

Aligning Curriculum Agenda

OUTCOME

Your leadership team will be prepared to support curriculum alignment at your school.

LEARNING GOALS

Your team will:

1. Build a shared understanding of curriculum alignment
2. Explore how to assess school curriculum alignment efforts
3. Create a plan to support curriculum alignment at the school

AGENDA ITEMS

Launching the Module

- Launch: *AC Handout 1* (5 minutes)

Learning Goal 1: What does curriculum alignment mean?

- Explore: Defining curriculum alignment, *AC Handout 2* (15 minutes)
- View: *Horizontal and Vertical Curriculum Alignment* (15 minutes)

Learning Goal 2: How can we assess our school's curriculum alignment efforts?

- View: *Aligning Curriculum Within and Across Grades* (15 minutes)
- Explore: Using an alignment matrix, *AC Handout 3* (20 minutes)

Learning Goal 3: How can we create a plan to support curriculum alignment at our school?

- Apply: Supporting curriculum alignment efforts, *AC Handout 4* (30 minutes)

Now What?

- Apply: Next steps, *AC Handout 5* (20 minutes)

Four Questions about Curriculum Alignment

DIRECTIONS

Before your team can guide—or launch—your school’s curriculum alignment efforts, you need to understand what curriculum alignment means. Read these questions and answers. Then turn to a partner and “say something.” You can give a brief summary of the reading or talk about a key point. Or you can share an idea about the content, a question, or a personal reaction.

What is curriculum alignment and why is it important?

Curriculum is how teachers organize and present content in the classroom (Drake, 2007; English, 2000; Posner, 2004). This includes what they teach, how they teach it, and how they assess learning. Merriam-Webster (2003) defines *align* as “to bring into line” and *alignment* as “positioning of different components relative to one another so that they perform as intended.”

So, what is curriculum alignment? It is *the way in which written content, instruction, and assessment work together to facilitate student achievement as defined by standards.*

When students fail to achieve, something is out of whack and needs to be brought back into line. The content might not be rigorous. It might not meet standards. Instruction might be weak. Assessments might not accurately gauge students’ learning, or they might not apply to the content. Many things could be “off.” The bottom line: Some part of the framework that supports student learning is weak or broken. You must diagnose the problem and help your school fix it.

My colleagues talk about “horizontal” and “vertical” alignment. What do these terms mean?

Horizontal alignment refers to alignment work done *at one grade level*, in discrete content areas, or across content areas. Examples of horizontal alignment:

- Eighth grade mathematics teachers work together to align their content, instructional strategies, and assessments and link them to the state’s standards and standardized mathematics test.
- The sixth grade interdisciplinary-content team develops common writing goals for all content areas. These goals complement the state’s literacy standards for the grade.

Vertical alignment focuses on aligning curriculum in a discrete content area (e.g., mathematics) *across grades within a school and/or across schools*, including elementary, middle, and high schools. Examples of vertical alignment:

- A middle school science department team articulates the content, instructional strategies, and summative assessments for each grade level. Then, the team aligns this curriculum to the state standards and assessments.
- Teachers from a middle school mathematics department work with elementary and high school teachers to align the K–12 mathematics curriculum to the state standards.

Schools often start alignment efforts by aligning the written curriculum to local, state, and/or national standards. Beyond this, schools embark on a variety of horizontal alignment and vertical alignment activities—such as the ones described above.

How does a horizontally and vertically aligned curriculum benefit students?

In schools that horizontally align their curriculum, students experience a common curriculum in one grade level, no matter who their teachers are. All students in a grade have a consistent learning experience. And all students move on to the next grade with the same knowledge base and skills. In schools that vertically align their curriculum, students thrive from each content area's sequential, conceptually-based curriculum as they move from grade to grade. Schools that vertically and horizontally align their curriculum can boost student outcomes in a big way. Their students benefit from a sturdy framework—what they learn, when they learn it, and how they show their learning—that supports their learning and is consistent and standards-based across and within grade levels.

How do we know if we are making the right alignment decisions? How can we tell if our school is making progress?

Your team's discussions about standards, content, instruction, and assessment are at the heart of all alignment efforts. Yet they are not enough. Curriculum alignment must progress from thought, to talk, to action, to assessment. It's a cycle, and a critical phase is documenting alignment efforts so you can track them.

Many schools use a curriculum mapping process to track their work. Teachers within a grade level or content area meet regularly. Together, they agree upon the standards or learning goals, core skills and content, instructional strategies, and assessments that will drive the curriculum at each grade level or within each content area. Then they create a curriculum map that shows their decisions; over time, they review and refine this map.

