

Alignment in SEDL's Working Systemically Model

2004 PROGRESS REPORT TO SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS

Summary Report available online at
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SUMMARY REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

In December 2000, the U.S. Department of Education awarded the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) a 5-year contract to develop and refine an educational reform model to help low-performing districts and schools improve student achievement in reading or mathematics. Drawing on over 3 decades of research, SEDL developed the *Working Systemically Model* around the idea that student achievement improves as schools and districts learn to work together using system-wide instructional and organizational strategies to attain common goals. This approach to education reform emphasizes the importance of having all levels of the system—including teachers and school and district administrative personnel—working together to align their efforts toward the goal of improving student learning.

The findings in this report come from analyses of school, district, and SEDL activities supporting the implementation of the *Working Systemically Model* in 2003–2004. The findings presented here result from the following three questions that guided our research on the implementation of the *Working Systemically Model* in our school sites:

- To what extent are low-performing districts and schools building their capacity to align curriculum, instruction, and assessment with state standards?
- What strategies are SEDL field staff using to build the capacity of low-performing districts and schools to align curriculum, instruction, and assessment with standards?
- How has student achievement data changed in SEDL's intensive sites over time?

The SEDL research team collected data from each site to help us determine whether schools and districts are: 1) making progress in building alignment capacity and 2) showing improvement in student achievement. Information collected for this report includes interviews with school- and district-level educators, pencil and paper surveys, site contact records maintained by SEDL field staff, and state-mandated achievement test data.

PROGRESS ON ALIGNMENT

When speaking about alignment capacity—and its link to student achievement—we are talking about the way schools and districts are able to use curriculum, instruction, and assessments coherently to address state learning standards. We can imagine state standards as an educational goal that students have to reach. Curriculum, instruction, and assessments help guide students' pursuit of that goal. Alignment is the degree to which these three components complement one another. Capacity refers to the skills and knowledge needed by educators (e.g. teachers, principals, superintendents) to fit these components together in way that makes sense. Figure 1 represents an "ideal" system where curriculum, instruction, and assessments are aligned perfectly, providing a clear path to the standards.

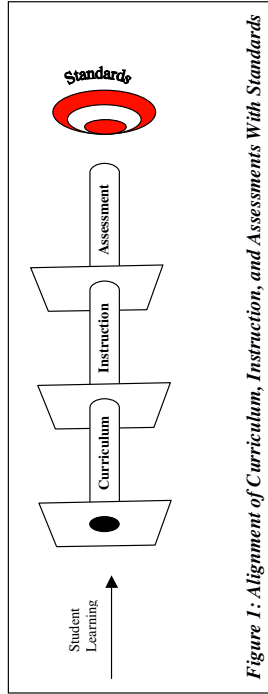


Figure 1: Alignment of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessments With Standards

In Figure 2, curriculum, instruction, and assessment are used to help guide students through the process of learning the standards-based content. However, if curriculum, instruction, and assessment are misaligned, it becomes harder to stay on a course that leads to the standards.

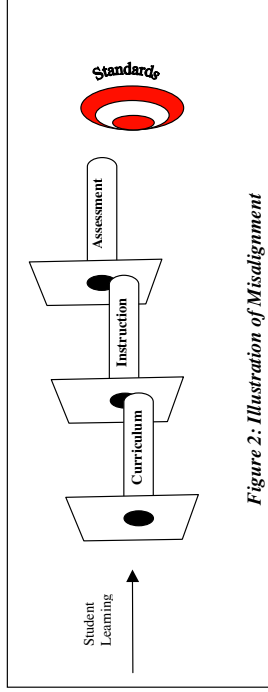


Figure 2: Illustration of Misalignment

As alignment decreases, it becomes more difficult to maintain a focus on standards. This has a direct impact on student learning since performance on state assessments are the basis for gauging learning progress. Educators need to focus on specific skills and knowledge to keep curriculum, instruction, and assessment aligned with standards. Consequently, a primary goal of the *Working Systemically Model* has been to build alignment capacity in low-performing districts and schools with the intent of improving student learning.

Our data indicate that districts and schools working with SEDL are building their capacity to align curriculum, instruction, and assessment with standards. Survey and interview information tells us that educators in our sites think alignment of instruction and assessment, alignment of curriculum and standards, and vertical alignment (for example, alignment between what is taught in third- and fourth-grade math) is improving. The data also indicate that educators across sites believe school and district leaders did a better job of promoting alignment in the 2003–2004 school year than in the previous year.

