textbooks. Developing these resources is a considerable task. Continuum-to-text correlation charts and supplementary instructional materials require analytical expertise, as well as a great deal of time to prepare.

Many publishers provide correla-

tions for their texts. However, their charts commonly identify skills and then list page numbers where the skills are developed. To supplement these materials, we devised a correlation chart that lists the units and pages in a text and the essential skills taught and the grade level at which they will be tested. A teacher can use the publishers' charts for considering a skill and the resources available to teach it, and can use the district's chart for considering how to proceed through a particular text: what to emphasize, what to go over lightly, what to skip, and what to add.

2. *Developing a year-long instructional plan.* We found that teachers want help in selecting and scheduling instructional units so that all necessary competencies will be taught during the year. There simply isn't enough time to teach *everything*. It is important for teachers to locate the basic competencies in their materials and then schedule when instruction on them will be completed during the year. By scheduling instruction in this way, teachers are able to look closely at what can be taught in the time available and be realistic about accomplishable expectations. Research has shown that year-long planning can result in greater pupil achievement by ensuring that more instruction will be provided.³

One resource useful to teachers during this planning is the district's *Survey of Essential Skills (SES) School Report*, which summarizes pupil performance by individual pupil and by grade level on the previous year's test. For example, by looking at the average score of each skill for fourth graders during the prior year, a fourth grade teacher can see which skills were taught well and which skills deserve extra time and instruction this year. Although some teachers had trouble seeing the relationship between last year's scores and this year's planning ("Yes, last year's fourth graders did poorly on fractions, but I have a new bunch of fourth graders this year"), most agreed that poor performance last year could mean that the teacher needs to improve instruction in that particular area this year.

3. *Developing a weekly schedule.* Teachers develop weekly schedules, for example, reading from 9 to 10 Monday through Thursday, math

from 11 to 12 daily, social studies from 1:30 to 2 Wednesday and Friday. In the Curriculum Alignment Project, we found weekly schedules useful in two ways. First, the district did not want teachers to spend all of their time teaching only basic proficiencies in math, reading, and language. Nor did the teachers want to do that. Weekly schedules provided a mechanism for planning a balanced curriculum.

Second, planning weekly schedules is related to selecting instructional content and scheduling units throughout the year. When attempting to develop a weekly schedule, teachers discovered there wasn't enough time to teach all of the desired content in all of the subject areas, separate and distinct from other subjects, to all of their groups of students. Thus, efficient use of time through integration of subjects such as reading and social studies was important.

Even when there is a mismatch between the time required and the time available, most teachers still try to fit everything in. Consequently, many students do not receive adequate instructional time with the teacher.

In the Curriculum Alignment Project, we have tried to find ways to help teachers develop realistic weekly schedules. For example, workshops on planning at the beginning of the school year help teachers use the following methods to adjust their weekly schedules so that the time required for instruction is equal to the time available:

- Teachers used the listing of continuum skills and the previous year's test results to emphasize the most important sections of texts and other materials (as opposed to the entire text). As a result, teachers often found that they needed less time for certain subjects than was originally planned.

- Teachers formed the number of instructional groups that allowed them to give pupils sufficient time. For example, forming two or three reading groups was more effective and efficient than forming four or five. Teachers were encouraged to avoid "over-grouping."

- Teachers traded certain pupils with other teachers for particular subjects so that they could conduct one group instead of two.

- 4. *Teaching toward competencies.*

The first three activities described here have to do with planning for competency-based instruction. But more than planning is needed. Researchers have identified teachers' classroom behaviors that can greatly influence the amount of learning that takes place; many of these behaviors are summarized in current literature.⁴ For example, research strongly suggests that teachers need to provide pupils with ample practice of the required competencies, and they need to help pupils correct any inappropriate responses. Some of the activities in the Curriculum Alignment Project have focused on these procedures. For example, during inservice meetings, teachers learned how to provide practice in consistently weak areas, and they participated in exercises to help assess progress in these areas.

5. Monitoring and improving progress. Teachers want help during the school year in completing the planned instruction and in monitoring and improving the progress of their classes in attaining the competencies. The unit completion goals set during activity two are a convenient mechanism for principals to keep track of progress during the year. When a class falls behind projected completion dates, the teacher and principal must find ways to improve the situation.

