

---

## INTRODUCTION

---

# The “Big Picture” of Curriculum

---

“The 2nd grade teachers have common planning time once a month where they map out what they will be teaching.”

“The curriculum writing team will be meeting on Thursdays after school.”

“Please submit a list of recommendations for read-aloud books that support the social studies curriculum.”

“The school board has approved the adoption of a new reading program.”

These quotes capture the many and diverse ways that schools approach curriculum. Designing, adopting, or revising curriculum can be viewed as an exciting opportunity or a daunting task. An educator’s perspective is based on each individual’s prior experiences working with curriculum as well as that person’s personal view as to what constitutes quality. When individuals are then put into groups to adopt or design a curriculum, as is often the case, it becomes very difficult for them to do so. Often the result is an unwieldy and unmanageable curriculum, the purchase of a program that does not quite match up with what a district needs or values, or some variation in between.

My experiences facilitating professional development programs related to curriculum led me to see a need for a book devoted to curriculum that readers would be able to use to guide the curriculum design process and evaluate curriculum in a meaningful and manageable way. Most books about curriculum are devoted to the design and examination of individual units of study that sit within the curriculum. What makes this book different is that it examines the “big picture” of curriculum—what needs to be considered when all the units are put together. By examining the big picture, educators can determine the curriculum’s strengths and weaknesses, and they can decide where to focus attention in its design and revision or where to supplement when adopting a published curriculum. And there *will* be a need for evaluation and revision, because the statement “curriculum is a living document” is amply true. In fact, considering a curriculum “done” is really an indicator that it is time to revisit the curriculum again.

## Layers of Curriculum

To begin the process of evaluating and designing curriculum, we first must define what we mean by curriculum. Traditionally, curriculum is thought of as the *what* in teaching—what students learn in school. It sounds simple enough, but what students learn is multilayered and can be interpreted as many things, including content, skills and strategies, processes, books and resources, and dispositions and habits of mind. To clarify the *what*, it is helpful to look at the different layers of curriculum (Martin-Kniep, 1999):

- 1 • *Formal curriculum* describes what students need to know, be able to do, and value.
- 2 • *Operational curriculum* translates formal curriculum into a plan for instruction.
- 3 • *Taught curriculum* is what is delivered in the classroom.
- 4 • *Assessed curriculum* is what is evaluated through formal measures.
- 5 • *Learned curriculum* is what students walk away understanding as a result of their learning experiences.

## Formal Curriculum

When we hear the word *curriculum*, typically what we picture is the formal curriculum. Formal curriculum describes what students need to know, be able to do, and be like through statements in the form of national and local standards, content-specific understandings and practices, district- or teacher-generated outcomes and objectives, and other types of learning targets. Standards have different focuses but generally fall into three categories: process, content, and disposition. Process standards focus on skills and strategies, content standards identify either content-specific skills and practices or subject-specific information, and dispositional standards address ways of thinking or habits of mind.

Although standards have been used to guide classroom practice for many years, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have brought renewed attention to the standards-based design process and cause to revisit curriculum. The CCSS in English language arts (ELA) and literacy are an example of process standards. They lay out what students should be able to do at each grade level and are scaffolded from one grade level to the next, with each grade level building on the skills and processes from the previous grade level. They do not, however, prescribe the content that needs to be taught.

Content information can be gathered from other formal curriculum documents. For example, in New York State, social studies teachers use the CCLS (New York State's version of the CCSS) to guide reading and writing processes but use the state Social Studies Framework (New York State K–12 Social Studies Framework, n.d.) for guidelines regarding social studies content and practices specific to the discipline. The Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS, 2013) are content standards that articulate content, science and engineering practices, and crosscutting concepts.

Cognitive processes, social and work habits, and thinking demands or dispositions can also serve as formal curriculum because they describe what students should be like or express what is valued in learning. Often these cognitive processes or ways of thinking are not articulated through standards but rather through formal descriptions, scales, or progressions

such as Bloom's taxonomy, habits of mind (Costa & Kallick, 2000), and executive function skills. In this book, categorical descriptions such as these are referenced as standards.

Regardless of focus, formal curriculum describes what the learner needs to know, be able to do, and value. The key word here is *learner*. It is the responsibility of the school and teachers to ensure that students have the opportunity to learn and demonstrate the content, skills, processes, and dispositions embedded within the standards, and this responsibility, in turn, generates the need for an operational curriculum.

### Operational Curriculum

Standards lay out priorities and serve as the driving force behind the curriculum, answering the question *Why do we have to teach that?* However, by themselves standards cannot be used in the classroom; they must be made operational. The operational curriculum brings together different types of standards, content, texts, and resources. It identifies ways to assess student learning and provides appropriate learning experiences that can be used during instruction.

There has been a great deal of confusion about the formal curriculum and the operational curriculum. Formal curriculum does not dictate specifics such as the texts students will read or the type of animal to be studied when learning about habitats. Those specifics are identified in the operational curriculum, and in a quality curriculum, they should reflect the values and priorities of the community the curriculum serves. Standards are designed to ensure that all students have the same skills and use the same processes, whereas curriculum identifies what content and resources they will be using to do so.

### Taught, Assessed, and Learned Curriculum

Through the operational curriculum, teachers make decisions about what occurs in the classroom and implement the taught curriculum. Many factors affect this decision-making process, including time, interest, and makeup of the student body. Given that no teacher and group of

students are ever the same from one classroom to the next, the taught curriculum will not be exactly the same in every classroom. It is unreasonable to assume that all teachers of the same grade level will be teaching exactly the same thing, the same way, on the same day. A quality curriculum will provide the information that teachers require to make purposeful decisions to meet student needs and provide the appropriate pathway for meeting the expectations outlined in the operational curriculum without dictating a one-way-suits-all approach.

Through the assessed curriculum, teachers are able to determine what the students have and have not learned, identify areas of strengths and needs, and make decisions about next steps in instruction. Once again, choices are made as to what is assessed. A quality curriculum includes assessments that closely align to the standards and big ideas found in each unit. A quality curriculum will also include different types of assessments so teachers can accurately determine the learned curriculum—what students know and understand as a result of instruction—and how well student understanding aligns with the formal curriculum.

