

Decision Making – When You Have Separate Grade-level Standards

We have rapidly moved from a time when state standards were simply nice guidelines for us to look at, to a time when standards are something we must follow very closely. This is especially true for the subjects of math and reading because — with few exceptions — standards are now written for separate grade levels of these subjects. (At least there are separate descriptors for grades K-8; oftentimes there is still only one combined set of descriptors for grades 9-12.) To some of us, this feels like an intrusion on our decision-making. However, three things need to be acknowledged. 1) When a ***detailed analysis for understanding*** of the standards is completed, most educators are pleased with what they find. 2) There is still some room for local decision-making about curriculum. 3) There is a lot of room left for local decision-making about *instruction*.

If you will soon be creating new local curriculum for math or reading (or for any subject where the standards are written for individual grade levels), the following steps may be helpful to you. These steps describe the major tasks a K-12 group should accomplish when creating local curriculum from state standards that are broken down by grade level. (Caution: These steps will not work for standards written only in grade level bands, such as standards for K-2, 3-5, 6-8, 9-12. These are sometimes called “benchmarked” standards. If the subject you are working with falls into this category, the original CLI steps will be necessary.)

- A) Gather information (current data) about what is being taught at each grade level. To get this data, send out simple questionnaires to all teachers of the target subject. Have the teachers list by category the content they are currently teaching (the same categories the state uses is best). Compile all the information according to grade level and display it in a manner for all to see. Look at the gathered data either in pairs or grade-level groups to see if anything needs to be clarified, added, or omitted. Making decisions based on data is the best place to start.
- B) Look at your data and discuss what seems to have been a focus for each grade level. Overall, has each one had a signature theme, a special project, or a major idea that no other grade level has had? What makes each grade level different from the others? If you had to give each one a descriptive title, what would each title be? See if the group can come up with a short description for each grade level without using words such as *introduce*, *reinforce*, *in-depth*, or *more detail*. If this is the first time for your district or school to have focus statements for each grade level (other than high school course titles), what would you like them to be? What should they be?

- C) Compare your current data by grade level to each grade level of the standards.
1. Highlight those parts of the standards that already match current data and choose to use these topics in your local curriculum the way *the standards have worded them*.
 2. Make decisions about any grade-level topic being done currently that you don't find in the standards. Have the standards moved it to another grade level? Is this topic not reflected in the standards at all? If you want to keep it, make a note to write it in your local curriculum *in addition to* the standards' topics.
 3. Discuss what the standards now include that you don't find in your current grade-level data. Is this "new thing" currently in another grade level in your local curriculum? If so, can you now move it? Is another of the "new things" completely new, and if so, will it require staff development for teachers? Make notes of those things that will need good discussion or possibly training to be taught effectively. Don't dismiss these "new things" without careful consideration of what they are. (Even if your current textbooks don't include them!)
- D) Now that you know what should be in your new curriculum, including what is new and what has been moved around, look back at the overall focus areas or grade-level titles you established in Task B. Do any of these titles now need to change? In other words, are the standards going to cause any grade level to change its focus? If you couldn't complete Task B previously, maybe now you can. This will help everyone see how each grade level builds from the one below.
- E) Retype the standards and your local additions, if any, to serve as ***your local curriculum***. Change any vague verbs to make the statements clearer (but be careful not to change the intent). Reorder or regroup any of the statements to make them more teachable or understandable. Decide where you want to place your added topics. If you are provided with testing information, highlight which items are to be tested at each grade level. Designate which items are brand new to each grade level. Although Task E may seem like an unnecessary step, it is very important to retype the document to include additions and/or changes, as well as to fit the district's usual format. When this step is completed, the "standards" become "curriculum" and are much more likely to be used as such.
- F) In your new local curriculum document, be sure to include the *numbers* of the original state standards, either at the end of each local unit (outcome, target, etc.), or in a "correlation chart" at the end of the document. This will show that you are truly using the standards and know where each piece is being addressed.

You are now ready to complete any type of pacing guide or curriculum mapping process that will designate *when* each grade level will teach each of the newly aligned units of local curriculum. Strategies should be researched for each new unit and lots of creative instructional practices should be planned. The standards give quality advice about *what* should be taught — the fun part is finding all the best and varied ways for ***how*** to teach that new "what"!