The teacher may need to form fewer groups of pupils, or spend more time on a particular subject, or even rethink what can be accomplished during the year. The teacher may need to modify an instructional strategy or provide better conditions for motivation. The principal needs to keep informed of the progress of each class and help the teacher accomplish the goals planned for the year. Monitoring progress, sometimes called outcomes-based supervision, has been demonstrated to result in higher pupil achievement.⁵

Curriculum Alignment Resources

To successfully align their instruction with a district's list of competencies, teachers need help from principals with the preceding activities. In the Curriculum Alignment Project, principals receive help, too, in the form of well developed materials that they and teachers can use to conduct the curriculum alignment process.

A School Curriculum Alignment Kit is being developed for the district's elementary schools and will be more widely implemented during the coming school year. Primarily, the kit consists of a Coordinator's Guide describing the inservice activities that should be held with teachers throughout the year to help them:

- Use the Survey of Essential Skills (SES) results to detect strong and weak competencies and to place and group pupils
- Relate the continua to present texts and materials
- Plan and schedule instruction on a weekly, semester, and yearly basis so that all essential skills are covered
- Improve instruction depending on the school's need, for example, to integrate essentials into other subjects or to deal with children below grade level
- Assess mid-year progress and plan remaining instruction.

The other components of the kit, to be used in inservice, are:

- Correlation charts which list in page order all the skills covered in a specific textbook and show which skills are continuum skills and at what grade level they are to be assessed. Continuum skills at a specific grade level that are *not* covered in the textbooks are also listed.
- Practice items for all continuum skills at each grade level, written in the format of the SES. These items, which provide SES practice, can be used for instruction or can be made into mini-unit or mid-year tests.
- Class Progress Sheets at each grade level for each subject. These sheets list the skills to be assessed at that grade level and have columns to be checked when the skill is taught and when tested.
- Teacher worksheets for yearly goal setting.
- Teacher worksheets for weekly scheduling.
- Forms and scales for monitoring class progress, observing instruction, and identifying and remediating instructional problems.

The Curriculum Alignment Project is developing methods and resources that elementary school principals and teachers can use to teach essential skills. The project is now under way in ten schools and will be imple-

mented in more schools next year.

It is our belief that schools can effectively teach essential skills to all students.⁶ We also believe that the Curriculum Alignment Project is one effective way to achieve that goal, that is, to enable children to learn the essential skills identified for each grade and subject. We are not alone in our belief. In a report to the judge in the Los Angeles School Desegregation Case, consultants said that the Curriculum Alignment Project: "... is now one of the most promising efforts to improve big city schools in the United States."⁷ ■

¹ Fred Niedermeyer, "The Testing of a Prototype System for Outcomes-Based Instructional Supervision," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 13 (Spring 1977): 34-50; and W. James Popham, "Performance Tests of Teaching Proficiency: Rationale, Development and Validation," *American Educational Research Journal* 8 (January 1971): 105-117.

² Fred Niedermeyer, "Curriculum Alignment—A Way to Make Schooling More Understandable," SWRL Professional Paper No. 41 (Los Alamitos, Calif.: SWRL Educational Research and Development, 1979).

³ Howard Sullivan and Fred Niedermeyer, "Pupil Achievement Under Varying Levels of Teacher Accountability," SWRL Professional Paper No. 28 (Los Alamitos, Calif.: SWRL Educational Research and Development, 1973).

⁴ Jere Brophy, "Teacher Behavior and Student Learning," *Educational Leadership* 37 (October 1979): 34-38; and Joseph Schneider, "Researchers Discover Formula for Success in Student Learning," *Educational R&D Report* (CEMREL, Inc., St. Louis, Mo.) 2 (Fall 1979): 1-6.

⁵ Fred Niedermeyer, "A Basis for Improved Instructional Leadership," *Elementary School Journal* 77 (January 1977): 248-254; and Harold Smithman and William Lucio, "Supervision by Objectives: Pupil Achievement as a Measure of Teacher Performance," *Educational Leadership* 31 (January 1974): 338-344.

⁶ Ralph Hanson and Richard Schutz, "A New Look at Schooling Effects from Programmatic Research and Development," in *Making Change Happen*, ed. Dale Mann (New York: Teachers College Press) 1979, pp. 120-149.

⁷ *Initial Report of Consultants Concerning Programs Addressing Effects of Racial Isolation in Minority Schools*, Los Angeles Unified School District, August 1980, p. 33.

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