Curriculum often gets scant attention from state policymakers. Either they fail to distinguish between the academic standards they set and the curriculum that is developed locally, or they perceive no role in curriculum development and therefore leave the door open for continued misalignment of standards and curriculum and a lack of coherence among other related policies.

Learning standards and curriculum are in fact two distinct domains. The former reflects what students need to know, understand, and be able to do, and the latter reflects how learning is organized and delivered to enable them to achieve the standards. It is also true that there is a division of labor in their development: State boards of education (SBEs) typically are responsible for adopting and revising standards, and curriculum is most often devised, refined, and implemented at the local level. Yet a state that ignores curriculum imperils the standards-based education system—a system that is all the more important in light of the new authorities federal law has directed back to states.

The new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has this to say about state and local responsibilities: “It is the sense of the Congress that States and local educational agencies retain the rights and responsibilities of determining educational curriculum, programs of instruction, and assessments for elementary and secondary education (Section 8549A(b)).” This clause leaves states with significant, open-ended responsibility. Needs of individual students and classroom contexts strongly influence decisions about curriculum, so local decision making remains critical. But without mandating a specific curriculum on local practitioners, states can remain proactive in meeting the real demands and challenges practitioners have voiced in implementing new standards. For example, in a recent study of district leaders’ perceptions on challenges in implementing the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), more than half said they did not expect to complete significant implementation milestones such as preparing teachers to teach to the standards and implementing CCSS-aligned curricula, citing lack of resources as a significant problem. This problem has only grown with time: When compared with the same survey administered in 2011, a greater proportion of district leaders agreed with the statement that changes will be needed in instruction and curriculum to effectively implement the standards.

Given the capacity limitations of local practitioners, learning standards and curriculum will not readily align without state action. SBEs can take several actions to ensure alignment between the two and coherence across all parts of the system:

- provide curriculum frameworks to guide educators as they align curriculum with standards;
- require evidence from districts of locally developed curriculum aligned to standards;
- provide training to local district leaders on how to develop a standards-based curriculum framework;
- encourage the use of individualized learning plans to ensure educators, students, and their families are on the same page with the scope and sequence of student educational experiences; and
- offer centralized resource websites to encourage quality control and create a platform for educators to access, share, and learn about standards-aligned curricula.

**Curriculum Frameworks**

A common challenge with standards, as with any policy writing, is that intentions do not always intersect with implementation reality. Some educators need help deducing the intention behind a standard and how to translate that intention into curriculum. Development of curriculum frameworks at the state level—or a requirement for districts to provide evidence that a locally developed curriculum framework exists—can help with
this translation and guidance function. Such frameworks empower educators to organize intent, scope, and sequence of student demonstration of mastery on a particular standard and ensure that these learning progressions are implemented as intended.

Curricular and instructional decisions are best made as close to where learning takes place as possible. Most educators were not trained to design curriculum but rather to deliver it. Professional development for teachers, district curriculum leaders, and local school leaders is a necessity for both the development and implementation of curriculum frameworks. In order to produce the learning progressions that good frameworks require, those designing curriculum must not only understand the process of curriculum alignment, they must also know the local context and the needs of students. SBEs should embrace their authority over professional development and district reporting and require tight alignment of curriculum and professional development to learning standards.

With the support of its educators, the state board of education, and experts across the state, Massachusetts has developed such frameworks for eight disciplines: mathematics, English language arts, vocational and technical education, history and social science, and the arts. Even though these disciplines are very different, a common thread underlies the organization of most of them. They include guiding principles behind the discipline, relevant learning standards, an elaboration of skills within the standards, the learning progression to achieve the standards, and resources to help educators design their curriculum. Rather than leaving educators to ponder their intent, these frameworks clarify expectations and the broader arc of the standards. In doing so, they free educators to spend their time thinking about the best ways to help students achieve them.

**INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING PLANS**

A key feature of standards-aligned curricula is transparency in the sequence and scope of content that is covered in classrooms. Educators run into trouble when students and their families cannot see the connections between the learning progressions embedded in standards and their long-term goals or when they fail to make relevant connections between lessons and their students’ aspirations. Individual learning plans can help cut through this confusion while supporting schoolwide development of standards-aligned curricula. These plans are collaboratively developed among educators, students, and families. They chart the coursework and experiences that will help students achieve their short, medium, and long-term aspirations.

Under Vermont’s Personalized Learning Plan policy, for example, schools are expected “to initiate a process for students to identify their goals, learning styles, and abilities and align this with the school’s academic expectations and the student’s pathway toward graduation.” In order to support the plans, the state education agency gives schools and educators information on the policy, helps them connect effectively with parents and students, and helps them align a student’s learning progression with the state’s academic standards. Consequently, Vermont has set the stage for a standards-curriculum alignment process that educators, students, and their families co-own.

**CENTRALIZED RESOURCE WEBSITES**

State policymakers must contend with the fact that curriculum development is big business. There is no shortage of providers willing to modify their product a bit and market it as a standards-aligned curriculum framework. Practitioners, who typically don’t have time to sift through the claims made for competing products, would benefit from a neutral arbiter to provide transparent information and quality control. One way states can help is by housing relevant resources educators on a central, easily accessible website. Such resources could include sample curriculum, curriculum frameworks, calendars, sample lessons, and professional development opportunities, which are fully vetted and judged to be aligned to a state’s learning standards.

**New York’s EngageNY website,** created by the New York State Education Department to support implementation of the New York State Board of Regents’ Regents Reform Agenda, includes many such resources, in addition to case studies and a video library that highlights instructional shifts embedded in new standards. Thousands of educators in New York state as well as thousands outside it have visited the website.

In conclusion, whether policymakers conflate standards and curriculum or fail to address their misalignment, the result will be the same: Educators will not receive the support they need to translate standards into meaningful learning experiences. It is every SBE’s responsibility to clarify the difference between standards and curriculum and leverage resources to translate clearer, deeper learning standards into high-quality curriculum. For SBEs, this task calls on all their powers of policymaking, raising questions, and convening. As educators grapple with new opportunities and challenges that new standards present, such support is essential to building a coherent education system that prepares all students for college, careers, and civic life.

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**NOTES**


2. The Massachusetts curriculum frameworks can be accessed at [http://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/current.html](http://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/current.html).

3. The same is true for instructional resources (See Jordan Koch, “Materials in a Standards-Based Learning System,” Policy Update 23, no. 8). Many educators consider textbooks as synonymous with curriculum. Educators and policymakers should understand that materials only assist teachers in delivering curriculum and are not themselves curriculum. Standards, curriculum, and materials comprise a three-legged stool of effective instruction—distinctly linked yet singular in purpose and function.