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Toward a Balanced Curriculum: Aligning Standards, Curriculum, and Assessments

David A. Squires

Curriculum, testing, and teaching must change together to improve education. Unless all improve in concert, nothing will change.
(L.A. Steen, 1989)

In an initial conference with the principal, a typical first-year teacher may receive the following: a textbook; a teacher's manual for the textbook; state standards; national standards; a class management guide for the standardized test; item specifications for the state tests; and a district-developed curriculum guide. Finally, the teacher receives good wishes for a productive year, with an admonition to pay special attention to raising student test scores.

The teacher leaves, lugging these resources piled two feet thick, and wondering how to make sense of it all. "Should I just use the text? Will this be enough for the standardized tests? How can I integrate the standards? What's best for my students?"

Experienced teachers face the same dilemma of balancing these competing demands. Under this kind of pressure, teachers may opt for content coverage over student mastery. As a result, many students may be left behind. Individual teacher decisions about what to emphasize, made in isolation and with good intentions, are unlikely to result in higher levels of student learning as reflected in test scores.

A balanced curriculum process, however, can resolve competing demands and bring clarity and high performance to the instructional program. This process helps teachers make decisions about what is important to teach students.

The balanced curriculum process described in this article was created by the School Development

Program (SDP), founded by Dr. James P. Comer. The information and educators' comments in the article come from the SDP's experience in working with schools across the country implementing the balanced curriculum process.

The SDP's first goal is to establish a supportive culture at a school (Squires and Kranyik 1995). Then, the balanced curriculum process helps broaden the developmental perspective at the SDP's core by addressing student learning. This process has been implemented in Washington, D.C., Guilford, North Carolina, and San Francisco and Oakland, California.

Overview of the Balanced Curriculum Process

The process of producing a balanced curriculum includes staff development activities whereby a school faculty meets cooperatively— as a whole, in grade-level teams, or in mixed grade levels—to arrive at consensus about what is most important to teach students (Squires and Joyner 1996). Teachers decide on the appropriate mix of their own ideas and professional expertise, perceptions of students' developmental needs, the existing curriculum and instructional program, textbooks, the views of experts in the field, national standards, district/state goals and frameworks, and the content and format of standardized tests.

In deciding what is most important to teach students, teachers coordinate decisions between grade levels or courses so that the school's curriculum makes sense as a whole both vertically and horizontally. They use results of unit and standardized assessments to help the school refine and improve the curriculum. If schools devote a ma-

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majority of their staff development time to completing this process, it can be done in two years.

There are three steps in the process: describing, aligning, and assessing the curriculum.

Step 1: Describing the Curriculum—

Grade-level or course teachers describe their existing curriculum—what was actually taught to students last year. There is no need to reinvent the wheel. Faculty share what they are already emphasizing in their teaching. Teachers summarize this information by defining unit titles and specifying estimated length of time needed for unit completion. Generally, units range from two to four weeks in length, with nine to 18 units accomplished in a year.

Next, teachers of the same grade level or course work for consensus on one to five “important activities” for each unit that rigorously and adequately demonstrate student competence. Individual teachers decide how to structure and sequence these activities to meet the needs of their students. An example of a unit with important activities is:

Mysteries (Unit Title)

Three Weeks (Estimated Teaching Time)

- We will read a number of mysteries both as a class and self-chosen.
- We will discuss how the details used in the mysteries helped or hindered the reader’s understanding of cause and effect.
- We will discuss how different points of view taken by the authors (first person, third person, omniscient) affect meaning.
- We will write a mystery story, which will be published in a class book.

The unit activities are the teachers’ shorthand that allows communication within and between grade levels and courses, and focuses attention on only important activities. Unit descriptions are teachers’ professional promises to the students, parents, and teachers of the next level that most students will successfully complete the important activities.

A few rules guide this process. Promise only what can be delivered; the school year is short and the quantity of possible topics and activities is great. Based on teachers’ professional experience, promise only what students can do successfully, when challenged. Allow no more than five impor-

tant activities for any unit. Teachers should decide by consensus—not everyone will completely agree, but all can live with the decision. The activities should be robust and fun for both student and teacher.

