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- White Paper -

Making Standards Alignment a Value-Add: From the Product Developer's Lens...

... It's your product. Just as the product underwent careful consideration and planning, so should its alignment to standards. Misinformation and misdirection can escalate costs—financial and otherwise. What do you need to know?

Targeting Alignment

To which documents should we align, national or state?

It is helpful to consider aligning to both. First, the national documents not only provide developers with some assurance that enduring and timeless learning objectives are being met, which provides peace of mind when it comes to projecting revision work that may need to be done in the future (see *Hindsight and Foresight*, p.4). The impact of these national documents on state-level documents cannot be minimized—for example, our past analyses have indicated as many as 36 state-level science standards documents with extensive references to both the *National Science Education Standards* and the Project 2061 *Benchmarks for Science Literacy*. Second, many states address skills (not to be confused with content understandings) in different ways and at different levels of detail. Consider for example states whose standards do or do not address historical thinking—exceptional material outlined in the *National Standards for History*, regardless of various opinions regarding the appropriateness of content in that document. Consider as well the process standards in mathematics and science (especially Science As Inquiry). States continue to focus additional development efforts on these important areas of student learning, and it behooves the developer to analyze their product and identify ties to these types of skill-based objectives. Third, national documents are revealing important aspects of alignment of learning objectives within standards that will undoubtedly serve as guides in the future to state developers. As one example, see the continuum of objectives across grade bands for one goal in the Measurement standard of NCTM's *Principles and Standards of School Mathematics*. Fourth, many teachers are highly familiar with the national standards, and continue to look for connections to these documents in addition to ties with the standards in their own state. There is no reason, NCLB or not, to believe this will become less prevalent as time passes.



Standards...

... mean many things to many people, and there are many differing perceptions as to their purpose. Read our [Exploratory Report - Education Standards 2009](#) for a timely background analysis of standards from both a national and state perspective.

With what states should we align?

This is primarily a marketing question, and your decision rests on several factors. The location of your company and the states in which your company exerts influence is a factor. The market share of a state should influence your decision, especially if there is reason to believe that your product is relevant to the standards in a particular state, or that the product will be received with higher interest or publicity in certain states. An example of the above might be a unit on evolution in the state of Kansas, where sparks have continued to fly during science standards revision work. The population of a state is always a factor. California, Texas, and New York presently influence textbook manufacturers to the extent that they develop state-specific versions of their student and teacher editions. Beyond these considerations, and taking into account future utility of the alignment, standards that have been developed more recently can be expected to remain in effect for a longer period of time than those that have not (e.g., those documents that are five years or older). By this same line of reasoning, it does not usually make sense to align with a document that is on its way out. Sometimes this is not easily avoided, because it entails having one or more persons keeping abreast of news in the arena of state standards development. It is also useful to obtain information on the degree to which a state's assessment has been finalized and implemented (see Hindsight and Foresight on page 4 of this document), and to which the state can indicate alignment of standards and assessment, as this will largely influence the reliance and duration of time the state can be expected to place emphasis on the documents in their present form. Similar to the above is the degree of specificity, as it differs so dramatically from state to state.

To what subject should we align, and should we align to more than one?

The decision of what subject(s) to which a product should be aligned depends on the nature of the domain-specific content in the product, its potential ties to a variety of subjects, and the intended purpose of the product (e.g., a widely used resource that is flexible and adaptable, a tool for promoting “best practices” instruction and/or possible professional development, a subject-specific instructional guide and set of activities, and so forth). It also often depends on the focus of the company and its disposition toward marketing—benefiting from more subjects requires a broader marketing base. An advantage of aligning a product to standards in more than one subject is that “coverage” of standards is maximized in the classroom insofar as time is concerned if one unit or set of activities can be used to address multiple subjects simultaneously. In some cases, most typically middle school, the team concept is reinforced when units are designed to address multiple subjects and clear guidance is given as to what portions of a product are best suited to certain subjects.

Should we look at just “content,” or are processes, skills, ways of thinking, teaching standards, professional development, and so forth also important?

Choices between types of standards to which a product can be aligned depend largely on the purpose of the product. An advantage of analyzing these aspects is that standards alignment is rarely just a question of the content that is addressed. There are interrelationships. The teaching behavior impacts not only what processes and ways of thinking that are addressed, but also the extent to which the content itself is addressed. Flexibility and value to educators is seldom diminished by additional analysis.

Attaining Usefulness

How are state documents similar, for alignment purposes, and how are they different?