You can also use the following tools to track and assess your decisions and efforts:

- *Frameworks* which align common assessments within a content area
- *In and Out Goals* which clarify what students should know as they enter and exit a grade level or school
- *Concept maps* which illustrate the interconnection of curricular concepts (and often instructional materials) across grade levels
- *Matrices* which capture alignment efforts throughout a school (see *AC Handout 3* for an example)

REFERENCES

Drake, S. (2007). *Creating standards-based integrated curriculum: Aligning curriculum, content, assessment, and instruction*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

English, F. W. (2000). *Deciding what to teach and test: Developing, aligning, and auditing the curriculum*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Merriam-Webster, Incorporated. (2003). *Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary* (11th ed.). Springfield, MA: Author.

Posner, G. J. (2004). *Analyzing the curriculum*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Assessing Schoolwide Curriculum Alignment

Your team wants to help your school fix the things that are out of line. You know that doing so will make a big difference in students' learning experiences. Your first move is to gain a clear, "at-a-glance" picture of current curriculum alignment. This picture needs to capture work at all grade levels and within content areas. A schoolwide curriculum alignment matrix can help you with this. Armed with the matrix, you can provide targeted support to teachers and teams that mends problems in the alignment.

DIRECTIONS

Read page one and discuss the question at the bottom of the page as a team. Follow the same process for page two.

Main Street Middle School Aligns Its Curriculum

Capturing Alignment Efforts

Educators at Main Street Middle School are in the midst of a major effort to boost student achievement. To date, they have launched a variety of curriculum alignment activities. The schoolwide leadership team wants to assess their progress. So, they capture all of the school's alignment efforts in a matrix.

Main Street Middle School: Schoolwide Curriculum Alignment Matrix		
Science	Mathematics	English Language Arts
Horizontal Alignment: Alignment Within Each Grade Level, Grades 6–8		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sixth grade teachers use concept maps to align assessments to the content. Seventh and eighth grade teachers use concept maps to align units and lessons to the content. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sixth grade teachers have not aligned content to the standards. Seventh grade teachers have met once to learn about the process of curriculum mapping. Eighth grade teachers developed a framework for administering common assessments that are aligned to their instructional materials. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sixth, seventh, and eighth grade teachers are in the process of identifying "in and out" goals for each grade level.
Vertical Alignment: Alignment Within Each Content Area, Grades 6–8		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As a science department, teachers have created concept maps for life, earth, and physical sciences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As a mathematics department, teachers have begun discussions on aligning content to the standards. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As an English language arts department, teachers plan to align content and instructional materials to their grade-level "in and out" goals.

Discuss: How do the grade-level and content-area alignment efforts at Main Street compare to alignment work at our school?

Responding to Alignment Efforts

The schoolwide leadership team at Main Street Middle School gets together to discuss and analyze the information in the matrix. As a whole, the team decides how it can contribute to the curriculum alignment efforts.

Making the Case for Curriculum Alignment: The matrix reveals that each grade level in the mathematics department is at a different stage in the alignment process. The team decides that the best way to support the department's efforts is to "make the case" for alignment to sixth grade teachers. To do so, they share an article on how an aligned curriculum impacts student learning with the teachers. Then they bring the teachers together to discuss the article. A few English Language Arts teachers join the meeting to share their process of developing "in and out" goals.

Guiding Ongoing Alignment Efforts: The matrix shows that the science department, within and across grades, has developed concept maps for each science content strand. The team wants to promote these teachers' ongoing alignment efforts. To do so, the team sponsors a series of discussion forums focused on K–12 vertical alignment within each strand area. Working closely with the science department chair and teachers, the team invites teachers from the local elementary and high schools to attend the forums. The Main Street Middle School science teachers facilitate the forums. The result: K–12 concept maps for life, earth, and physical sciences.

Discuss: How does the schoolwide leadership team at Main Street Middle School respond to the information in the matrix? How do their actions compare to the role we play in alignment efforts?

Contributing to Curriculum Alignment at Our School

Like the leadership team at Main Street Middle School, your leadership team can contribute to alignment efforts at your school.

DIRECTIONS

1. Write the content area from the note-taking template in the gray box below. Check the type of support teachers/teams in this content area need.
2. Read through the suggested activities for the type of support you identified. Place a checkmark next to the ones that make the most sense to you. If you have more ideas, write them next to the blank bullet points.
3. Discuss one action you will take. Write this action in the gray box at the bottom of the page. In this box, also jot down the first step you will take to carry the action out, the date by which your team will finish this step, and the name of the person who will spearhead this first step.