With so many layers in the curriculum, it is easy to see how standards can get “lost in translation.” Students do not always leave the classroom understanding the skills, processes, and content that have been identified in the formal curriculum. Although many factors affect learning, one that we do have control over is the use of the formal curriculum to create a purposefully aligned, engaging, and meaningful curriculum for our students.

## How This Book Is Organized

This book is organized in five sections similar to the steps in a standards-based design process used to create curriculum: organizational structure, standards, assessment, instruction, and format. The chapters in each section focus on a specific consideration for the creation and examination of curriculum. They provide a detailed look at what you need to consider when you are examining or designing quality curriculum, and they include many examples and illustrations from different schools, content

areas, and grade levels. (In addition, Appendix B walks you through an annotated 6th grade math unit to demonstrate how the attributes of quality curriculum apply to mathematics.) Within each chapter are tools and activities to help you further understand the attributes of a quality curriculum and, more important, to help you evaluate or plan your own curriculum and give you feedback as to what areas warrant further investigation. Each chapter ends with a summary, a brief recap of the tools and activities presented in the chapter, and a checklist that you can use during the evaluation or design process.

## Organizational Structure of Curriculum

*Consideration 1—Organizing Centers.* The first area to consider when designing or evaluating curriculum is the organizing center. A unit's organizing center is communicated through its title, essential question, and big idea. A quality curriculum will organize units of study around centers that are worthy of the time and energy set aside for their pursuit and that reflect the overall intent and purpose of the curriculum. This chapter examines the various components that make up the organizing center for a unit and provides a simple tool and guiding questions that will help you to examine or plan the organizing centers for your curriculum.

## Standards

*Consideration 2—Alignment to Standards.* As many teachers reconsider their curriculum because of the adoption of new standards, it is worthwhile to first examine the curriculum to determine how well the assessments and learning experiences align to the standards. Too often a curriculum lists standards in a way that denotes equal importance, and the curriculum user or writer accepts that tasks align to the standards in equal measure. This chapter focuses on the importance of examining how standards are communicated within a curriculum and provides activities that will help you determine the degree of alignment between tasks and standards.

*Consideration 3—Standards Placement and Emphasis.* Another consideration when examining standards is how they are placed within the

curriculum; order does matter. When determining placement and emphasis, it is important to consider factors such as the overall intent of the standards, grade-level focus standards, gradual release of responsibility, and developmentally appropriate practice. This chapter explores each of the factors in detail and provides you with a choice of standards-analysis tools that are helpful in evaluating the placement of standards within the curriculum or when planning for design.

## Assessment

*Consideration 4—Assessment Types and Purposes.* Teachers use four types of assessments to determine what students know, are able to do, and value. The types are information recall, demonstration, product assessment, and process assessment. A quality curriculum includes different types of assessments that are congruent with the standards for the unit. Teachers use these various assessments at different moments to ascertain what students know and are able to do. A quality curriculum will therefore include diagnostic assessments as well as assessments used for formative and summative purposes. This chapter explores the role of different types of assessments and the purposes they serve within a curriculum.

*Consideration 5—Curriculum-Embedded Performance Assessments.* A quality curriculum will include assessments that produce as well as measure learning. This chapter presents criteria for high-quality curriculum-embedded performance assessments that serve this purpose. These assessments measure the most important learning for the unit, are congruent with and strongly align to standards, have an authentic audience and purpose, and include diagnostic and formative assessment moments.

## Instruction

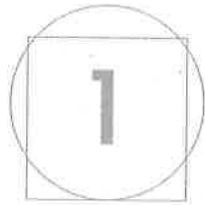
*Consideration 6—Instruction.* Learning experiences and lessons are two ways to communicate what should be taught daily. Either structure should include information about what students will do, why they will do it, and what the teacher will have as evidence of student learning. These lessons and learning experiences should be strongly aligned to the standards for

that unit. A quality curriculum includes learning experiences or lessons that address content, process, and dispositions. This chapter provides strategies for ensuring the use of different types of lessons and learning experiences and includes information to guide instruction.

*Consideration 7—Resources That Support Instruction.* Resources include texts, technology, and materials that support instruction. The guiding principle behind the selection of these materials is how they will serve the purpose of the learning experience. This chapter offers guiding questions to assist you in the selection of resources to support the curriculum.

## Format

*Consideration 8—Success with Your Curriculum.* This chapter reiterates the information provided throughout the book and offers three final thoughts for successfully implementing and using your curriculum. A quality curriculum is easily accessible to teachers and other educators who use it, is supported by professional development, and is connected to student work. Included in this chapter are examples, guiding questions, and student work protocols to help you successfully implement your curriculum.



---

## CONSIDERATION 1

---

# Organizing Centers

---

Which unit within each of the following example sets captures your attention?

*Example Set 1*

A. *The Grapes of Wrath* and the Great Depression: Students read *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck and write a report on the Great Depression.

- B. Literature or Life? In this unit students study the essential question *What's more real—literature or life?* They read several poems, short stories, and a full-length novel to analyze the connection between the time period in which the works were written and the events of the time. Students use their understanding of this connection to write their own review and analysis of a contemporary novel and how it reflects the lifestyle and values of today.

*Example Set 2*

A. Goods and Services: Students learn the difference between businesses in their community that sell goods and those that provide services. Based on what they have learned, they sort pictures of different businesses into the two categories.

B. The Business of Business: *What do you do?* Students understand that businesses provide different types of goods and services. They explore different types of businesses by analyzing

those in their own local community and conducting additional research on the goods and services provided by businesses online. Students prepare and conduct an interview with a local businessperson about the goods or services that individual provides for the community. Students use their understanding of goods and services and information they learned from their interview to write a proposal suggesting an idea for a new store or website that would provide a good or a service that their age group or family would find appealing.

*Example Set 3*

A. Habit of Mind 12—Wonderment and Awe: In this unit students study the habit of mind “wonderment and awe” (Costa & Kallick, 2000). They learn what this habit of mind means and find examples of how it exists in the world around them and in themselves.

B. Wonderment and Awe: *How do you see the world?* In this unit, students explore the habit of mind “wonderment and awe” and how it affects the way people see the world. They find examples and nonexamples of how wonderment and awe affect a person’s views of text, art, music, and the natural world. Students end the unit by selecting a visual art form and using it to show how they see the world with wonderment and awe.

