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## *Process Overview and Curriculum Issues*

### **CHAPTER EXPECTATIONS**

This chapter will give an overview of the entire process of using state standards to develop Power Standards, Quarterly Instructional Objectives, and common, aligned assessments. The chapter outlines the process of developing the curriculum documents that the local staff creates, understands, supports, and is able to implement. The first step in the change process is to determine where the organization is so the issue of existing curriculum realities within which the work must be done are dealt with and suggestions are shared for understanding and using the local politics to help advance the project. Those readers whose curriculum is currently guaranteed and viable may wish to skip the sections in this chapter about curriculum issues.

### **PROCESS OVERVIEW**

This book will describe the process shown in Figure 0.1 (page xiv), that is, how the local practitioner can work with his or her own local personnel to use the state standards as the basis for Power Standards, as developed and operationalized by Larry Ainsworth and Doug Reeves. The book will

explain how, once these Power Standards are developed by a task force of local educators, to take the Power Standards in a completely different direction than is normally taken and use the Power Standards as the basis for an aligned curriculum and common assessments.

Through a process involving a task force of the same local personnel who developed the Power Standards, work will next be done to develop Quarterly Instructional Objectives. These Quarterly Instructional Objectives answer the question, If the Power Standard is the expected student learning for the year, then what must students learn first quarter? Second quarter? Third quarter? Fourth quarter? These Quarterly Instructional Objectives are developed through the same professional process as were the Power Standards. That is, local teachers, using the Power Standards (which are based on the state standards), will decide what specific skills must be learned and in what order those skills must be learned to ensure all students move toward mastery of the Power Standards in a logical progression of skills built on previously acquired skills.

These Quarterly Instructional Objectives will be aligned to the Power Standards and the subskills used by the state assessment to measure the content area. For example, if your state uses algebraic reasoning, number sense, integers, geometric reasoning, and statistics and probability to define math, then steps will be taken by the design task force to ensure all of these subskills are taught throughout the year in a predetermined sequence as determined by the local professional educators. Unlike pacing guides or lesson plans used by some schools or districts, these locally developed Quarterly Instructional Objectives will be anywhere from five to ten specific skills that will be taught by every teacher in that grade level or subject area during the academic quarter designated by those professionals. Please note that there is no attempt to determine *how* these things will be taught—that is the art of the individual teacher—but the task force will decide on and agree to *what* specific skills will be taught and *when* these skills will be taught throughout the school year.

These Quarterly Instructional Objectives can then serve as the basis for the development of common assessments, again by the same local personnel who have done the curriculum alignment work described above. While developing such common formative assessments has always proved a huge, almost insurmountable problem for most local educators, the use of the Quarterly Instructional Objectives and the very specific skills they identify as the sole basis for the instruction and the assessments for the specific quarter greatly reduce the complexity and consternation of the assessment development process. With such specific directives as “The student will add, subtract, multiply, and divide integers” (a real Quarterly Instructional Objective developed by one of my partner schools), the development of the common assessments, as well as the development of simple quizzes and tests, can be done and shared by local teachers within the grade level or course. Since this process ensures all

teachers are teaching the same skills in approximately the same order, such sharing between teachers is now possible.

Through the numbering system used (this will be shared in Chapter 4, Samples and Numbering the Quarterly Instructional Objectives section), these Quarterly Instructional Objectives can then be used to develop common assessments to measure student progress toward achieving the Power Standards and to develop real-time data showing student performance on specific skills. By tagging common assessment items to specific Quarterly Instructional Objectives, teachers can get instant feedback about which students have mastered which Quarterly Instructional Objective and which students have not, thus allowing for tutorial work that is focused on a specific, diagnosed weakness rather than the student's having failed the test. Specific areas of strength and weakness will be identified, and teachers will be given real-time data to drive decision making within the instructional process.

During this common assessment development process, it's important to remember what not only total quality management but also Wiggins and McTighe (1998) tell us about beginning with the end in mind and backwards design. As these Power Standards and Quarterly Instructional Objectives are developed, we must be aware that they will become the basis not only of all instruction but also of our common assessment system; therefore, we must consider their assessment potential as they are written. Can we write assessment items to measure these intended learnings? We will discuss this in more depth in the chapters that follow, but the reader is reminded of its importance to the process.

The last step in this process is developing a system to use all of this data to improve instruction and learning. We must begin to use these formative assessments and to generate leading indicators of student performance that will affect student performance. The creation of this kind of system to use all of the student performance data will take time and commitment, perhaps years, but it is a critical part of the process to ensure that we use these new formative assessments to alter instruction to improve student performance.

This process can be made much easier through the use of the Internet-based software package provided by Partners4results ([www.partners4results.org](http://www.partners4results.org)). This software package was developed as a result of the work the software company did with the author and is now available for those who wish to use software and the Internet to enable the process to be completed much easier and more efficiently. This process will be part of the descriptors used throughout the book, and the reader may use and explore this software package online at [www.partners4results.org/demo](http://www.partners4results.org/demo).