Content Area: _____ Type of Support Needed: Making the Case for Curriculum Alignment
 Guiding Ongoing Alignment Efforts

Make the Case for Curriculum Alignment

If teachers/teams in the identified content area have not begun to align curriculum, you can:

- interview teachers to understand and address their questions and concerns related to curriculum alignment and to pinpoint why alignment has not been started
- use district and/or school learning outcomes to show teachers how alignment can contribute to continuous improvement
- share student-learning data (especially data that indicates gaps in learning from one grade level to the next in the content area) to provide a data-based rationale for alignment
- convene a discussion forum that allows teachers who have already finished aligning their curriculum to share their lessons learned with teachers who are just beginning alignment work
-

Guide Ongoing Alignment Efforts

If teachers/teams in the identified content area have initiated or completed alignment efforts you can:

- celebrate the accomplishments of teams or departments at faculty meetings or in school newsletters
- orient newly hired teachers to curriculum alignment efforts in their content area and/or grade level
- launch cross-curricular alignment efforts to support schoolwide learning goals (e.g., writing across the curriculum, 21st Century Skills, critical thinking skills, student self-assessment)
- organize discussion forums to encourage K–12 alignment in collaboration with teachers from elementary and high schools
-

Action Our Team Will Take:

First Step:

Completed by (date):

Spearheaded by:

Next Steps

DIRECTIONS

As a team, work through the Reflect, Commit, and Plan steps below.

Reflect

Circle the learning goal below that your team will pursue further.

1. **Your team will build a shared understanding of curriculum alignment.**
2. **Your team will explore how to assess school curriculum alignment efforts.**
3. **Your team will create a plan to support curriculum alignment at the school.**

Commit

Review and discuss the suggested next steps (pp. 2–3) for the learning goal your team selected to pursue. As a team, choose one next step that your team will take (from those listed or from ideas generated by the team). Record it below.

Next Step:

Plan

Identify 2–3 actions related to the next step your team identified. For each action, identify responsible team member(s) and related dates.

Action	Responsible Team Member(s)	Date(s)
1.		
2.		
3.		

Suggested next steps

1. Your team will build a shared understanding of curriculum alignment. (Learning Goal 1)

1	2	3	4	5
Help!		We've made progress but real work remains		We've mastered it!

Next Steps:

- ✔ **If your team assesses its status as a 3 or below, consider the following:**
 - Explore this module's resources (accessed from the module's landing page) to gain a deeper understanding of curriculum alignment and its connection to quality instruction
 - Work with another *Success at the Core* module, Common Formative Assessments, to broaden your understanding of aligning assessments within the curriculum
- ✔ **If your team assesses its status as a 4 or 5, consider the following:**
 - Share *AC Handout 2* with faculty to develop your school's understanding of curriculum alignment

2. Your team will explore how to assess school curriculum alignment efforts. (Learning Goal 2)

1	2	3	4	5
Help!		We've made progress but real work remains		We've mastered it!

Next Steps:

- ✔ **If your team assesses its status as a 3 or below, consider the following:**
 - Interview teachers at the school to help you complete one of the cells in the *Our School: Schoolwide Curriculum Alignment Matrix*
 - View again the videos from this module, attending to the ways in which the schools assess their alignment efforts (e.g., curriculum maps, "in and out" goals)
- ✔ **If your team assesses its status as a 4 or 5, consider the following:**
 - Add a fourth column to *AC Handout 3*, titled *Cross-curricular Alignment*, and identify what this might look like at Main Street Middle School
 - Discuss what K–12 vertical alignment might look like at Main Street Middle School
 - Recommend *Success at the Core's* Teacher Development materials to teachers to build their understanding of the importance of aligning curriculum

3. Your team will create a plan to support curriculum alignment at the school. (Learning Goal 3)

1
Help!

2

3
We've made progress but
real work remains

4

5
We've mastered
it!

Next Steps:



If your team assesses its status as a 3 or below, consider the following:

- View again the Covington Middle School and Shaw Middle School videos, attending to the ways in which the leadership teams support curriculum alignment efforts
- Explore this module's resources (accessed from the module's landing page) to gain a deeper understanding of how a schoolwide "big picture" of alignment efforts supports improved instruction



If your team assesses its status as a 4 or 5, consider the following:

- Discuss a timeline for carrying out the action that your team identified at the end of the APPLY activity in Learning Goal 3
- Pick another cell in the *Our School: Schoolwide Curriculum Alignment Matrix*, fill in the cell, and discuss ways to support the identified alignment efforts
- Move on to another *Success at the Core* Leadership Development module