Sometimes first impressions do matter, and the way in which a curriculum first communicates what it values is through its organizing center. An organizing center is the central idea upon which a unit of study is built. It can be a topic, a theme, a concept, an issue, a problem, a process, or a phenomenon (Martin-Kniep, 2000). An organizing center is communicated through a unit’s title, essential question, and big idea. A quality curriculum will organize units of study around centers that are worthy of the time and energy set aside for their pursuit and that reflect the overall intent and purpose of the curriculum.

So the question becomes, What is the best way to organize the curriculum? If you review the examples just provided, you can see the impact that decision has on the curriculum.

In the first example set, the same unit is organized around a text and a related topic, and then a simple question. The first organizational structure, Unit A of the set, limits the scope of the unit to a particular text (*The Grapes of Wrath*) and topic (the Great Depression). More than likely, students will be led through an in-depth analysis of the text with references to their research on the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. The unit has not been intentionally designed to make the leap from *The Grapes of Wrath* to other texts and time periods and to the larger question posed in Unit B: *What's more real—literature or life?*

In Unit B, students have the opportunity to examine the connection between literature and life, contemplating the role of fictional accounts in understanding real events and time periods. Although *The Grapes of Wrath* can still be a central text, teachers will likely want to consider additional works from other time periods, including *To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee; *The Great Gatsby*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald; and *The Catcher in the Rye*, by J. D. Salinger. Each text allows students to examine how literature reflects real life and prepares them for an analysis of a contemporary work.

The units described in the second example set are from a financial literacy curriculum for elementary students. Unit A approaches the curriculum in a direct manner. The organizing center is the topic students will be studying: goods and services. In Unit A, students learn to distinguish between businesses that sell goods and those that provide services. Unit B identifies the context for the examination of goods and services by identifying the bigger idea of businesses. It personalizes the unit through the essential question *What do you do?*—a common question posed by adults among their peers. Although both units may have students engaging in similar activities, such as examining the types of goods and services provided in the community, only Unit B requires that students apply their understanding in a new and novel way.

In the third example set, the units come from a curriculum developed around the habits of mind articulated by Costa and Kallick (2000). Unit A is structured to present “wonderment and awe” as one in a series. Unit

B links the habit to an essential question, showing how wonderment and awe can affect the student and moving the unit from abstract to practical. The essential question lends itself to exploration across media and content, bringing in literature, art, music, and science.

In each example set, Unit B

\*

- 1 • Moves away from a topic to a bigger idea, concept, or essential question.
- 2 • Can be explored from different perspectives, across content, place, or time.
- 3 • Is relevant and meaningful because it results in the application to something bigger than school.
- 4 • Requires higher levels of thinking by asking students to analyze, evaluate, and create.

## Organizing Centers in the Content Areas

The same principle of organizing centers applies to content areas. Let's look at a social studies unit to see the impact of three different organizing centers on the same unit of study. Typically social studies units are organized around topics such as the American Revolution. Students know that in such a unit they will learn about the war. Instruction will focus on the events that led to the war, the major battles, and the ultimate results. The unit stays within the context of that event, in that time, in that place.

Let's see what happens when the organizing center moves from topic to concept and the unit explores rebellions and revolutions. Now the unit lends itself to the exploration of other events. With this organizing center, the students first take a look at the American Revolution and then examine other events in American history that fall under the heading Rebellions and Revolutions. These events could include the Whiskey Rebellion, Shays Rebellion, the War of 1812, Nat Turner's rebellion, and John Brown's raid, to name a few.

A third approach to teaching these topics is to examine the same events through an organizing center of an essential question: *Rebellion or revolution?* This example differs slightly from the other two. Rather than focusing solely on the events, this essential question requires students to evaluate the events taught in the unit of study through different points of view. For example, in their examination of the American Revolution, students might examine how the British and the Loyalists viewed the events leading to the war and the war itself as acts of rebellion against the British king and parliament. At the same time, the Sons of Liberty, the patriots, and eventually the Continental Congress felt they had legitimate cause to sever ties with Great Britain and form their own country, hence the naming of the American Revolution. Similar studies of point of view and cause and effect are examined as they relate to each of the subsequent events, asking students to determine the legitimacy of the name given to the event and the way it is presented in history books—and, more important, establishing a set of criteria with which to examine rebellion and revolution in the world today.

## Essential Questions

The unit title communicates the focus and importance of the unit, but it does not stand alone in identifying the organizing center. The organizing center is further explained by the unit's essential question.

Which of the following two groups of questions are essential? How do they differ from each other?

### *Group A*

- What makes a story last?
- How do you measure success?
- What is more constant than change?
- Is beauty in the eye of the beholder?
- Are all leaders great?

*essential*

*guiding**Group B*

- How do folktales and fables share a lesson or moral?
- How do you describe the characters in the story?
- What is erosion?
- How do poems incorporate similes and metaphors?
- What were the contributions of the American presidents?

The questions in Group A would be considered *essential questions* because they are large, global questions that can be explored and contemplated, elicit multiple perspectives, and do not require one correct answer. In Jay McTighe and Grant Wiggins's book on essential questions, these questions would be considered "overarching" essential questions (McTighe & Wiggins, 2013).

In a quality unit of study, the essential question provides the context and direction for the unit. It poses the focus of exploration as it relates to the unit title and in some cases serves as the title itself. If the essential question changed, the unit would go in a different direction, as seen in the social studies example just presented.

The essential questions in Group A are different from the questions in Group B, which are *guiding questions*. Although still important for articulating what students will examine in a unit of study, guiding questions are answerable and do not communicate the organizing center of the unit. Guiding questions identify the important skills, content, and dispositions of the unit and are used to create the classroom learning activities.

## The Central or Big Idea

The central or big idea is a statement that identifies the most important learning of the unit in a clear and concise manner. Often it articulates a generalization related to the essential question and serves as the connector between the essential question and the unit title, as seen in the following examples:

*Example 1*

**Unit Title:** Civilizations: Old and New

**Essential Question:** What makes a civilization classical?

**Big Idea:** Students understand that classical civilizations share common characteristics and have left unique contributions that still affect us today.

*Example 2*

**Unit Title:** Homes for Everyone and Everything

**Essential Question:** Why is a home important?

**Big Idea:** Students understand that home is an important concept to all living species and that environmental challenges can affect a living species' ability to survive and thrive in its home.