Further, all of this curriculum alignment and development work will be done in a continuous improvement environment with built-in checks and balances to ensure the process and the product are continually improved. Steeped in total quality management practices and especially

the Plan, Do, Check, Act cycle, this book will give the reader the opportunity to walk through the process in a step-by-step order to implement the technical changes needed in this process while continuously addressing the political and leadership realities and continuous improvement issues inherent in the change process. Each of these steps will be explained in the appropriate chapters in far greater detail, but an overview of the entire process is important to help the reader understand the expected learning.

The Plan, Do, Check, Act cycle is frequently amended in education by replacing the Check part of the cycle with Reflect; that is, we take the time to reflect on the impact of the work we do and the best ways to improve that work. Some even add Reflect as an additional step in the process. Any of those derivations can be applied and will work, so long as the point is that we are looking at our work and correcting and amending that work based on results that the work is producing or failing to produce.

During my early days as a district administrator, we were discussing the Plan, Do, Check, Act cycle; the task force was discussing how we in education have become the masters of the Plan, Do cycle. No matter what the problem or social issue, we can write a curriculum for it or develop a program to address the need. We are constantly in a state of developing curriculum or programs to address problems—a kind of constant Plan, Do, Plan, Do . . . cycle without ever checking to see if the new programs work (affect the desired behavior). While we were all laughing and enjoying the moment, one of the teachers interjected, “No, Joe, you plan, we do,” the point being that we need to make deliberate efforts to see (Check or Reflect) if the programs we design and deploy have any impact on the intended behaviors.

## WHAT ABOUT NATIONAL STANDARDS?

With all the excitement and trepidation surrounding the imminent adoption of national standards, many people are asking if districts should just wait for the new national standards to be implemented and then move forward with curriculum alignment projects. Why do all the work of aligning to state standards if those state standards are to be replaced by national standards? That is an important question and deserves some time and space in this book and in the reader’s thinking.

America really is serious about adopting and implementing the new national standards, and that is a really good thing. We, as a country, need to define what it is we want all of our children to know and be able to do to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century and beyond. To remain competitive at the international level, we must produce world-class learners with world-class skills, and the move to national standards can be a great step in that direction. Once these world-class standards are adopted

nationally, we can then begin to have the conversation about changing the structure of public education to meet those world-class standards.

The first thing we must remember is what Larry Lezotte teaches in his public speaking: there are only two kinds of schools, improving and declining. As institutions, we are either improving our services to kids and the results we produce, or we are declining. There simply is no way to hold our own, tread water, or whatever words may describe attempts to maintain the current state of education in this country. That being said, how do we justify inaction or a holding pattern until the new national standards are adopted and implemented?

Will we say to today's learners that there is a new initiative coming, and when that new initiative hits, we will respond to it and improve services then? That is hardly possible, nor is it the reason we became educators. We became educators because we want to help prepare the future leaders of the world, and that means all of our children all of the time. We simply cannot wait for the next innovation, the next big thing, the next whatever. We must operate within our current reality and do the absolute best we can do with the technologies and issues we currently have.

This is an opportunity for districts to be proactive in the face of the coming national standards. It will take time to finalize these national standards, but that time frame is not the issue. There are several issues that mandate curriculum alignment despite the impending national standards, or perhaps because of them:

- This curriculum alignment process will take the staff through the development of local Power Standards and instructional objectives and increase the staff's knowledge of and familiarity with standards in general.
- This series of curriculum alignment activities will prepare the staff to better understand and deal with standards-based education issues.
- This curriculum alignment work will lay the groundwork for a curriculum and assessment system to make the eventual transfer to national standards and the many issues that accompany this new initiative.
- The district will not be starting from scratch when it comes time to implement national standards but rather will have a framework and a process in place and functioning to deal with this new initiative.
- The district will be way ahead of the curve where research tells us we need to be.
- Can the district afford to do nothing with the standards initiative but wait until the change is made and then react to that change? Even a year can be a long time to delay such important work. Can the district afford to sit by and tell the community it is waiting for the new national standards to improve services? Can the system afford such inaction?

- The national standards, while they will not be completely aligned with any state's standards, will have lots of commonality with many existing state standards. Particular skills may move from one grade level to another, and subskills within the content area may be defined somewhat differently by the national standards, but the basic skill set will be transferable from the state to the national standards. That simply has to happen to allow a transition from state to national standards.

This is a chance for proactive districts and people to get ahead of the curve and position their districts much better than other districts that fail to see the opportunity in this new national standards initiative. The opportunity to be a leader in this transition process is here, but only for districts that choose to be leaders.

