

Leading a Standards-Based System: Aligning Policy to Standards

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State boards of education have been developing, adopting, and implementing learning standards for students since the 1980s. The American standards-based movement can be traced to the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983. Ever since, states have been reviewing and revising learning standards in the hopes of helping students excel in colleges and careers. Standards are here to stay, whether or not a state has opted for such efforts to harmonize standards as the Common Core State Standards or the Next Generation Science Standards. But it is not enough to adopt and implement standards. That is only a beginning. State boards of education must also embark on the complex but crucial work of truly leading and governing a standards-based education system, which, when done with fidelity, can help ensure high levels of student performance.

Policy Alignment

In a standards-based system, learning standards cannot be adopted or implemented in isolation. They must be the hub of all other education system components, permeating all other system functions and serving as the lens through which state board members view all policy design and development (figure 1). Regardless of which standards are adopted, they must ground all strategic planning and subsequent decisions; in this way, a standards-based system keeps learning as its primary focus. In this first of a series of Policy Updates, I introduce a model for policy alignment, the elements of which will be discussed further in subsequent Updates.

Although some policies—regarding health, safety, finance, and transportation, for example—lack a direct connection to learning standards, many policies need to be aligned with them. This model organizes those policies into six categories: expectations, curriculum, materials, measures of effectiveness, accountability, and professional learning.

Expectations. Learning standards' primary purpose is to establish expectations for students at each level and academic area. Are policies that outline expectations for teachers and other educational leaders aligned to helping students attain the standards? Otherwise, time, effort, and other resources will be wasted.

Curriculum. Standards are not curriculum, but they are close cousins. Standards establish

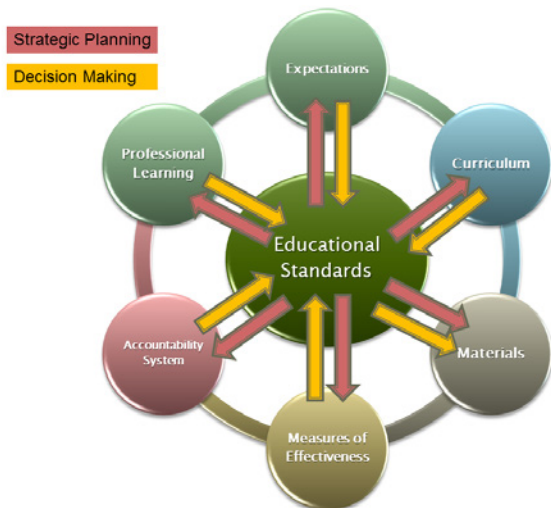
the end product while curriculum is the means to that end. Most, if not all, state boards govern graduation requirements. But board authority on curriculum varies widely beyond that: Some boards tightly control curriculum at the state level, some at the district level, and some locally. Regardless, curriculum governance must closely track the central learning standards lest a major disconnect thwart students' success in meeting them.

Materials. At least 23 states have policies on approval of instructional materials. In many classrooms, these materials—including software, supplements, and textbooks—underpin most instruction. If they are not aligned with standards, instruction is not likely to be either.

Measures of Effectiveness. Measurement is the most high-profile area in the policy web, aside from the standards themselves. Thus, transparency is paramount. The standards serve as the basis for effective assessment design. Not only are aligned assessments important for reporting student performance, but with the advent of the flexibility waivers under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), they also measure teacher and school/district performance. Some states have comprehensive assessment systems that go beyond summative assessments to include interim, benchmark, and formative processes. All should be aligned to the core learning standards to drive improved student performance.

Accountability System. The federal government requires that all states have accountability systems that align to learning standards. Those states that engaged in the ESEA flexibility





process already considered the relationship of standards to school system support, rewards, and educator effectiveness, thus guaranteeing alignment of some policies. Other policies often go unexamined. For instance, some boards have separate school accreditation models that are extraneous to federal accountability requirements; those, too, must be aligned to support learning standards. Are there policies that govern public reporting of board or state-level leadership effectiveness? If so, those policies must also be reviewed through the standards lens.

Professional Learning. State boards of education vary in their authority over professional preparation, licensure, and development. No two ways about it: Teaching in a standards-based system is hard. All these policies need to be aligned to produce a work force able to design and deliver a standards-grounded instructional program.

Next Steps

Strategic Planning. Aligning the policy web is essential to *establishing* a standards-based system. But that is merely the first step. Once state boards have aligned their policies, they must *operationalize* it, continually revisiting, developing, refining, and extending the central standards-based system itself; it must become a way of planning, leading, and living as a board. A board's strategic planning begins with the standards as core and moves outward (figure 2). This process will institutionalize the concept of continuous improvement of the system, of districts, of schools, and of the board itself.

Decision Making. Perhaps the most difficult part of operationalizing a standards-based system is decision making. The process is the obverse of strategic planning: While planning begins with standards and moves toward actions to improve student achievement, decision making points back to the center, examining how each choice will serve the core mission (figure 2).

State Examples

Many states have made great progress in designing and developing systems centered on high-quality learning standards for all students.

Maryland. The Maryland State Department of Education develops and implements standards and policy for pre-kindergarten through high school under the leadership of the State Board of Education. Its 2005 [strategic plan](#) lists five priorities: “improving student achievement; building educators’ capacity to improve student achievement; building an aligned, understandable system of instruction, curriculum, and assessment; fostering positive school environments; and involving families in education.” To achieve its goals, the department developed and implemented a streamlined, voluntary state curriculum; expanded opportunities for teacher feedback in its professional development program; encouraged transparency by requiring districts to explain their professional development plans to their teachers; and required all school systems to develop and adopt policies on family involvement.

Massachusetts. The Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education’s 2010 Conditions for School Effectiveness specify actions schools and districts should take to best support student academic achievement and how [to gauge practice](#). For example, to gauge the effectiveness of leadership and governance, “[L]eaders should establish, implement, and evaluate the effectiveness of policies and procedures that are standards-based, driven by student data, and designed to promote continuous improvement of instructional practice and high achievement...” Other key areas include curriculum and instruction, assessment, human resources and professional development, student support, and financial and asset management.

Kentucky. The Kentucky Board of Education and Department of Education developed [strategic plans](#) for students, teachers, and administrators in August 2014 specifying goals and policy actions geared toward improving student academic achievement. For example, the plan specifies that professional development programs and experiences should be “aligned to the Kentucky Core Academic Standards.”

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Resources

Francis Eberle, “Next Generation Science Standards: Implications of Adoption,” [Policy Update 20, no. 2 \(2013\)](#).

Francis Eberle, “Next Generation Science Standards: Implications of Adoption—Part 2,” [Policy Update 20, no. 7 \(2013\)](#).

“Implementing the Common Core,” [State Education Standard 12, no. 2 \(2012\)](#).

Elizabeth Ross, “Common Core Standards: After Adoption, What Comes Next?” [Policy Update 17, no. 9 \(2010\)](#).