The big idea communicates the overall outcome for the unit. Without it, the curriculum user would need to examine all of the curriculum components to determine the desired results, often resulting in multiple users having different interpretations. With clear articulation of the big idea, all users understand the importance of the unit—a consequence that is particularly valuable when it comes time for assessment, because the performance task is designed to measure the most important learning for the unit.

## Implications for Evaluating, Creating, or Revising Curriculum

Although it may seem like the organizing center plays a minor role in the overall curriculum design and evaluation process, examining or determining the organizing center is an important first step. Keeping in mind that this book is about the “big picture” of curriculum, it is important to look beyond the first unit of study or the unit of study you are currently working on and examine or identify *all* the organizing centers for the curriculum to determine if they convey the message you want to send about what you value in curriculum.

An example from my work in P.S. 11 in New York City illustrates how examining and revising the organizing center can affect the overall curriculum. The principal, Dr. Joan Kong, invited me to work with the school's coach, Angela Miuta, and a group of teachers—Hande Williams, Teresa Ranieri, Thalia Jackson-Cole, Elvira Gonzalez, and Laura Magnotta—to assist them in using the New York State Common Core Learning Standards to design their own curriculum. The group engaged in a recursive process of design and revision based on implementation, and after several years of doing so they had to choose a textbook for English language arts. Because textbooks do not serve as curriculum, the group sat down to evaluate the new series and determine what needed to be done to make it their own. The following examples from the 4th grade curriculum illustrate what they found.

**Unit 1: Animal Structure**—*How does an animal's structure help it to live?* Students read informational texts about animals to compare, gather, and synthesize ideas. After doing so, they create an infographic on an animal by describing the animal's physical characteristics, its habitat, and special adaptations.

**Unit 2: Regions of the United States**—*How are the regions of the United States unique?* Students read informational texts about the unique regions of the United States. Students write an opinion sharing reasons as to why one of the regions would be the best place to live.

**Unit 3: Earth**—*How has the Earth's surface changed?* Students read informational texts to develop an understanding of how the Earth's surface has changed. After doing so, students write a comparative essay that examines the effects of change to the Earth's surface as explained in a paired myth passage.

**Unit 4: America's Economy**—*How does the economy work?* Students read literary texts to determine how different characters have worked to overcome challenges in meeting their needs. Students use this information to write a narrative in which a character meets a need.

Examining the organizing centers for each unit sent clear messages about the overall organizing center for the curriculum:

- The curriculum was organized by topics related to content areas.
- The organizing center for each unit was communicated through a title and an answerable guiding question.
- The curriculum separated the study of fiction and nonfiction text by units.
- The culminating tasks for each unit were designed with the teacher as the sole audience for student work.

The school, however, was looking for a curriculum that integrated English language arts with content in a meaningful way, included units that allowed for the examination of fiction and nonfiction simultaneously, and provided the opportunity for students to engage in authentic and meaningful tasks. Given that the school did not have a choice in resources, the teachers set out to make the curriculum their own and planned a curriculum using what they had learned about the organizing centers. The result was the following:

**Unit 1: Survival**—*What does it take to survive?* Students understand that survival is a recurring theme in literature and in life. Students read survival stories to identify and explain traits of characters who have survived physical challenges and other obstacles. They read informational texts about how animals adapt and survive in their different habitats. Students choose an animal to research and create an infographic for younger students explaining the survival instincts of the animals.

**Unit 2: Regions**—*Does where you live matter?* Students read informational text about the different regions of the United States and fictional stories set in these different regions. After reading the stories, they determine the impact the setting had on the story. Students choose one of the regions and create a resource that could be used by individuals who are deciding whether they should move to that region.

**Unit 3: Natural Phenomena**—*What really happens?* Students understand that over time both traditional stories and science have been used to explain how natural phenomena occur. Students read myths, folktales, and fables to learn how these traditional stories have been used to explain natural phenomena in different times and places. They read nonfiction texts that explain the science behind these occurrences. As a result of this unit, students write an introduction to a myth, folktale, or fable found in the school library in which they explain the connection between the science and the story.

**Unit 4: Innovative Solutions**—*What does it take to be innovative?* Students understand that innovative ideas often lead to creative solutions to personal, economic, and other types of problems. In this unit, students read fiction and nonfiction texts, including stories, editorials, and news articles, that provide examples of how people have used innovative solutions to solve problems. Together the class creates a definition of what it means to be innovative. The students identify problems that they have encountered in their own lives and choose one as the basis for writing a proposal that identifies an innovative solution that they can carry out as a class to solve the problem.

The result of the school's work was a curriculum that reflected the criteria the teachers had established and that communicated what they valued. The lesson to be learned from this school is that there are steps you can take in the early stages of choosing or evaluating a curriculum, as well as when planning to design your own, that result in a curriculum that reflects what you value for your students.

Figure 1.1 is a tool that you can use for evaluation and planning. The chart contains space for six units of study and can be modified to reflect the number of units in the curriculum you are evaluating. Typically a year's curriculum can include six units, each approximately six weeks long. However, the length of a unit should be based on what students will learn and do, so all units may not require the same amount of time.

Figure 1.1

**EVALUATING ORGANIZING CENTERS**

Titles (List unit titles here.)	Unit Description (Identify any essential questions and big ideas; describe what students will learn or do during the unit.)
Unit 1:	
Unit 2:	
Unit 3:	
Unit 4:	
Unit 5:	
Unit 6:	

Once you have identified the information called for in Figure 1.1, you can use it to answer the following questions and evaluate the organizing centers for the curriculum:



- 1 • What are the recurring organizing centers used for each unit of study—topic, theme, concept, issue, problem, process, or phenomenon?
- 2 • How are the organizing centers articulated within the curriculum—title only; title and essential question; or title, essential question, and big idea?
- 3 • How do the organizing centers align to the values and focuses of the school as articulated through one or more of the following: the school's mission and vision statement, the process and content standards, the learning processes, and the dispositions and habits of mind that are used to guide instruction?
- 4 • How do the organizing centers support student learning by creating appeal and then engaging students in meaningful, purposeful, and authentic experiences?

If the organizing center is narrow in focus, is articulated only through the title, and does not allow for in-depth analysis or reflect the values and

focuses of the school, it is an early indicator that this may not be the curriculum for you or that your existing curriculum needs revising. If you are designing your own curriculum, it is important to consider these questions before you begin.