## **SURVEY OF CURRENT ENVIRONMENT**

As discussed earlier, those districts that have already done this curriculum alignment work may choose to skip this section. But for the rest of us, as we prepare to do this work, it is important to do what total quality management calls an environmental scan, that is, to assess the curriculum system currently in place. Once we know where we are, it is easier to chart where we want to go. Before we begin the journey, let's look to see where we are.

Some systems do a SWOT analysis as described in total quality management, that is, an analysis of strengths, weaknesses (internal), opportunities, and threats (external). These four areas are shared with a leadership group, and each person is asked to respond to each area privately—what do they personally see in each area? Following time to do such individual work, the individual tables or small groups are asked to come to consensus on the group's answer to the questions posed. The facilitator then does the same exercise with the entire group to come to consensus on the issues.

The advantage of this approach is that it builds group consensus on problems and issues. However, it is time consuming, and it is not always possible to involve all members of the organization in this process. The main issue you will want to come to grips with is the current state of the curriculum process in the district since this is the area of focus for this project. Frequently found in many districts are the curriculum realities discussed in the next couple of sections. It is important that readers understand these curriculum issues so that they may make sure these curriculum issues are addressed through this process of curriculum alignment.

There are districts that have done exemplary work in this curriculum alignment process, and they are to be congratulated for their efforts. It is, however, still critical to ask these questions to make sure these issues are considered by everyone doing this work. If your district has done this

work, that is great. If not, you will find a blueprint for doing the work in this book. So let's examine the critical questions.

### **Do You Even Have a Curriculum?**

While at first glance this may seem like a silly question, it is indeed a very important question to be asked. As Mike Schmoker, Larry Lezotte, Doug Reeves, and others tell us, although a guaranteed and viable curriculum is the first and most important step in improving student performance, not all districts have such a document. A curriculum is guaranteed when the local education system can guarantee it is taught in every classroom in the district. A curriculum is viable when it is aligned to the state standards and assessments.

Many people who are not involved in education assume that the curriculum in schools and districts is controlled by a very tight set of expectations and academic skills that are universally taught at specific grade levels and times of the year. Many also believe that these curriculum expectations are held across school, district, and even state lines. In many, if not most, systems, nothing could be further from the truth. Every district in this country has been free to determine what will be taught and when it will be taught. This freedom, combined with the natural evolution of organizations, has led to a national educational system that is all over the board about what is taught and when it is taught.

For several years in the 1990s, I taught graduate-level curriculum courses to teachers and administrators at a couple of colleges and universities in the south suburbs of Chicago. These teachers and administrators practiced in some very prestigious suburban districts as well as some of the more challenging environments. During the first class meeting of every semester, I would make the same offer—if anyone in the class could bring the district curriculum documents that drove his or her instruction and determined what he or she taught, that student would receive an A on the first test. No such grade was ever given.

People could sometimes find curriculum documents through a friendly secretary or older teacher who just happened to know where one of the old curriculum guides had been stashed. Usually written years ago, as a personal favor to the teacher or administrator, these documents were generally found on a forgotten shelf somewhere. Documents that were yellow with age (and even a few still published in purple spirit-masters, for those old enough to remember that technology) or dusty and forgotten in some storage cabinet were occasionally produced, but nobody ever produced a current document that really drove instruction. Following such a revelation, we discussed what, then, does determine what the teachers teach the kids. It boiled down to the same answers—the textbook, what the teacher liked, what the other teachers recommended, and so forth. In such an environment, how can we expect real curriculum alignment to happen?

While state standards attempt to standardize curriculum expectations across a single state, there is still much discretion at the local level in deciding what will be taught and when it will be taught. In fact, even mentioning state standards as a kind of state curriculum can elicit cries of anguish about academic freedom from many practitioners. Over the years, the public education system has been built through local control and independent decision making, and in many cases, classroom preferences have determined what is taught and when it is taught.

Real curriculum documents that drive everyday instruction in a meaningful way simply do not exist in many districts. What really gets taught is frequently a matter of choice or chance, not design. But do not blame the teachers for some kind of plot to avoid responsibility or academic content. Teachers, for the most part, are hard-working, child-centered, dedicated professionals who are doing their best to survive in an environment rich in accountability and poor in support. The educators discussed in the story box have simply never been told exactly what it is they are expected to teach.

When I first taught high school English in a large, prestigious, suburban high school, I was given a 400-page curriculum document containing about every skill known to man, which I was expected to teach to my sophomore English students. When I asked for more specific direction, I was told to “figure it out.” I made those instructional decisions for my students, and the other sophomore English teachers (I believe there were six) made their own individual choices.

