

# District Vignette

## Ensuring Consistent Alignment and Rigor in Interim Assessments Across Schools



When Middle City School District leaders looked at their fourth graders' disappointing results on the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading assessment, they gulped. "We have a lot of work to do to get our children on track for college and careers," Superintendent Avery Jordan told her senior staff. "And we have to start with elementary school."

Superintendent Jordan and her leadership team formulated a plan. Over the course of the next school year, every elementary school principal would administer three common school-wide assessments covering key college- and career-ready literacy standards for students in third through fifth grade. Superintendent Jordan explained to principals that district leaders would use students' results to help determine what support each school needed. While the literacy standards addressed by each assessment would be consistent across the district, each school would be empowered to design its own assessments.

Kara Thompson, Middle City's director of professional development, liked the flexibility the plan gave schools but knew there would be challenges. Even if each school designed assessments that addressed the same reading standards, she suspected that there would be variability among them. With the introduction of new standards in the district, she knew teachers hadn't yet developed an understanding of the skills needed to meet them. She also knew that the assessments had to be rigorous and measure whether students really were meeting the standards that the State eventually would assess; however, she also wanted the assessments to measure a range of skills related to the standards so teachers would understand what their students know and can do and adjust their instruction appropriately.

Thompson decided to plan a series of summer training sessions for the literacy coaches from each elementary school in the district. They in turn would lead

assessment development at their schools. She would use two of the modules from the *Assessment Design Toolkit*<sup>1</sup>—those focused on alignment and rigor—as key components of her professional development plan.

Thompson introduced the module on alignment to the coaches at the beginning of the first session. "This video is designed to help teachers figure out how to 'unpack' a complex standard to identify all the specific skills it contains," she explained. Before clicking the play button, she passed out copies of the resources included with the two online modules: the note-taking templates, the assessment blueprint and Bloom's Taxonomy, the tool Middle City School District used to talk about levels of thinking.

Pausing the video at the 14-minute mark, Johnson asked participants to discuss the first "check for understanding" with the person sitting next to them: *Why is alignment critical to a well-designed assessment? What might happen if an assessment item is not aligned in terms of content?* As she walked around the room, she heard murmurs of recognition from the coaches as they shared personal experiences related to the prompt. "I've definitely given kids assessment items that unintentionally measured the wrong thing," one coach confessed, while his partner nodded in affirmation.

At the end of the video, Thompson wanted participants to practice. Even though she thought the mathematics examples in the alignment module did a good job explaining the concepts, she knew that the literacy coaches would appreciate having English language arts (ELA) examples they could take back to their teachers. She especially wanted them to grapple with ELA standards that contained multiple skills, the way the fourth-grade mathematics standard used in the video did. She distributed copies of sample assessment items, some of which were better aligned than others to the ELA standards and asked the

<sup>1</sup> The *Assessment Design Toolkit* was developed under the auspices of the Reform Support Network, with funding from the U.S. Department of Education under contract #GS-23F-8182H.

coaches to spend the next 25 minutes discussing with their table groups how well-aligned they thought each item was with the associated standard.

Thompson circulated around the room as the teachers worked, pausing for a few minutes at a table of elementary school literacy coaches who were looking at assessment items aligned to a third-grade ELA standard that asked students to demonstrate an understanding of text by referring to text as the basis for the answers. The first assessment item she gave them was for *Little House in the Big Woods* by Laura Ingalls Wilder. One of the coaches read it aloud to the rest of his table group: “Ma and Pa assigned daily chores to Laura and her sister Mary. What chores or jobs do you have to do at home?”

“This question isn’t well-aligned to the standard,” spoke up one of the other coaches at the table. “It’s asking the student to describe his or her own experience with chores, not the Wilders’. They wouldn’t even have had to read the book to answer it.”

“I think we could modify it pretty easily to align better, though,” said another coach. “What if you added something like, ‘How are your chores similar or different than Laura’s and Mary’s?’”

“Good thought,” said the first coach. “And you could add the sentence ‘Be sure to use at least three details from the text in your answer’ to make sure kids refer explicitly to the text the way the standard requires.”

As the group moved on to the next assessment item, Johnson walked over to observe another table’s discussion, confident that the coaches would be well-prepared to help their teachers with this concept back at their schools.

After a short coffee break, Thompson moved on to the module on rigor. Pausing the video at 14 minutes and 4 seconds, she challenged each table group to spend the next 20 minutes coming up with a short ELA assessment, aligned with a single standard, consisting of items that grow gradually more complex—similar to the basketball example in the video. “Especially when you’re measuring how well students have mastered a complex standard, it’s important to make sure your assessment covers a range of skills related to the standard. That way you’ll understand what all students know and can do,” she emphasized. “If your assessment contains items with a range of levels of rigor, you’re less likely to end up with some students who get everything wrong, and others who get everything right.”

“That’s a good point,” one of the coaches interjected. “My teachers always get frustrated when that happens, because in neither case have they learned anything about that student’s needs to help their teaching the next day.”

After watching the rest of the rigor module, Thompson asked the coaches to share some key takeaways.

“I appreciated the advice to focus on the verbs, rather than just on the key words in a standard,” shared a coach. “Look at the standard the module uses as an example: *Use the relationship between particular words—for example, synonyms, antonyms, homographs—to better understand each of the words.* I think a lot of the teachers at my school would say, ‘Oh yeah, that’s the standard about synonyms and antonyms.’ But the standard is actually asking kids to ‘use the relationship between words to understand both words better’—that’s a much more cognitively complex skill than just identifying antonyms from a list. I think a lot of the teachers at my school will appreciate the example that illustrates the difference between a low-level multiple-choice question and an item in which kids have to explain the meaning of a word based on context clues from a paragraph.”

At the end of the session, Thompson sent the literacy coaches home with an assignment: “Work with your teachers to use Bloom’s Taxonomy to determine the levels of rigor in each of the key standards designated by district leadership for your fall interim assessment. At our next session together, we’ll compare answers to help each of you prepare to work with your faculties to write or select assessment items that are well aligned with the standards in terms of both content and rigor.”

As the literacy coaches left for lunch, Thompson headed back to her office and sank into her desk chair, tired but cautiously optimistic. It was clear that having a common language and clear examples to use back at their schools would help the coaches and their teachers grapple with tricky issues related to rigor and alignment. But the proof would be in the assessments each school team ultimately designed—that is, in the level of the work the assessments asked students to produce. If district leaders were going to be able to take an honest look at the strengths and needs of all of their students, every school’s interim assessments would have to be well aligned to the content and rigor of the selected literacy standards. Thompson looked forward to taking a look at the coaches’ draft fall interim assessments to see how much they had gained from the series of sessions she had begun—and how much work still remained.