

Curriculum Leadership Institute E-Hint

The Underlying Causes of Low-Performing Schools

Districts that have one or more low-performing schools know they need to take immediate steps to correct the situation, but frequently tell us they just don't know where to start! CLI has had much experience in providing assistance to schools in need of improvement, and we know that the first step is to analyze present circumstances in order to pinpoint the specific cause(s) for the poor performance. Here are the most common reasons for low performance in a school, with the types of corrective actions needed.

Reasons for Low-Performance	Actions Needed
Relying on textbooks	Teachers who rely on textbooks are often missing key concepts and the <i>intentions</i> of the state standards. Although publishers will tell you that their texts are aligned to your state's standards, the truth is they are aligned to pretty much <i>all</i> states' standards and may not be specific enough to your state. A textbook should be a resource only; it is not the curriculum. It is imperative that the school or district develop a local curriculum that <i>is</i> aligned to your standards, and that is more focused than the scope of an entire textbook.
Trying to use the state standards as curriculum	The standards are, of course, a foundation of your curriculum. However, verb usage may be inconsistent at the expectation level, or the verb that describes what the students are to do with the content may be completely missing. Standards may include other vague terminology that is open to interpretation, making aligned instruction and assessment virtually impossible. Additionally, most standards are too vast... too great in number or scope for real learning to occur. Educators must work together to analyze, interpret, and make decisions about the standards and the school's actual expectations.
Subgroups aren't performing well enough	Teachers of these groups of students are often not included in the development and implementation processes that regular classroom teachers complete, so they have less direction about precisely what is to be taught and learned. Also, regardless of whether the subgroup students are in special classes or the regular classroom, what they are taught is frequently not on the same level as what they are held accountable to on state tests. This problem is alleviated when teachers (1) plan <i>deliberate, focused</i> instruction that is <i>accurately aligned</i> with the state standards; (2) develop aligned assessments; and (3) use data from the assessments to inform instruction.

<p>Language and vocabulary are not consistent</p>	<p>Sometimes one <i>seemingly</i> small problem can have huge consequences. If language is not consistent in the curriculum – horizontally and vertically – or if the school’s language is not consistent with that used in state assessments, the result can be confusion and misinterpretation by students, leading to poor performance. Teachers need to work collaboratively on local curriculum, instructional planning resources, and aligned assessments so there is consistency among all grade level expectations.</p>
<p>Expectations are not high enough</p>	<p>Students everywhere today are being held to high standards. Geographic locations, backgrounds, economics, and so forth are no longer being accepted as reasons why some students cannot succeed; schools must help students reach high standards regardless of these circumstances. Another problem that occurs in many schools is that expectations are not consistent from one teacher to another. Not only must the local curriculum meet high standards, it must be measured through common assessments and criteria for success, so that expectations are the same for all students.</p>
<p>Instruction and/or assessment do not properly align with curriculum</p>	<p>A school can have the best curriculum in the state, perfectly aligned with standards – but if what happens in the classroom doesn’t line up, student learning will suffer. Teachers often see key words in a standard/curriculum unit, and teach “around” that key concept instead of directly to it. Likewise, assessment items often miss the mark – they assess “something about” the topic, but not what is specifically required. Proper alignment is critical in terms of both what the students are to know and what they are to be able to do.</p>
<p>Individual teachers have their own interpretations</p>	<p>This problem could have several sources. If the local curriculum includes vague verbs or other references, then teachers will have different interpretations. Likewise, if instruction and assessment are not carefully aligned, the same problem will occur. When there is not enough collaboration among teachers, students enter a new grade level or course without the same levels of understanding. The result is too much back-tracking to try to get everyone caught up to the same expectations. Teachers need to know how to use collaboration for establishing common language, interpretation, and expectations. Training on curriculum implementation and preparation of common assessments with common criteria will also correct this problem.</p>

Once you’ve pinpointed the cause for your school’s low performance, and identified the type of action needed, you can then create a detailed plan for getting action underway. If you need assistance in identifying problems or creating your action plan, contact CLI. We’d be glad to visit with you about your individual situation and how we can help you get on the pathway to school improvement.