While most teachers strive to do the best that they can in such an unaligned system, there is no possibility that the efforts of that entire English department, or any other academic department or grade level in the country, can be even remotely aligned to any outside document such as state standards or the ACT, or anything else for that matter. And how did the sophomore English teachers’ efforts serve the needs of the junior English teachers? Not at all, I’m sure. However, since all teachers were pretty much free to do as they saw fit, it never really mattered. In an unaligned system such as this and many others in America, teachers simply taught what they thought to be important or what they enjoyed and let the test scores (if there were any back then) fall where they may. Besides, what drove the education system for many years was the bell curve, which told us that some kids were supposed to achieve, and some kids weren’t—“Don’t blame me, I just taught ‘em.”

Remember, as Larry Lezotte tells us, we are not in trouble because we did something wrong; we’re in trouble because our mission changed. We went from compulsory attendance to compulsory learning for all students, but we have not changed our system to reflect our new mission.

What about the state standards that almost all states have since adopted? Don’t those clearly outline the learning expectations for all students? No, because many states have done little to operationalize standards across the entire state in a focused, understandable way. While some



state standards have been around a long time, the standards themselves have received scattered and often minimal attention. Also, simply putting the standards on the state's website with some explanatory directions and links to other sites does not operationalize state standards nor reform the existing system into a standards-based system.

While working in the middle school environment years ago, I presented a program about creating middle schools from junior highs at a state conference and explained to the audience that the conversion from a traditional junior high to a fully functioning middle school was a three- to five-year process with staff development, research, and so forth required to really do the work.

Following my presentation, a school board member approached me and explained how wrong my timeline was and how his district had made the conversion in a single board meeting by passing a resolution changing the name of all four junior highs to middle schools. It was quick and efficient and had worked, or so he thought.

Also, let's not blame the administrators for a lack of dedication or leadership. Again, the administrators I have dealt with, for the most part, are hard-working, dedicated people. Some feel overwhelmed, to be sure, but they are a great resource and partner in this curriculum leadership initiative. Administrators provide the leadership, and they must absolutely be a part of this initiative. However, few national models for effectively aligning curriculum documents to the state standards exist, and these are hard to find and daunting to many administrators who lack experience in curriculum and instruction. Since each state has its own standards, a national model is hard to create, but this book will explain such a model that can and has worked. More professional educators need to become aware of these proven approaches through conferences and books like this, which give local people the kind of support and advice they need to move the change-agenda initiative forward.

In a discussion with a social studies department that was looking at the state standards for a particular grade level, the entire department saw that the standards for that grade level were evenly divided between the American Revolution and Westward Expansion. One agitated teacher said to me, "Joe, you don't get it. I became a social studies teacher because I love to teach the American Revolution. Are you saying I can't teach the American Revolution?" Before I could answer, one of the other teachers in the department said, "Yes, you can still teach the American Revolution, but you just can't teach it all year long like you have been." That is the point. We have a very good, well-intentioned teacher spending all his time and passion on a favorite topic and ignoring the other parts of the state standards.

First and foremost, the most important curriculum question that must be asked is similar to the question I asked those graduate students years ago: Can anyone produce the district curriculum documents that drive instruction and determine what kids learn? Does the district have a single document that guides instruction in every classroom in the district? Not just the elementary classes, not just the academic classes, not just the regular education classes, but all classes—from kindergarten through high school in all content areas. Has the district formally decided and published, and the board adopted, a single document or series of documents that describe what every child must know and be able to do?

So back to the original question posed above—Can anyone produce the district curriculum documents that drive instruction and determine what kids are expected to learn? Does the district have a single document that guides instruction in every classroom in the district? Once a system produces that document, if it exists, the reader can go on to the next steps, ensuring that the document is truly aligned to the state standards and assessments, that it is universally deployed, and that those using it are fully prepared to do so. But we first have to find that curriculum document or admit it does not exist. Either answer is a good answer in the change process—once we know where we are, plotting where we are going is easier.

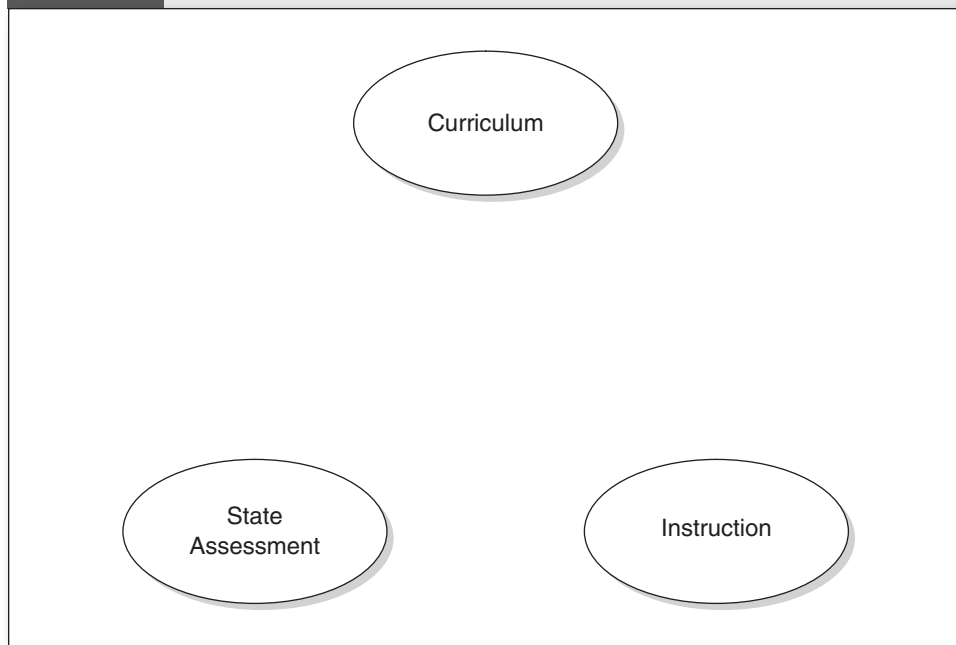
Remember, if you can't find the curriculum guide or teachers don't know whether it even exists, the district really doesn't have such a document. Finding one through a secretary who has been around for years and knows where the document is hidden or stored does not count. The curriculum guide must be a real, living document that teachers use to design instruction and follow faithfully to determine what all kids must know and be able to do.