School and district personnel have worked with SEDL field staff to build skills that help improve and support alignment capacity. However, while general alignment status is getting better, some areas remain that could continue to improve. For example, some educators are not able to distinguish between concepts like horizontal alignment (alignment of content and standards across one grade level) and vertical alignment (alignment of content across grade levels to support the flow of learning from one grade to the next). The data also tell us that educators sometimes confuse curriculum (what is

taught) with instruction (how it is taught). It is important to the future of this work that school and district personnel have the same definitions and understanding of these concepts. This helps improve the level of coherence across the school system by giving school and district personnel a common language around and conceptual understanding of alignment. As educators continue to improve their capacity, we expect the level of understanding of alignment concepts to grow.

Schools and districts working with SEDL have begun using the Professional Teaching and Learning Cycle (PTLC) to engage in the necessary activities to build their alignment capacity. SEDL field staff have worked with school and district personnel on a variety of strategies, including the following:

- Helping teachers and administrative staff study the state standards in math and reading/English/language arts
- Providing guidance on the development of lesson plans and assessments that are consistent with the standards and state accountability system
- Modeling classroom instruction for teachers
- Helping educators use student data to spot trouble areas (for instance, data may indicate a particularly difficult standard where teachers must focus instruction)
- Working in school- and district-level leadership meetings to identify needs and build support for alignment

In the process of going through these exercises, educators are also learning how to collaborate with each other to solve common problems or issues. For example, teachers work with each other and SEDL site specialists in grade-level or content teams to develop curriculum maps and study student data. In some districts, teachers from different schools meet to discuss and create both lesson plans and assessments aligned with standards. Several school and district personnel have also participated in the Summer Leadership Institute in Austin for formal training in instructional leadership and how leaders can promote alignment capacity in their schools and districts.

CHANGES IN STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessments with standards is linked to student learning because learning, in most states, is measured by how children perform on standards-based assessments. Therefore, as schools improve their alignment capacity, we expect to see improvement in student achievement.

The SEDL research team has examined state test results for 22 schools participating in the *Working Systemically Model*. These schools come from five states—Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas—each with its own benchmark exam in various grades. To investigate changes over time, we decided to look at the percentage of students who were categorized as “passing” or better according to performance levels on state benchmark exams. Because sites focused on either math or reading, our team only analyzed results in the relevant SEDL area of focus for each site. In other words, if a site focused on reading, then we only looked at achievement data for reading, English/language arts, or literacy performance.

Although we examined data for 22 schools, sometimes a school had more than one tested grade. For instance, a Texas elementary school administers exams at grades 3, 4, and 5. Thus, this school has three sets of results. Among the 22 schools across our five states, there were 27 sets of results.

Table 1 tells us whether a school experienced an increase, decrease, or no change in the percentage of students classified in the passing performance categories since beginning work with SEDL. Each check represents one set of test results. Multiple checks for a single school indicate more than one tested grade level in that school. School identifiers, including names, school type, and states, have been removed to ensure anonymity.

Table 1: Change in Percentage of Passing Students

	Increase	No Change	Decrease
School 1	✓✓		✓
School 2	✓	✓	
School 3			
School 4	✓		
School 5	✓		
School 6	✓		
School 7	✓		
School 8	✓		
School 9	✓		
School 10	✓		
School 11		✓	
School 12	✓		
School 13	✓		
School 14	✓		
School 15	✓		
School 16		✓	
School 17	✓		
School 18	✓		
School 19			✓
School 20	✓		
School 21	✓		
School 22	✓	✓	✓

Of the 22 schools in our group, 19 had at least one grade level show an increase over time in the percentage of students categorized as meeting minimum requirements or better. When we looked at the 27 sets of test results over time, 20 sets showed at least a 5 percentage point increase in the percentage of students placed in the passing categories. It is important to note that three sets of test results—one each in Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas—showed at least a five percentage point decrease in the total percentage of students classified as passing.

Overall, the data suggest an increase in the percentage of students being classified as passing across the sites. Although there may be other factors that impact student learning, these increases are encouraging, especially when considered with the strides made toward aligning curriculum, instruction, and assessment with state standards.