

A New Look at Verification of Alignment with Standards

In the CLI Model, the Subject Area Committee (SAC) completes a three-to-four-year process of writing and validating curriculum, and writing and validating assessments. One of the early steps in the curriculum-writing process is to use state standards as guidelines when making decisions about what will be in the newly revised curriculum. SAC members also look for gaps and redundancies and make decisions concerning the vertical alignment of skills and concepts.

When the first draft of the curriculum is completed, SAC members work together to complete a critical review of the document. They look for proper formatting, assure absence of bias, and make sure the necessary skills and concepts are all present and sequential. In addition, SAC members usually *revisit* alignment with the relevant state standards to which each grade level is held responsible, to assure those standards are still inherent in the completed curriculum.

Typically, the teacher who wrote the particular grade level or course curriculum completes the corresponding standards alignment examination. The process involves laying the new local curriculum right beside the standards pages and verifying where alignment exists between the two documents. We at CLI recommend that through alignment, SAC members acknowledge not only where standards *are* being addressed locally, but also indicate which standards are *not* being addressed by the local curriculum. They must then determine the reasons why some standards are missing or where those standards should be incorporated. Checking both “where they are” and “where they are not” is sort of like “looking through both lenses.” This dual-sided process provides us valuable information, but the process could be improved.

As stated earlier, typically the teacher who wrote the curriculum does the alignment verification. That teacher automatically — perhaps without realizing it — considers not only what the curriculum actually says, but what he or she “usually does” in the classroom. Therefore, the alignment may not really be accurate.

For example, consider this elementary science standard: *Describe life cycles of selected organisms, including both plant and animal.* The elementary teacher who wrote the science curriculum has an outcome that says, **Students will examine the characteristics of animals and plants to determine how they survive.** This teacher has taught a unit for several years in which she starts with the life cycle of an animal, and at each stage of the cycle she has students determine what threatens the animal and what it does to survive. She then repeats the steps with the life cycle and survival techniques of a plant. Therefore, this teacher reads the outcome (in bold) and immediately decides it matches the standard (in italics) because she is thinking about her own instruction. However, a second teacher might look at this outcome and simply teach survival techniques, such as how animals and plants survive in different environments. This teacher would have accomplished the outcome about survival techniques, but *not* met the standard about life cycles.

Teachers may certainly use different strategies to teach an outcome, so the activities they choose may or may not “fill in” the portions of a standard that are not *specifically* stated in the local curriculum document. If the thought process the teacher used when checking alignment of standards to curriculum included the activities he/she uses for instruction, there is no guarantee that the alignment will remain if a different teacher is also responsible for that course.

This kind of problem indicates the need for a more effective and critical alignment process. Such a process could be accomplished by having a teacher who did *not* write the course curriculum and who does not *teach* that course conduct the standard alignment audit. All teachers on the SAC would take responsibility for auditing a course they do not usually teach and that they did not write. Each member would be cautioned to evaluate the local curriculum only by “what it says,” not for what they think a teacher “would do.”

To insure long-term alignment, the alignment must be inherent in the curriculum, not in the choice of activities for instruction.