In a district that I recently worked with for two years, I posed this same question about the existence of a curriculum. The curriculum person with whom I was working was quick to confirm that they indeed had a district curriculum document, which even had a pacing component to it that told teachers what to teach and when to teach it. I was impressed and asked to see it.

A year and a half later, we were still looking for it. Several people had heard of it, some even claimed to have seen it, but nobody could produce the document itself. After two years, we agreed that they might have such a document, but nobody could find it.

### **Do You Have Three Curricula?**

Currently, in many school districts, there are three distinct and separate curricula, as shown in Figure 1.1. The first curriculum (Curriculum) is the curriculum that is published by the district. This is the existing written document, if there is one, which outlines the expected learnings for every student in every class. The second curriculum (Instruction) is the curriculum taught

**Figure 1.1** Unaligned Curricula

by the teachers, which may or may not be consistent throughout the district. In many districts, the second curriculum is not the same as the district curriculum and, in fact, varies from classroom to classroom within the same grade level and within the same school—basically teachers are making individual decisions about what is and what is not taught. The third curriculum (State Assessment) is the curriculum that is assessed by the state assessment. Please note the absolute lack of connection among the three curricula—that is the real problem in many current student performance issues—there is no alignment among these three curricula, especially between the curriculum being taught to the students and the curriculum being assessed by the state.

While talking to a high school science department comprising four teachers teaching the introductory biology class, we got into a discussion about the most critical parts of biology. The first teacher was quick to say that understanding cell structure is the most important part of learning biology. Teacher 2 disagreed and explained that understanding the chemical reactions within the cell is critical to understanding biology. The third teacher corrected both of the others and explained why knowing genetics is most essential. I cannot even remember what the fourth teacher selected as the critical factor in understanding biology, but I believe my point is made. Can anyone even remotely believe that a coordinated, aligned curriculum in biology exists in that building? Better yet, can the teachers who teach the follow-up course, Chemistry I, get a group of students who are equally prepared for the next course in the mandated sequence?

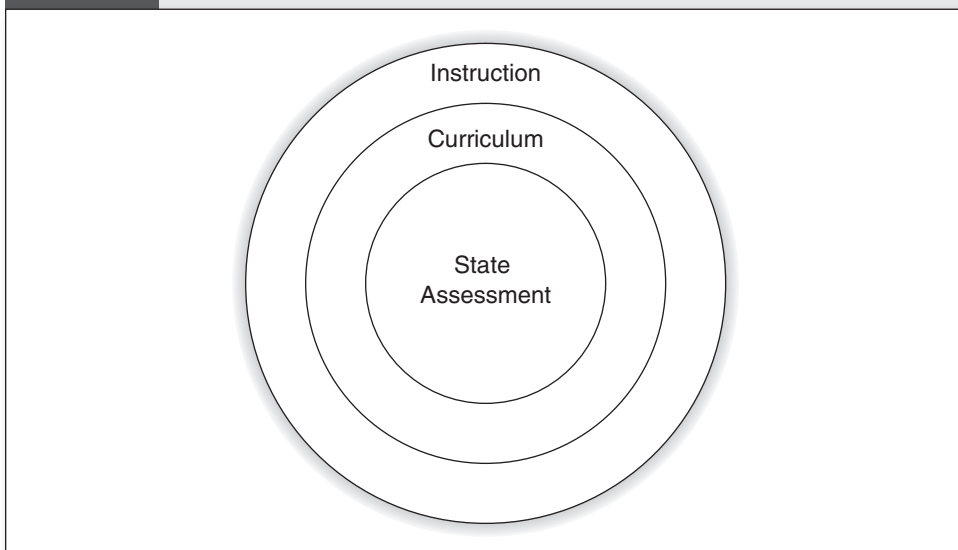
Curriculum alignment will help not only the current classroom teacher but also the classroom teacher who will have those students in the next course or grade level. I have since had conversations similar to that presented in the story box with many science and other subject-area teachers, with similar results.