Unit titles and associated important activities for the year are posted so that faculty can see whether the described program makes sense across grade levels or in course sequence. Marlene Guy, then a principal in Washington, D.C., found that a unit on “Families” was taught at kindergarten, first, second, and third grade, and each grade used similar activities. She met with these grade levels to discuss how they might consolidate the instruction in order to allow additional time to address other important areas of the curriculum.

Grade levels will need to discuss such “deals” in order to reduce inappropriate overlap. The curriculum is now defined, incorporating only important activities, while allowing teacher flexibility in approach.

Step 2: Aligning the Curriculum—

The described curriculum is aligned to: national standards, such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics Evaluation Standards; state and district curriculum frameworks; standardized tests, both in content and format; state and local assessments; texts and other instructional materials; students’ developmental levels; and staff’s beliefs about the components of a strong program.

It’s complicated—so many demands in so many areas. However, teachers consider the subject areas one at a time, revising their unit descriptions to strengthen alignment, curriculum balance, and coverage. Christina Huizar, an elementary teacher in Oakland, California, commented, “Curriculum alignment has taught us how to make sense of it all so students can learn and achieve....Now we have the steps.”

A grid is used listing the unit activities in the left-hand column, and the standards, textbook chapters, other resource material, and standardized test specifications listed along the top (English 1992). Teachers mark an X where there is direct alignment—where the vocabulary used in the standards is the same as that used in the unit’s activity description. In the sample alignment grid in Figure 1 (page 19), the explanations illustrate the thinking behind the alignment. In practice, teachers would just place X’s in the boxes with no written explanations.



Figure 1.—Alignment Grid, with Explanations Linking Unit Activities to Standards and Standardized Test Specifications

Standards, Standardized Test Specifications Mysteries (Unit Title)	2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions of human experience. (NCTE/IRA Standards)	11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities. (NCTE/IRA Standards)	26. Construct Meaning: Aspects of character, main idea, theme, setting, cause and effect, compare and contrast, conclusion. (Reading—California Achievement Test 5)	28. Evaluate, Extend Meaning: Fact and opinion, predict outcomes, author's purpose, generalize, judge effect and intent. (Reading—California Achievement Test 5)
We will read a number of mysteries, both as a class and self-chosen.	X Activity includes mysteries, part of "a wide range of literature."	No Match. No indication of community. If class shared, then there would be a match.	No Match. None of the vocabulary is used in the activity description.	No Match. None of the vocabulary is used in the activity description.
We will discuss how the details used in the mysteries helped or hindered the reader's understanding of cause and effect.	No Match. No explicit mention in the activity of "understanding human experience," although the activity could be modified.	Questionable. Discussion involves community, but building community is not the intent of the activity.	X Direct match because both activity and standards use "cause and effect."	X Good match to author's purpose; it could be improved by including "author's purpose" in the activity.
We will discuss how different points of view taken by the authors (first person, third person, omniscient) affect meaning.	X Activity involves author's perspective, contributing to understanding of human experience.	No Match. Understanding different points does not necessarily build community directly.	X Good match to compare and contrast. For a direct match, replace "discuss" with "compare and contrast."	X Good match to "judge effect and intent." For a direct match the words "judge effect and intent" should be in the activity.
We will write a mystery story that will be published in a class book.	No Match. If students were asked to discuss how their story deepened their understanding of human experience, then a match could be made.	No Match. If specified that students should participate in editing or revision groups, then a match could be made.	No Match. Indeed, students would have to title their story. To make a direct match, this should be included in the activity.	No Match. If students were asked to reflect on one of these areas in their writing, then a match could be made.
Totals:	2X	0	2X	2X



The mystery unit is aligned well to three of the standards/standardized test specifications, as indicated by two X's in columns 2, 26, and 28. There is not a direct match to the IRA/NCTE standard 11, "participating in a variety of literacy communities," although suggestions for making a match are given. Although there is no match for the last activity across the four standards, there are suggestions provided for modifying this activity. Also, if more standards were included, some matches would probably be made.

Teachers use the grid to determine adequate coverage of essential concepts and skills, and to identify gaps where a redrafting of important unit activities might be needed. (See suggestions in the grid in Figure 1.) The alignment process also strengthens and deepens the instructional activities while providing important touchstones for teacher conversation.

Ms. Fayette Anderson, principal of the School of the Twenty-First Century in San Francisco, said, "The group was able to see very clearly where the gaps existed. The dialogue around including or excluding the skills taught was significant, too."