## Choosing the “Right” Organizing Centers

There is no one “right” organizing center for all schools. Answering the questions just listed will help you identify the right organizing centers for *your* curriculum. The most important of those questions is *How do the organizing centers align to the values and focuses of the school?* School values and focuses are communicated in many ways, including through the

- School’s mission and vision statement.
- ★ • Process and content standards that have been adopted by the state or local school board.
- Learning processes that have been the focus of school, grade-level, or department collegial circles and professional development.
- Dispositions and habits of mind used by the school to guide student metacognition.

Figure 1.2 includes several examples to illustrate the connection between school values and focuses and the organizing center for the curriculum.

## Summary: Organizing Centers

An organizing center is the central idea upon which a unit of study is built. It is communicated through a unit’s title, essential question, and big idea. Quality organizing centers are built around themes, concepts, issues, problems, processes, or phenomena. They align to the values of the school as articulated through one or more of the following: the school’s mission and vision statement, the process and content standards, the learning processes, and the dispositions and habits of mind that are used to guide instruction. A quality curriculum will organize units of study around

Figure 1.2

### CONNECTING SCHOOL VALUES AND FOCUSES WITH ORGANIZING CENTERS

School Values and Focuses as Articulated Through . . .	Related Organizing Center	Explanation
<p><i>Example 1: Mission Statement</i>—We believe that students should learn in a safe, supportive, and student-centered environment. We are committed to meeting the needs of all students, helping them to achieve academic excellence, and preparing them for a global society.</p>	<p>Schooling for All: <i>Does everyone deserve an education?</i> Students understand that not all children receive an education and how the lack of education affects the lives of those who don't.</p>	<p>This school's mission statement articulates the following goals for its students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safe, student-centered learning environment that meets the need of all learners</li> <li>• Academic excellence</li> <li>• Preparation for a global society</li> </ul> <p>The related organizing center connects to the school's mission statement because it provides students with the opportunity to learn about education in other communities.</p>
<p><i>Example 2: Social Studies Themes</i>—The National Council for the Social Studies identifies the following themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Culture</li> <li>• Time, Continuity, and Change</li> <li>• People, Places, and the Environment</li> <li>• Individual Development and Identity</li> <li>• Individuals, Groups, and Institutions</li> <li>• Power, Authority, and Governance</li> <li>• Production, Distribution, and Consumption</li> <li>• Science, Technology, and Society</li> <li>• Global Connections</li> <li>• Civic Ideals and Practices</li> </ul>	<p>Science, Technology, and Society: <i>Should science be controlled?</i> Students learn about the complexity of government regulation of scientific research because of religious, ethical, and moral issues.</p>	<p>The conceptually based social studies themes can easily be used as titles and narrowed in focus to specific grade-level content through the essential question and big idea. The concept of Science, Technology, and Society can be used as the unit title but is made more specific through the essential question and big idea.</p>

(continues)

Figure 1.2  
**CONNECTING SCHOOL VALUES AND FOCUSES  
 WITH ORGANIZING CENTERS** (continued)

School Values and Focuses as Articulated Through . . .	Related Organizing Center	Explanation
<p><i>Example 3; Common Core State Standards:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• RI.11-12.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term or terms over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines <i>faction</i> in Federalist No. 10).</li> <li>• RI.11-12.5 Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in his or her exposition or argument, including whether the structure makes points clear, convincing, and engaging.</li> <li>• RI.11-12.6 Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness, or beauty of the text.</li> </ul>	<p>The Power of Words: <i>Can we make a difference with what we say?</i>                  Students explore how authors have used language and structure to communicate strong messages that have changed how people think about the world around them.</p>	<p>Analysis of the Common Core State Standards for reading informational text in 11th and 12th grade in comparison with those in 9th and 10th grade indicates that the following skills should be emphasized:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analyze how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term or terms over the course of a text.</li> <li>• Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in her exposition or argument, including whether the structure makes points that are clear, convincing, and engaging.</li> <li>• Analyze how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness, or beauty of the text.</li> </ul> <p>The organizing center for the sample unit focuses on these skills by emphasizing the impact of language and structure on a text.</p>



centers that are worthy of the time and energy set aside for their pursuit and that reflect the overall intent and purpose of the curriculum.

### Tools and Activities for Evaluation, Design, and Revision

• **Evaluating Organizing Centers.** This tool (Figure 1.1) can be used either to identify organizing centers for a curriculum that is currently being designed or to evaluate the organizing centers in an existing curriculum. Using it to plan or evaluate the curriculum will ensure that the curriculum is on the right track and reflects the values of the school.



#### Checklist for Evaluation, Design, and Revision

- The organizing center is articulated through the title, essential question, and big idea.
- The organizing center for each unit of study is a theme, a concept, an issue, a problem, a process, or a phenomenon.
- The organizing center aligns to the values of the school as articulated through one or more of the following: the school's mission and vision statement, the process and content standards, the learning processes, and the dispositions and habits of mind that are used to guide instruction.
- The organizing center supports student learning by creating appeal and will result in students engaging in meaningful, purposeful, and authentic experiences.



---

## CONSIDERATION 2

---

# Alignment to Standards

---

Students sit in small groups reading different versions of the story *Stone Soup*. At one table students are examining the 1947 version of *Stone Soup* by Marcia Brown. In this story, three hungry soldiers enter a village looking for something to eat. The villagers hide their food until the soldiers slowly convince them to share it as they create a soup from stones. At another table, students are examining the later version by Jon J. Muth, which tells the story of three monks in China who face a similar situation when passing through a small village. Simultaneously, students at the remaining tables work with other versions of the same tale. Regardless of the version, all the students are identifying and discussing key details of the text as those details unfold, and the lesson they learned as a result, in preparation for a class discussion on the central message of the story.

Why are the students doing this? Their teacher has designed a learning experience to align to the Common Core standard for 3rd grade: *RL.3.2 Recount stories, including fables, folktales, and myths from diverse cultures; determine the central message, lesson, or moral and explain how it is conveyed through key details in the text.* Is the task, however, truly aligned to the standard?