Larry Ainsworth, who coined the term *Power Standards* and did the work that led to those Power Standards, talks about asking teachers, Who has taught all the state standards assigned to their grade level? Of course, nobody has, so the questions follow, How did you choose? Based on what? The problem is, of course, that all teachers use different criteria and choose different standards, resulting in the biology issues discussed above. That leads to the current state of affairs in curriculum—there are very few coherent, well-defined, and aligned curricula that are taught by entire school systems, much less used by entire states.

Figure 1.2, based on the work and writings of Lisa Carter (2007) and others, shows the ideal state of curriculum alignment. Please note that in the diagram, there is no intent to establish the state assessment as the only thing taught. That would be foolish. The point is to ensure that the state assessment is central to what our children are taught—educators owe students that if they are expected to demonstrate proficiency or better on that state assessment.

In addition to the skills and standards contained in the state assessment, the curriculum that is taught covers many issues and topics, which is as it should be, but we need to take steps to ensure the state standards and assessment system are central to our instructional focus.

**Figure 1.2** Aligned Curricula



Due to the secretive nature of the state assessments and the difficulty of finding and using released items, teachers do not always know specifically what students are expected to do on the state assessments. Think about that! Public education has well-intentioned, hard-working professionals preparing students for assessments that the teachers themselves have not seen and do not really understand. Would America tolerate such a system in medical school? Commercial pilot school?

That is my point, exactly. If the district does not exercise its management prerogative to decide, publish, and ensure what gets taught and when it gets taught, the lack of focus and agreement on curriculum is a *fait accompli*. It is also critical to point out that while I call for districts to exercise their management prerogative to decide, publish, and ensure the curriculum that is taught, I do so in an inclusive, teacher-driven process that involves those who will implement the decision. Curriculum decisions, that is, aligning to the state standards, must be subject to the judgment of those closest to the ground, the teachers who do the daily work. While the process must happen under the guidance and supervision of the administrative team, the decisions must ultimately be made by the teachers who will teach the skills. It is a collective work that must engage all. The teacher voice must be heard and be a major component of the decision-making process.

In my work as a consultant, it is not at all unusual to be in junior high and high school classrooms and witness English teachers teaching parts of speech and subject-verb agreement, even though that is a second-, third-, or even fourth-grade state standard. Seeing rote drill in times tables or work with fractions in junior high is also not unusual. These teachers are not trying to hold back kids to keep them from being successful. They are doing what they think is right, but the system has failed both the kids and their teachers by not clearly defining and enforcing a guaranteed and viable curriculum.

One of the forms we use to help districts assess their current curriculum realities is presented in the What the Research Tells Us box. Teachers are asked to respond to this survey, building principals then collate the responses for their buildings (instructional leaders need to know the current curriculum reality in their buildings), and then the person responsible for curriculum at the central office collates the results for the entire district. As with many of the forms shown in this book, the spacing has been changed to make publishing easier.

### WHAT THE RESEARCH TELLS US

The research and work of Larry Lezotte, Mike Schmoker, Doug Reeves, Rick Stiggins, and many others continually point out the importance of a guaranteed and viable curriculum in improving student performance. The research is crystal clear on the impact of an aligned and viable curriculum as the first step in improving student performance, and gains of 25 to 30 percent are seen by doing this work.

That being said, let's talk about where you and your building/district are in that process of creating a guaranteed (taught in every classroom in the district) and viable (aligned to state standards) curriculum. Please respond to each of the questions below as a kind of reality check on your current efforts and progress toward a guaranteed and viable curriculum.

On a scale of 1 to 5, please rate your current status in each area listed below the scale.

#### Scale

1 = *Not really a strong area—we've talked some about it but that's about it.*

2 = *We have looked at this issue and have discussed what we should do but have not begun any of the work.*

3 = *We are in the planning stages but have not really selected our approach or set a budget, timeline, and so forth.*

4 = *We have begun the process, have a game plan in place, and are moving forward on a timetable.*

5 = *We have accomplished this goal; our current state reflects national best practice, and we could share our work with others.*

1. Our school/district has an actual, published curriculum document in place that is aligned to the state standards and state assessment system and is readily accessible for all.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Our school/district has an actual, published curriculum document that defines and drives all instruction in the school/district and is used by all professional staff to plan instruction.	1	2	3	4	5
3. Our school/district has spent the time and the resources to ensure all of our professional staff understand the state standards and are able to use those standards as the basis for designing instruction.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Our school/district has spent the time and the resources to ensure all of our professional staff understand the state assessment system, the skills all of our students must demonstrate, and how they must demonstrate those skills.	1	2	3	4	5