State documents differ in organization, complexity, and specificity of detail. Though there are some distinctions in content, these are more an aspect of specificity, except in cases such as state history. Beyond these differences, states have given very different levels of attention to “process” and skills. Even when “process” does not constitute a major component of a state’s standards, it almost always lends different meanings and “spirit of intent” to the content learning objectives within standards. The same types of possible permutations exist with regard to inclusion of teaching guidelines or standards, and often domain-specific classroom assessment practices. The lack of similarity between states translates into a need for product developers to consider each state independently—at least, if you really intend to provide a service to the teachers of that state. To assume that an alignment to a state or national document can be accurately ported over to another state without manual analyses would be inaccurate. The same applies, as well, to the attempt in recent years to tie alignment to skill and/or content “tags” and obtain a quick alignment (typically computerized) to all states’ standards, as though there were enough common ground to justify this as anything more than an attempt to get a quick list of standards together that can be shown to teachers—not a good motive for doing any alignment. To mitigate your costs and obtain the accuracy teachers in the field truly need and deserve, familiarize yourself or your staff intimately with all of the documents with which you intend to align. When your staff members know the standards documents well, and have a high working knowledge of education (e.g., experience in teaching, pedagogical grounding, etc.) so that interpretation of what is written and what is intended is second nature, these analyses can be rapid and extremely accurate. They can get it right the first time, rather than cause repeated iterations and corrective work—the main cause of high costs in most processes of this nature.

Usefulness...

... requires that thought be given to each state document as a distinct and unique articulation of a state’s philosophies, desired levels of specificity, and approaches regarding important aspects concerning process skills and teaching practice. Read our [Exploratory Report - Education Standards 2009](#) for additional information regarding distinctions among states and the reasons and results of differing views and specifications.

What value does a product have if it does not distinctly align?

Some products are designed to be taught a certain way, and their instructional approach and goals are tuned to the point where alignment with standards is essential. They are after very specific pre-determined learning objectives. On the other hand, some products (e.g., trade books, for instance) are very flexible resources, and may be approached, integrated into instruction, and adapted to a variety of learning situations easily and effectively. To say that these do not support the standards would be incorrect, but to say that they align to specific learning objectives would also be incorrect, as certain uses or behaviors by teachers or students using the resource are not included as a portion of the written resource. It is worth noting, however, that even if a distinct alignment is not provided (or does not exist) it is still very helpful to provide “standards-relevant data” with such resources that describe some of the flexible benefits the resource offers to teachers charged with addressing standards, especially if a part of the original intended market for the product is educators and/or students.

How, and in what format, are alignments expressed so they are most useful to educators seeing our product?

This is often the most overlooked aspect of the alignment process. It has tremendous bearing on whether or not the alignment serves teachers' needs. Prior consideration can also largely reduce cost by directly targeting work—whether in-house or by a subcontractor—toward the backend development needs of the company.

When teachers use a product in the classroom, they look toward standards alignment information to obtain guidance on where and how to focus their instruction so that emphasis is placed on appropriate content and process, and on how to properly document that emphasis. This requires that a product's alignment provides text description, easy access, and assurance that the information is up-to-date. This is where the issue begins to become a balancing act between the needs of the company and its customers (i.e., teachers). The most customer-friendly form of access—in print within the product or as an accompaniment—does not provide teachers with access to updated alignments over time, nor does it provide the developer with a means of upgrading alignments without incurring excessive costs for product modification, possible reformatting, and reprinting. It may, however, be more than sufficient in many cases for the time span required. Raising the bar a notch in terms of the service provided, developers can link to a page on their own site, or a partner site, that provides standards alignment updates for the product(s), or even the complete updated version of the alignment. Web-based upgrades are often the simplest, most cost-effective, and most manageable way of keeping up with the fast-paced changes sure to come in the next few years. As an added benefit, developers can use the update landing pages to provide information or links that allow teachers to access new developments regarding standards that might be of interest in the classroom. The additional traffic generated on those pages from past customers also provides unique opportunities for generating new business, sales, and clients. Considering your company's strategy in advance helps you to identify the specific format in which to enter your alignment data, or in which to specify receipt of your deliverable from a subcontractor. You may prefer Word for a printed document, for example, or Excel for very easy import into a searchable standards database, or even html for upload-ready Web page access. Why incur additional time and expense because you failed to consider your backend needs?

Hindsight and Foresight

What is all this about the high-stakes testing, and how might this affect the possible alignment of our product to standards? Should we align with these assessments as well?