After determining whether the curriculum is structured using organizing centers that reflect school values or focuses (the topic of Chapter 1), the next step in evaluating or creating a curriculum is to ensure that it

is strongly aligned to the standards the district uses to communicate its values and focuses and to guide instruction. In the classroom described here, if the students were simply asked to identify the main characters in the story, we could easily say that the task was not aligned to the standard. In most cases, examples and nonexamples of alignment are readily distinguishable from each other, making it easy to spot a curriculum that is not aligned. However, the evaluation of alignment is often not about whether a task is aligned or not but rather *to what degree*. In this case the question is, to what degree did the students' examination of the text align to the standard related to recounting key details from stories to determine the central message of the story? The answer is that the learning experience is strongly aligned to the standard. Students are completing work using the skills embedded in the standard. The focus of this chapter is to explore alignment and how to evaluate or create a curriculum that is strongly aligned to standards.

## Degrees of Alignment

When examining a task that sits inside a learning experience or an assessment for degree of alignment, I suggest using a scale of weak, moderate, and strong. Weak alignment is evident when a task addresses only part of a standard or the underlying skills subsumed by the standard. For example, consider the following Common Core standard for 7th grade:

RL.7.5 Analyze how a drama's or poem's form or structure (e.g., soliloquy, sonnet) contributes to its meaning.

An example of a weakly aligned task would be one in which the students are asked to identify the pattern for the sonnet "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways" by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. One could argue that knowing that a sonnet is a 14-line poem divided into two sections—an 8-line stanza (octave) rhyming ABBAABBA, and a 6-line stanza (sestet) rhyming CDCDCD or CDEEDE—is helpful in identifying one. However,

the task certainly does not get to the heart of the standard, which is to analyze how structure contributes to meaning. It may serve as a stepping stone to arriving at the standard, but as a task by itself it does not accomplish its goal.

Consider a task in which students are asked to write the message of the sonnet in one sentence. In this case, the task moves closer to the standard because students are analyzing the poem for its meaning. The teacher who designed the task considered structure, in that a sonnet focuses on one thought or idea, hence the request that students write a sentence. However, the task only moderately aligns to the standard because the students are not asked to make the connection between the structure of a sonnet and its meaning. The teacher has done that for them. The task may be used as a learning experience to reinforce the idea that a sonnet focuses on one idea, but again, left as an isolated task it cannot be considered strongly aligned to the standard.

In a strongly aligned task, students are asked to examine several sonnets for their structure and uncover what distinguishes a sonnet from other types of poems. Their examination of the sonnets leads to the understanding that a sonnet is a 14-line poem that focuses on a single thought or sentiment, and sonnets vary in that some are structured in two stanzas versus one and they may have different rhyming patterns. Students use their criteria to then analyze “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.” They work in groups to discuss how the structure affects the poem’s message. Students consolidate their thinking in a written response that analyzes the impact of the structure on the meaning of the poem. In this example, the task is strongly aligned; it is difficult to separate the task from the standard itself.

The following scale can be used to determine the degree of alignment between a task and a standard:

**Strong Alignment:** The task clearly aligns to the standard; the task and the standard are almost one and the same; the task addresses all parts and honors the intent of the standard.

**Moderate Alignment:** The task addresses the standard; the standard is part of the task but is not the primary focus.

**Weak Alignment:** The task touches on the standard; the standard may occur but is not guaranteed to be part of the task.

A helpful activity, one that is useful in unpacking the scale and understanding alignment, is to rate the alignment of different tasks to a selected standard. Use the preceding scale to rate the degree of alignment between each task in Figure 2.1 and the following standard:

RI.11-12.7 Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

The first example in Figure 2.1, watching a video explaining the history of film, is weakly aligned to the standard; students are only viewing one source, without a specific purpose. The second example is a strongly

Figure 2.1

**DEGREE OF ALIGNMENT**

Task Description	Degree of Alignment
Students watch a video explaining the history of film.	
Students read, watch, and analyze information and data to identify reasons for Latino immigration, challenges immigrants face, and immigrants' quality of life after arrival in the United States. They critique the origin of their sources to determine their reliability. Students use this information to write the introduction to a student-selected collection of memoirs, short stories, and poetry that illustrates the life of immigrants and answers the question <i>Can history be told through a story?</i>	
Students use nonfiction text, videos, and quantitative data as part of their research to complete a paper on an event recounted in a historical novel of their choice.	

aligned task. Here students are reading, watching, and analyzing data, indicating the use of diverse media and formats—text, video, and charts and graphs. They evaluate the credibility of their sources as a means of determining the accuracy of their information. Students then use the information to answer the question *Can history be told through a story?* The last example is moderately aligned to the standard. It focuses on using a variety of sources, but it is unclear as to whether students are responding to a specific question or problem. EQ

The goal is to ensure that the curriculum contains strongly aligned tasks. If we rely on the use of weakly aligned or moderately aligned tasks, students may not have the opportunity to engage in meaningful, relevant, and cognitively demanding tasks required by the school or district standards. A recent study by the Education Trust illustrates this situation. The study found that only 4 in 10 assignments (38 percent) were aligned with a grade-appropriate Common Core standard. As a result, students were often given short, less challenging tasks with a great deal of support that undermined the intention of the standards and lessened the required thinking (Brookins, Santelises, & Dabrowski, 2015). All students should have the opportunity to engage in cognitively demanding texts with scaffolds and supports dependent on need. A curriculum designed with this belief in mind allows teachers to make instructional decisions based on the needs of the students they are teaching. A quality curriculum designed with high-quality, strongly aligned tasks takes the first step in ensuring that this happens.

A task that is strongly aligned to a standard meets the following criteria:

1. The standard and the task are difficult to separate from each other.
2. The task requires students to fully engage in activities that align to all the skills embedded within the standard, usually requiring multiple steps.
3. The task reflects the intent of the standard.