5. Our school/district has a set of common, aligned formative assessments that are used by all professional staff on predetermined dates to measure student progress toward achieving state standards.	1	2	3	4	5
6. Our school/district is able to provide real-time data to our staff to report the results of the common, formative assessments in a timely manner so said results can be used in the reteaching loop to address specific, diagnosed weaknesses.	1	2	3	4	5
7. Our school/district has the electronic capability to report to students and parents that same real-time data about student performance on all of our common, aligned assessments.	1	2	3	4	5
8. Our school/district has the electronic capability to enable our administrators to monitor curriculum and instruction and to create and share data charts about current instructional practices with staff for the purpose of improving student performance.	1	2	3	4	5
9. Our school/district has an electronic curriculum map that is interactive and available 24-7 for our staff to share their successes and challenges in curriculum implementation.	1	2	3	4	5
10. Our school's/district's curriculum and instruction system formally uses continuous feedback (Plan, Do, Check, Act) to ensure the curriculum is constantly being improved, refined, and made more effective.	1	2	3	4	5

This preassessment is designed to help you see and understand the current state of your school's/district's curriculum and instruction system so that you may better prepare to move forward and improve student performance. In a perfect world, you would be able to rate each area a 5, but that is seldom the current reality.

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The critical issue with the form in the What the Research Tells Us box is determining whether there is a central curriculum document that defines and drives all instruction—not a document somewhere on a shelf or server that nobody uses or responds to but a real, living curriculum document. This process will help you move toward this kind of document.

While I was working with a district on developing math Power Standards and instructional objectives, we were having our vertical articulation discussion to make sure we had covered all the essential skills and in the correct order. The fifth-grade teachers began the conversation with, "When we get the new fifth graders, they can never divide fractions." The fourth-grade teachers quickly responded, "Don't blame us, they teach that in third grade." The third-grade teachers responded with a blank stare and replied, "We thought that was part of the fourth-grade curriculum." The point is obvious; without serious, ongoing discussions like the ones required in the creation and maintenance of Power Standards and instructional objectives, such errors are happening everywhere.

## WHAT ARE POWER STANDARDS?

The concept of Power Standards was introduced by Larry Ainsworth (2003a) in his book *Power Standards* and refined and operationalized by Doug Reeves during years of groundbreaking work and research. If the state standards are truly to be the basis for all instruction in the state, then educators must decide which standards at each grade level are the most critical to be taught. Since teachers cannot possibly teach all the state standards, let's decide on the state standards that students absolutely must learn and then do everything to ensure students learn these identified standards.

In current writing and research, there are several similar terms that essentially define Power Standards. They are referred to as "understandings" (Wiggins & McTighe, 2007, cited in Westerberg, 2009, pp. 33–34), "measurement topics" (Marzano, 2006, cited in Westerberg, 2009, pp. 33–34), "essential learnings" (NASSP, 2004, cited in Westerberg, 2009, pp. 33–34), and "Power Standards" (Reeves, 2001, cited in Westerberg, 2009, pp. 33–34). What all of these terms are essentially defining are those essential skills that all children must know and be able to do.

That is the long and the short of Power Standards. A group of professional educators must sit down in an organized fashion with certain documents and decide which of the many state standards are so important and so critical that they must be learned by all students.

So how will your system decide which of the state standards will be used to determine the Power Standards? While the complete list of state standards can be overwhelming, further work and cooperation among the teaching staff can refine these long lists down to the most important, most critical skills, which will then become the basis of all classroom instruction. These are the Power Standards that guide classroom instruction and



assessment and provide the kind of laser-like focus the teacher needs to deliver quality education for all students. A more complete discussion of this process is in Chapter 4.

In his book *"Unwrapping" the Standards*, Larry Ainsworth (2003b) proposes the following exercise to help teachers understand the standards. After selecting the standard to be "unwrapped," the group carefully reads it and underlines the key concepts the student is expected to learn (important nouns and noun phrases); the group then identifies and circles the verbs (what the student is expected to do with that concept—identify, evaluate, analyze, and so forth). The concepts are what students must know and skills, while performance verbs are what they must be able to do with what they know. This gives the entire group a graphic representation of precisely what the state standard is expecting the students to know and be able to do to meet the standard.

I have worked with John Antonetti, a prominent national consultant in educational reform, and he does something very similar but even more striking. He has the group use two highlighters, one color for important nouns and the other color for verbs. This shows in a visual way the skills and performances being required in the state standards.

Either method works and helps teachers come to a greater understanding of the state standards. The group then goes on to put the information into a graphic organizer, which can be as simple as putting concepts (nouns) at the top (things they need to know), skills in the middle (what they need to be able to do with the concepts), and topics/context (what content we will use to teach the standard) at the bottom.