Lisa Grundon, a teacher at John Muir School in San Francisco, said, "It was so valuable to check our district standards to see how they aligned with the national and state standards as well as the CTBS test in order to see where the gaps were in our draft of the Language Arts Standards for San Francisco."

Step 3: Assessing Student Mastery of the Curriculum—

Each unit is assessed in two different ways: 1) a performance assessment is designed to assess students' conceptual understanding of each activity; and 2) format assessment gives students practice on the format and concepts aligned with standardized and/or state tests.

Teachers use the unit's important activities as the basis for their unit assessments. For example, for the activity in the grid, "We will discuss how different points of view taken by the authors (first person, third person, omniscient) affect meaning," the assessment's first part would evaluate students in their point-of-view discussions.

Unit assessments are performance-based; they evaluate student performance on important unit activities. Teachers find they rely less on paper-and-pencil tests and more on students' capability to perform competently.

In the second part of each unit's assessment, the teachers construct a few items that are aligned

to the standardized assessment content and format. For example, the grid shows that the "Mystery" unit is aligned to *Construct Meaning* (which includes understanding cause and effect, being able to compare and contrast) and *Evaluate, Extend Meaning* (which includes understanding the author's purpose; judging effect and intent). In this example, teachers would use the California Achievement Test's *Class Management Guide* format information to construct a quiz of five to 10 multiple-choice items with a short mystery passage to assess student performance in these two areas.

Thus, the unit assessments are a combination of performance assessments and format assessments. No lengthy standardized test preparation activities should now be necessary before standardized tests. Cohen (1987) and Bloom (1976) suggest that when assessments are aligned with the concepts and format of instruction, students tend to be significantly more successful. Cohen states, "Lack of excellence in American schools is not caused by ineffective teaching, but mostly by misaligning what teachers teach, what they intend to teach, and what they assess as having been taught" (1987, 18). The assessment structure is weighted toward performance and addresses the format concerns of standardized testing.

As a whole, the balanced and aligned curriculum represents a "bet" that student performance will improve both on unit assessments and standardized assessments as a result of teachers' coordinated decisions. Teachers promise student success. Unit assessments tell them whether the promise has been realized. The same unit assessments are given by all teachers teaching the course, or all teachers on a grade level. A teacher grade book for the mystery unit would look like Figure 2 on page 21, although other grades for specific class activities would also be included.

To figure out whether the "bet" has been won, the balanced curriculum process systematizes data collection procedures so that schools can determine whether students' unit scores predict scores on standardized test item clusters. Teachers and administrators come to a consensus about how data from unit assessments will be collected, reported, and aggregated.

If results from standardized tests are not up to expectations, teachers and administrators can return to the grid, identify units and activities aligned to the deficient skill areas, and modify and realign them to strengthen instruction next year. For example, returning to the grid, if students did



Figure 3.—Activities, Settings, and Time Estimates for Math Curriculum Alignment Staff Development Delivered to a School

Activity #	Activity Description	Setting	Time Estimates
1	Opening.	Schoolwide	10 minutes - 1 hour
2	Overview of curriculum alignment.	Schoolwide	1 hour
3	Define components of a good mathematics program.	Schoolwide	1 - 2 hours
4	Outline unit titles and specify length of teaching time for each unit.	Grade level, then schoolwide	1 - 2 hours
5	Read and process the NCTM standards.	Schoolwide or grade level	2 2-hour sessions
6	Consider children's development.	Schoolwide or grade level	2 - 3 hours
7	Generate activity-based objectives for each unit.	Grade level	2 - 6 hours
8	Balance, align, and revise unit objectives to the state assessment system.	Grade level	2 - 4 hours
9	Balance, align, and revise unit objectives to the standardized test objectives.	Grade level	2 - 4 hours
10	Develop performance assessments for each unit's activities.	Grade level	2 - 4 hours
11	Develop unit assessments aligned to standardized assessments.	Schoolwide for overview. Grade level	1 hour 1 - 2 hours per assessment
12	Forge agreements about using unit assessments to improve the program. Develop ways to use results from tests to improve.	Schoolwide or grade level	1 - 4 hours
13	Plan for continuation and closing activities.	Schoolwide or grade level	1 - 2 hours



Workshop 1:

Training Session on Activities 1-4.