Examine the standards and corresponding tasks in Figure 2.2. As you read through the tasks in Column 2, underline the part of the task description

Figure 2.2  
TASK ALIGNMENT

Standard	Task
<p>Disposition of Practice: Commitment to Reflection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Willingness to devote time and energy to think about decisions, learning, and work in ways that promote thoughtfulness (Martin-Kniep, 2008).</li> </ul>	<p>Students investigate different ways in which young people can “make a difference.” They find examples of community service, fundraisers, and organizations that have been led by young people and have made a difference in the lives of others. Students write a summary of each example they find and record their thoughts, questions, and connections. They work in small groups to determine a way they can make a difference. Students implement their plan and collect data during implementation, altering their plan as necessary. Students write a reflection on their experience and modify their plan in order to implement it again in the future.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students make connections by relating ideas <i>within</i> the content or <i>among</i> content areas and select or devise one approach among many alternatives on how a situation can be solved (Webb’s Depth of Knowledge; Webb et al., 2005).</li> </ul>	<p>Students pursue the question <i>How healthy is the United States?</i> by documenting their own nutrition and exercise habits over a six-week period using a health-journal app. After documenting their own health, they conduct research that pursues questions such as these:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are the nutritional and exercise habits of Americans in different age groups?</li> <li>Are all the research findings regarding American health habits the same? How do they compare?</li> <li>How does society reflect these health habits?</li> <li>How do American health habits affect other areas of American life, such as economics and government?</li> </ul> <p>Students use their own experience to analyze the current state of American health. They write an evaluation of their own health in light of their findings, and prepare an action plan for pursuing a healthy life.</p>

that reflects the standard in Column 1. By underlining the task in the examples, you can determine if the task meets the criteria for strong alignment.

In the first example, the multistep process of finding examples of community service, fundraisers, and organizations; writing a summary and recording thoughts, ideas, and questions; and creating, implementing, revising, and reflecting on a plan is evidence of the willingness to devote time and energy to thinking about decisions, learning, and work in ways that promote thoughtfulness. The alignment can therefore be considered strong.

In the second example, students document their own nutrition and exercise habits, conduct research, analyze the current state of American health, write an evaluation of their own health, and prepare an action plan for pursuing a healthy life. The task seamlessly intertwines health content with literacy skills, and it provides students with a personalized problem that could be solved in multiple ways, once again showing that when the task and standard are the same, alignment is strong.

Once you can recognize the degree of alignment between a task and a standard, it becomes possible to revise a task so it strongly aligns to a standard. Returning to Figure 2.1, we can revise the weakly aligned task (students watch a video explaining the history of film) to make it strong by expanding on the resources and focusing the research on a specific question. Now instead of watching a video explaining the history of film, students read and analyze multimedia resources, articles, and commentaries on the role of film in society, and they examine data regarding film development and usage. They consider the origin of the materials, noting the authors and website creators to determine the credibility of their sources. Students use this information to create a multimedia presentation in which they analyze a film of their choice and answer the question *Does film form or follow the norms and values of a society?*

We can also revise the moderately aligned task from Figure 2.1 for stronger alignment by adding a question to guide the reading of the different sources. In the original task, students are using nonfiction text, videos, and quantitative data to complete a paper on an event recounted in

a historical novel of their choice. By adding the question *Does literature reflect life?* the research and the resulting paper have a specific purpose. EQ

## Content-Area Alignment

The same criteria apply to alignment in the content areas. However, alignment in the content areas often includes alignment to standards with different focuses. For example, consider the following task. Students read three articles to learn about different explanations of climate change, how it is caused, and the resulting impact of climate change on biodiversity. Students are asked to engage in this task in order to understand content identified in the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) and apply literacy skills to access the content, including those identified in Common Core standard RST.9-10.6:

Analyze the author's purpose in providing an explanation, describing a procedure, or discussing an experiment in a text, defining the question the author seeks to address.

The task strongly aligns to the reading standard because it requires students to analyze the author's explanation of climate change. However, when we examine the task for alignment to the science standard, we see that it is actually weakly aligned.

The Next Generation Science Standards contain information about performance, science and engineering practices, disciplinary core ideas, and crosscutting concepts. For the sake of this example, let's work with one of the NGSS's performance expectations and a corresponding core idea related to the topic of Interdependent Relationships in the Ecosystem.

### HS-LS4-6

Create or revise a simulation to test a solution to mitigate adverse impacts of human activity on biodiversity. [Clarification Statement: Emphasis is on designing solutions for a proposed problem related to threatened or endangered species, or to genetic variation of organisms for multiple species.]

**LS4.D: Biodiversity and Humans**

Humans depend on the living world for the resources and other benefits provided by biodiversity. But human activity is also having adverse impacts on biodiversity through overpopulation, overexploitation, habitat destruction, pollution, introduction of invasive species, and climate change. . . . Thus sustaining biodiversity so that ecosystem functioning and productivity are maintained is essential to supporting and enhancing life on Earth. Sustaining biodiversity also aids humanity by preserving landscapes of recreational or inspirational value.

Exploring the different views on climate change is only one part of the core idea LS4.D: Biodiversity and Humans, which is why the task is weakly aligned. To strongly align to the core idea, students would also need to examine

- Speciation and extinction.
- Adverse impacts of human behavior, including overpopulation, overexploitation, habitat destruction, pollution, introduction of invasive species, and climate change.
- Biological extinction, because many species are unable to survive in changed environments and die out.
  - The effects of biological extinction.
  - The importance of sustaining biodiversity.
  - Ways to sustain biodiversity.

One of the challenges related to strong alignment to content standards is making sure that all of the content included in the standard is also included in the curriculum, which may require more than one task. Addressing only one aspect of the content does not constitute alignment. For strong alignment to occur, the curriculum must include all the content in the standards.

By itself, the science core idea does not communicate how the students will acquire the information. This is why content standards are paired with literacy standards, as shown in the original example. Students are

learning about climate change through reading. Their next learning experience may include a task that has them listening to a multimedia presentation to learn about the effects of biological distinction.

Alignment becomes even more complex as more standards are added. In this extension of the example, the core idea is presented with a performance expectation. Now for strong alignment to occur, students would need to formulate and test a possible solution for addressing the negative human impact on biodiversity. This undertaking could include

- Choosing an area of focus.
- Creating or revising a simulation that includes mathematical and computational thinking.
  - Developing or evaluating a solution, taking into consideration cost, safety, reliability, and social, cultural, and environmental impacts.
  - Using physical models and computers.
  - Using empirical evidence to differentiate between cause and correlation and to make claims about specific causes and effects.

Now the original reading task serves a small role in a big picture. Regardless of scope, however, the concept of alignment remains the same. In the content areas, it means examining alignment in terms of content to be taught, content-specified skills such as the performance expectation, and the role of literacy in accessing and communicating the content.