Let's make one thing completely clear; the Power Standards are not proposed in any way to oppose state standards. State standards begin to clarify and codify what educators want students to know and be able to do, but these long lists of state standards do not provide teachers the kind of clarity needed to guide instruction. As explained throughout this book, the alignment of the three curricula is critical to improving student performance, the most important goal. What the system must do is provide the time, structure, and leadership to come to consensus on the most important and most critical learnings for that system. Once the system decides to work together to do this, a process must be developed to ensure those learnings are universally taught and assessed in a systematic way. Deployment issues will be explored in detail later.

I often relate the standards, assessment system, and many of the complex issues facing educators to the shape and size of a football. If only the football were round and a bit smaller, say like a soccer ball, it would bounce much straighter, take fewer "weird" hops, be easier to catch and throw, and generally make life easier for the players. However, the nature of the game is designed around this unusually shaped ball and its many idiosyncrasies. You can't change it, and if you did, it would destroy the uniqueness of the game. Learn to live with it, deal with it, and enjoy it, and do your best.

Also, it must be understood that this exercise of identifying Power Standards is not designed to, nor should it venture to, argue about whether the state has selected the appropriate state standards. The state standards are what they are, and the local group cannot change them, so do not spend time arguing about whether those standards are what they should be, whether the state followed a good process in determining them, and on and on. All of that is irrelevant. The state standards are here to stay, and it looks as if they will be replaced with national standards. If any of these standards are modified, they will be modified by a group other than the local one working with this process. Don't waste energy discussing that which cannot be changed, and get on with the task at hand, using the state standards to focus instruction and learning in the building or district.

Once the information about the standards is gathered and feelings are expressed, then the system must integrate this information, data, and judgment into a singular Power Standard, an expression of the most critical, most important skills that all students must know and be able to do in a grade level or course.

Once these essential learnings are identified, we must do what Doug Reeves discusses in *Making Standards Work* (2003): "Pull the Weeds Before Planting the Flowers" (Chapter 13) and take a long, hard look at letting go of those classroom activities that do not help us teach those essential learnings (pp. 103–105).

As discussed in numerous places in this book and throughout the curriculum world, the current curriculum is "a mile wide and an inch deep." Power Standards give educators the opportunity to correct that once and for all. This process allows educators to make a conscious, deliberate decision about what all students must know and be able to do and limit that to a teachable, learnable number of skills.

## PROCESS SUMMARY

The actual process has not yet begun, so you are studying and preparing to do the work. Make sure you have done your homework and are totally

familiar with Power Standards, Quarterly Instructional Objectives, and common assessments. Also, take the time to really understand the internal politics and the current curriculum system and how it has functioned in the past. Remember, the purpose of this project is to move forward, not prosecute the past.

### **Political Issues**

Understanding the local politics is also of paramount importance in this stage of the process. To bring a system to consensus on an issue as important and complex as defining the real curriculum, that is, to define the curriculum that is actually taught and assessed, is a huge undertaking, and bringing all members of the system on board, supportive of this initiative, is demanding work. That work demands not only an understanding of the technical issue of Power Standards but also an understanding of and willingness to work within the political realities of the local system.

### **Leadership Issues**

Use your knowledge of the political system and your professional leadership skills to listen to people, to help them understand the project, to create buy-in, and to answer questions and clear up concerns. Your commitment and dedication to helping all participants understand what you are doing, why you are doing it, and their role in that change is critical to moving this forward. Take your time and do it right.

### **Continuous Improvement Issues**

Continuous improvement skills are not required at this stage of the process, other than constantly referring to the Plan, Do, Check, Act cycle as a part of the finished product. Remember, you will not be asking people to commit to a single answer that will remain in place forever; you will be working with them to create curriculum documents that will be examined and refined on an annual basis. Whatever decisions are made, the Plan, Do, Check, Act cycle will be used to continuously improve the work and process.

### **Technical Skills**

At this stage of the process, you must make sure you totally understand the concept of Power Standards, how to develop them, and the importance of doing so. If more information is needed in understanding or developing Power Standards, further reading of this book will be helpful, but it is imperative you feel comfortable with the concept of Power Standards and the need for them before you move this initiative forward.

### **PROCESS CHECKLIST**

Make sure you do or consider the following:

- Educate all members of the educational community about what Power Standards are and the process to be followed in developing those Power Standards.
- Develop and deploy a specific plan to share the work and thinking of the task force.
- Ensure, as the leader, that your knowledge of Power Standards and the entire process is complete. If needed, an outside consultant can be brought in, or you may choose to do this work yourself.
- Take the needed steps to understand the local politics and to bring as many people as possible on board for the project. Future problems may be avoided by particular attention to these issues early in the process.
- Deal with and address the political issues identified in the district as you design the work, addressed in the next chapter.
- Do the work to assess and understand the current state of curriculum in the district. This may entail use of the survey included in this chapter, or you may judge that it is not needed.