

WestEd's Curriculum-to-Standards Alignment Studies

Rigorous academic content standards can serve as critical levers for improving student achievement by signaling goals, focusing instruction, and establishing common learning expectations. Standards-based curricula, in turn, allow educators to implement the expectations of the academic content standards in the classroom. The credibility of this approach rests on evidence of alignment between curricula and standards. WestEd helps curriculum developers gather this evidence through independent, objective alignment analyses carried out by seasoned alignment study experts. Our alignment studies are designed with two key aims in mind: (1) satisfying rigorous evidence requirements, such as local education agencies' (LEA) expectations that curricula align to state academic content standards; and (2) providing meaningful and practicable feedback that contributes to the quality of standards-based curricula.

WestEd's Experience and Expertise

WestEd has conducted alignment studies for curriculum developers in numerous content areas, including English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies, as well as career-technical education (CTE) courses.

WestEd's Approach

Alignment refers to the match between the expectations for student learning, as defined by the academic content standards, and the curricula used for the instruction of students in the content and skills of those standards. WestEd's approach to evaluating alignment has been refined over time, with its foundations in the work of Norman Webb (1997, 2002, 2007).¹ Our methodology often focuses on analyses of the lessons, activities, labs, discussion questions, and critical-thinking questions within each set of curriculum materials. At the curriculum developer's request, the study may also include assessments, tests, or other supplementary materials as part of the analysis. Trained alignment specialists provide independent judgments about the

¹ Webb, N. L. (1997). *Research monograph number 6: Criteria for alignment of expectations and assessments in mathematics and science education*. Washington, DC: Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO); Webb, N. L. (2002). *Alignment study in language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies of state standards and assessments for four states*. Washington, DC: CCSSO; Webb, N. L. (2007). Issues related to judging the alignment of curriculum standards and assessments. *Applied Measurement in Education*, 20(1), 7–25.

relationships between individual lessons and relevant content standards. Our studies typically address two fundamental research questions:

- To what degree are the curricula aligned to academic content standards?
- Overall, which areas of the academic content standards are addressed by the curricula, and where are there gaps in coverage?

Our alignment studies generally proceed in two steps—individual lesson analyses and curricula analyses—described below.

Individual Lessons Analyses

Individual lessons, activities, labs, and quizzes are evaluated for alignment to content standards for categorical concurrence, which measures the strength of the relationship between each lesson, activity, lab, and quiz and one or more academic content standards. For each standard found to align to a lesson to some degree, analysts will provide a rating to indicate the strength of that alignment using a set of criteria.

Curricula Analyses

After the individual lessons, activities, labs, and quizzes are evaluated, WestEd’s alignment specialists determine the range of content alignment for the curricula. This process is critical to determine the extent to which the curricula, overall, address the full breadth of the academic content standards. At this step, WestEd documents any areas of the academic content standards that are not covered by the curricula.

Alignment Study Team Training

The alignment and evaluation study team includes staff with expertise and experience in alignment methodology, college- and career-readiness standards and assessments, and K–12 curriculum and instruction.

Prior to evaluating the alignment between curricula and standards, WestEd analysts conduct a thorough review of the standards, and the alignment specialists are trained in the use of the alignment protocol to ensure consistency of expectations. Prior to making any judgments, the analysts review a small subset of the curricula, and then, as a group, discuss their findings. This is to ensure that they can apply the alignment and evaluation protocol independently and accurately, as well as use the criteria consistently to assign ratings to curricula. The analysts also develop decision rules to ensure the rating process is standardized and applied consistently across grades and content areas. After training, the project lead monitors the ratings and

associated justifications to make certain the specialists continue to use the study protocols properly.

Final Report

Each alignment study report is tailored to meet the needs and expectations of the client. A report will typically provide summary findings. We also include a description of the methodology, protocol, training procedures, and all criteria and decision rules used by the specialists. Finally, WestEd provides detailed spreadsheets listing the ratings and comments for individual lessons.