The alignment of the product is certainly impacted by the states' various assessment instruments, but determining the manner in which it is impacted and how to respond can be a complex issue. We can start off with the recognition that assessments (the high-stakes tests) impact standards and vice-versa. It is a new version of an old question for the curriculum developer—does the assessment drive the instruction or does the instruction drive the assessment? The answer is, as always, both. If the state assessment and content standards are aligned, as they should be (and presently, often are *not*), then aligning with the content standards is sufficient—it means, by default, aligning to the assessment. Therefore aligning to state assessments (different from “national” - see sidebar) is not really necessary or worth the expense. Thankfully, there *is* a certain line where a developer's responsibility ends. However, because of the phenomenon of mutual impact, it is worthwhile and informative to review the available

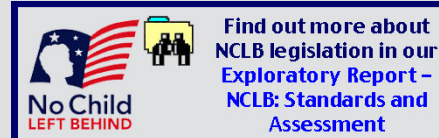
information regarding these assessments, especially in anticipation of what impacts the development of state assessments will have on content standards. Another closely related factor to consider in terms of future impact is what effect states' achievement standards—often in a redesign phase in many states—will have on product alignments presently being considered or completed. For those states ahead of legislative requirements (see sidebar), these “standards” are already making a marked difference in the degree of clarity and specificity in certain aspects of the content standards. As development proceeds, they will continue to impact certain alignment decisions that have been previously made. As the specificity increases and the overall alignment in a state improves, we will see the number of standards to which previously developed products align undergo a marked decrease. We will also see a decrease in the number of instances where standards analysts can claim that there is not sufficient evidence to make a determination as to whether or not an alignment exists. Developers need to stay abreast of new achievement standards along with new assessments, make product alignment adaptations as they are developed, and use these standards where they are already developed to better inform their decisions regarding whether or not certain content standards are “met” by their activities, guides, and other products.

The previously voluntary...

... National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in math and reading is now required in odd-numbered years for districts and agencies *if selected*. It is one measure by which states can (and undoubtedly will) be measured against each other that is not based on separate indicators. Other assessments by the state are less apt to be used in this manner, as they are intended (often not the case) to be specific to the state. Though there is no requirement that a state align its standards to NAEP, this factor alone makes it attractive. On many products, it is certainly worth doing an alignment, given that the task requires simply one more alignment (especially if correlating already to each of the states and the national) and could substantially set your product alignment apart from the competition.

New legislation...

... means changes are in the works. The changes do not necessarily mean, however, that your standards alignment efforts are in danger. They simply call for a keen eye toward what can be expected and therefore how best to plan and prepare for standards alignment work.



Should we have created the product first, based on the standards, and is it too late now to create a fit?

Not necessarily. The best products are developed based on sound research. If the research has been carefully analyzed, and the product addresses the right issues the right way, then it will align with certain aspects of a good standards document, even if only in skills. The content connection may be another issue. Regardless, it certainly helps to review the standards the product hopes to meet prior to development, and to attempt to develop in the area that best addresses those standards while retaining the research support. When a good product has been built on a solid foundation, factoring in an expensive redesign is prohibitive. It is even more costly in the long run to claim an alignment that does not truly exist. There are alternatives, however. Developers may approach the product as a flexible resource (as in the trade book example mentioned earlier), or create ancillary material to accompany the product, describing what it provides and how to apply these attributes in such a way as to directly address standards. This could mean something as simple as a set of 1-2 page guides for

addressing certain understandings through using the product. Often this costs far less than revisiting the product development itself, and provides a value-add as well. It can even be used as free material that can be downloaded from your Web site, useful to anyone who has purchased the product, and useful to your company for translating that additional traffic into sales on other useful products (similar to the possibilities discussed in the last question in the section Attaining Usefulness, p. 3).

What if the standards change? Have we spent our money and time for nothing?

Much of the above discussion applies in the event of a change in standards documents. Note that changes in the standards more often mean *refining* alignment data than facing a product that no longer aligns. Your organization's staff should make it a point to follow the revisions that occur in standards documents, and to re-align their products in a timely fashion. Often the philosophies of the document in a state remain intact. Therefore, creating a cross-alignment matrix that matches older with newer versions of standards in a state—a very different proposition than correlating one state with another—is not usually very time-consuming, and can often provide you with your new alignment for a variety of products in one subject at a very reasonable cost.

Note: The term “alignment” is used in this document to refer to either adaptation of products to standards or simply articulation of an existing correlation of a product to standards. Though it is worth noting that there are differences—to the extent that often the two terms are distinctive and not used interchangeably—we have chosen to avoid any semantic distinctions in an effort to be most clear and jargon-free in our discussion.

Questions or comments regarding this document are welcome. Please reference the document, and send your e-mail to:
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If you or another representative of your organization would like to briefly discuss your product(s) and standards alignment options, we would be happy to do so at **no cost or obligation**. Further, your name and contact information will not be shared, nor will you receive unsolicited messages at any time in the future as a result of your inquiry. Simply e-mail the address above, or call 806-229-2917 (toll free 1-888-276-2299), and identify the purpose of your inquiry.