- Activity 1 - Introduction
- Activity 2 - Overview of curriculum alignment
- Activity 3 - Define components of a good mathematics program.
- Activity 4 - Outline unit titles and specify length of teaching time for each unit.

Workshop 2:

Training Session on Activities 5-7.

Discuss successes and challenges in implementing first four activities in a school site.

- Activity 5 - Read and process the NCTM standards.
- Activity 6 - Consider the developmental pathways and action research.
- Activity 7 - Generate activity-based objectives for each unit.

Workshop 3:

Training Session on Activities 8-10.

Discuss successes and challenges in implementing first four activities in a school site.

- Activity 8 - Balance, align, and revise unit objectives to the state assessment system.
- Activity 9 - Balance, align, and revise unit objectives to the standardized test objectives.
- Activity 10 - Develop performance assessments for each unit's activities.

Workshop 4:

Training Session on Activities 11-13.

Discuss successes and challenges in implementing first four activities in a school site.

- Activity 11- Develop unit assessments aligned to standardized assessments.
- Activity 12- Forge agreements about using unit assessments to improve the program. Develop ways to use results from standardized tests to improve.
- Activity 13- Plan for continuation and closing activities.

The curriculum alignment activities begin in the summer of year one and continue through the summer of year two. An aligned curriculum is taught during the year. Results will show up on spring testing of year two. During year two, schools align their second curriculum area following the same activity structure as in the first curriculum area.

The School Team—

Each school has a team of five to seven persons, including the principal, a site facilitator, and site resource teachers who participate in the training. Additional participants include central-office representatives and the district's math and reading/language arts staff development people. During the training, participants become familiar with curriculum alignment activities. These activities are described in the School Development Program's *Curriculum Alignment Manual*, which is customized for the district. After the training, the team plans and schedules curriculum alignment activities in their school.

The Manuals—

There are two manuals provided by the School Development Program to support this process. The first, the *Presenter's Manual*, describes the activities in a lesson plan format, provides the rationale and research information, and contains small facsimiles of worksheets and overheads. This document, customized for the district to account for various curriculum frameworks and tests, is used by the presenter to structure faculty meetings, inservice opportunities, and grade-level meetings.

The second, the *Participant's Manual*, is used by teachers to assist them in making the complex decisions required in the curriculum balancing process. Small copies of overheads, full-sized worksheets, and reference material provide a customized workbook for the teaching staff. An addendum contains copies of overheads for the presenter.

The manuals are provided to the district as camera-ready copy appropriate for printing or duplication, or on computer disks that can be used by a printer. The district receives the rights to duplicate the manuals for use in district schools.

Central-Office Involvement in a School-by-School Approach—

After each training session, the team is responsible for scheduling and conducting the balanced curriculum process in the school for the school's staff. The district appoints a person from the central office to assist schools in finding resources, providing problem-solving interventions, and maintaining a high level of quality in the school work. School visits by a central office person, at least four a year per each school participating (one for each training session), are essential to ensure high-quality implementation at each school site. Moreover, the district person is also in the best



position to shepherd the Balanced Curriculum Process as it expands to other schools in future years.

District-Directed Process for Producing a Balanced Curriculum—

Some school districts prefer to take a district-based approach. In this case, the process is different. The steps are:

- defining the district curriculum;
- balancing and aligning the curriculum;
- implementing staff development and monitoring procedures to ensure the curriculum is taught;
- assessing the curriculum.

In a district-based approach, central-office teams consisting of curriculum supervisors, building administrators, university professors, community representatives, and master teachers come together. They synthesize district frameworks from national standards, state standards, state tests, standardized tests, and district-adopted texts, using matrices described earlier to check for balance and coverage. Then, schools use the resulting "aligned and balanced" frameworks as a basis for defining school-based units and developing important unit activities.

Lester Young, Superintendent of District 13 in New York City, summarizes this approach's rationale: "We should give our teachers structured expectations about what is most important so they can concentrate on delivery." Districts implement staff development efforts so that each school can adapt the general district frameworks for their student population and teachers' experiences.

Conclusion

The balanced curriculum process helps teachers make decisions about what is important to teach children on a schoolwide basis, while ensuring an aligned curriculum and high student performance. It provides a way for schools to define,

align, and assess a curriculum to generate improved student results while maintaining a balance that everyone understands, accepts, and uses for continual improvement. In short, a balanced curriculum hits many targets with one arrow. □

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