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COMMENTARY

For Aligned Instruction, State Must Have Aligned Standards, Assessments

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Standards-based reform has been the law of the land in California and nationwide for over a decade. For student achievement to rise, the reform says, teachers must improve their instruction by aligning it with rigorous content standards. These content standards are just part of what is supposed to be a coherent policy system including aligned achievement tests and stringent accountability measures. Although many researchers have investigated whether standards-based reform and accountability ultimately improve student achievement, few have explored the ways in which these reforms have actually played out in the states. In prior research, I found that state standards and assessments are actually quite poorly aligned with one another, which begs the question of how this incoherence affects teachers' instruction.

In my paper "The Association of State Policy Attributes With Teachers' Instructional Alignment" I explore the middle steps in standards-based reform's causal chain—the connection of state policies with the alignment of teachers' instruction to standards and assessments. I draw on survey results from more than 10,000 teachers over the years 2003–2010 in mathematics, science, and English language arts. From these surveys, I created a measure of the alignment of each teacher's instruction with state standards and/or assessments. Then I examined whether that alignment is correlated with a set of state policy variables that included a) consistency—the alignment of the state's test with its target standards, b) power—the state's use of rewards and sanctions for schools and students, c) specificity—the focus of the state's standards on a few big ideas, and d) stability—the length the standards had been in place.

My findings suggest that several state policy features are important predictors of teachers' alignment. In particular, teachers tend to practice more aligned instruction in states where the standards and assessments are better aligned with one another, in states where the standards are *less* focused (cover more topics more shallowly), and in states where there is a higher degree of accountability for student performance.

Given previous work, these results have several implications for California under theCommon Core. Most notably, states and state consortia must do a better job aligning assessments to the standards. There are well established techniques for improving alignment, and these findings support the intuitive hypothesis that teachers are more prone to teach what we want them to teach when we send them more consistent messages about what we want them to teach. Another conclusion is that highly focused standards may be more difficult for teachers to implement than broader standards. Teachers will need more support if they are to make fundamental changes in the content and form of their instruction.

The full study can be found here: "The Association of State Policy Attributes With Teachers' Instructional Alignment," Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis September 2012 vol. 34 no. 3, 278–294.

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