## Implications for Evaluating, Creating, or Revising Curriculum

Understanding that alignment occurs by degree rather than extremes is important to ensuring that students have opportunities to truly learn and practice the skills embedded in the standards. When evaluating curriculum, one way to check for strong alignment is to choose sample tasks from various units and determine the degree of alignment between the task and the standard identified using the scale of weak, moderate, and strong, as previously described. The tasks you choose to evaluate should represent

those found in daily lessons, extended activities, and assessments. The chart in Figure 2.3 is a helpful tool for gathering and evaluating this information. An example at the top of the chart illustrates the process.

You can add additional rows to the chart based on the number of tasks you are examining. It is advantageous to analyze multiple tasks of different lengths and purposes. Determining the degree of alignment is particularly important when examining published curriculum and instructional materials. A report from the Brown Center on Education



Figure 2.3

### DETERMINING ALIGNMENT IN A CURRICULUM

Task Description	Standard	Degree of Alignment	Notes for Revision
Students read several documents related to the events that occurred in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963, including Dr. Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and a reprinted newspaper article from the <i>New York Times</i> in 1963. As they read the texts, they work with different-colored highlighters to show how the texts address the event in a similar fashion and any disconnect among the texts.	RI.9-10.9 Analyze seminal U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (e.g., Washington's Farewell Address, the Gettysburg Address, Roosevelt's Four Freedoms speech, King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail"), including how they address related themes and concepts.	Moderate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include an additional reading such as "Ballad of Birmingham" by Dudley Randall.</li> <li>• Provide opportunity for discussion on the ways the texts describe the same event, the reasons for the differences in their descriptions, and the impact on student understanding of the events of Birmingham as a result of reading the different accounts.</li> </ul>
<i>Task 1:</i>			
<i>Task 2:</i>			

Policy at Brookings included this observation about publishing companies' initial responses to the Common Core State Standards: "Publishers of instructional materials are lining up to declare the alignment of their materials with the Common Core standards using the most superficial of definitions" (Chingos & Whitehurst, 2012, p. 1). Although publishers have made some improvements, those have not been enough; nor have they been consistent. Some companies have simply done a better job than others of aligning their materials, and with such inconsistencies, checking the degree of alignment is important.

## Addressed, Taught, and Assessed: Three Ways to Look at Standards

When examining curriculum, we are looking for tasks that are strongly aligned to the standards. What will help or hamper this determination is the way in which the curriculum communicates information about the standards and their value or emphasis.

We can view standards in different ways: those that are addressed, those that are taught, and those that are taught and assessed. Standards that are addressed are those that are touched upon but not necessarily the primary focus of a unit within a curriculum. Standards that are taught are those that involve students engaging in activities that practice the skills embedded within the standards. Standards that are taught and assessed are the standards that are the focus of instruction and are evaluated during the unit of study.

Let's examine a 4th grade unit to determine the difference between standards that are addressed and those that are taught and assessed. In this unit, students are examining the essential question *Is there more than one way to tell a story?* They are reading collections of texts that are connected by theme and that include stories from cultures other than the United States, nonfiction text, and dramas and stories that have been made into films. As they read, they take note of how the texts approach similar themes, and the similarities and differences between texts and

their visual presentations. As a result of their examination, students write a proposal for a new movie based on a book of their choice.

The Common Core reading literature standards for this unit include the following:

- RL.4.1 Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.
- RL.4.2 Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text; summarize the text.
- RL.4.3 Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., a character's thoughts, words, or actions).
- RL.4.5 Explain major differences between poems, drama, and prose, and refer to the structural elements of poems (e.g., verse, rhythm, meter) and drama (e.g., casts of characters, settings, descriptions, dialogue, stage directions) when writing or speaking about a text.
- RL.4.6 Compare and contrast the point of view from which different stories are narrated, including the difference between first- and third-person narrations.
- RL.4.7 Make connections between the text of a story or drama and a visual or oral presentation of the text, identifying where each version reflects specific descriptions and directions in the text.
- RL.4.9 Compare and contrast the treatment of similar themes and topics (e.g., opposition of good and evil) and patterns of events (e.g., the quest) in stories, myths, and traditional literature from different cultures.

At first glance, it is easy to see why these standards were chosen; it is possible for students to use the skills that are embedded in all of these standards. However, potential does not mean the task is aligned, nor that the standard should be listed as a unit outcome. The question goes back to

alignment and to what degree the tasks within the unit align to the standards. Based on this understanding, some of these standards are really just being addressed in the unit. The students are using the skills, but those skills are not the central focus of the unit. Further examination will reveal which standards are being addressed and which are being taught and assessed.

Throughout the unit, students read a variety of different text and film collections that may include the following:

- *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* by Brian Selznick, the film of the same title, and *Toys! Amazing Stories Behind Some Great Inventions* by Don Wulffson
- *The Lorax* by Dr. Seuss, the film of the same title, a nonfiction text on protecting the environment, and a folktale
- The poem "Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf" by Roald Dahl, a picture book of Little Red Riding Hood, and *Lon Po Po: A Red-Riding Hood Story from China* by Ed Young

Students complete various activities and participate in discussions about the texts and films, referring to details and examples that support their thinking. These activities allow students to identify and examine common themes within the collections of texts, and to examine the unique structures of the different types of texts. They also provide students with the opportunity to generate criteria to use when comparing texts and their film versions.

At different points in the unit, students complete written responses in which they summarize the text and respond to the following questions, using specific evidence from the text:

- What is the theme of the story? How do the details in the text reveal the theme?
- How is the text structured? How does the structure affect the story?
- In what ways does the film reflect the descriptions and directions in the text?

- How do the text and the film differ? How do these differences affect the story?
- How do the texts and films treat the same theme?

Given what we know about strong alignment, we can identify the standards that are taught and assessed when the task directions and the standards are placed next to each other, as in Figure 2.4. The standards that strongly align with the tasks—meaning the tasks and standard are difficult to separate from each other, and the intent of the standard remains intact—fall into either the category of “taught” or “taught and assessed.” What is the difference? *When a standard is taught, the task occurs during instruction.* We see this in the 4th grade unit when students complete activities and participate in discussions. *Students have the opportunity to practice the skills embedded in the standard with teacher guidance and feedback.* When standards are taught and assessed, this still occurs, but there is also an *assessment opportunity that allows the teacher to check and monitor student understanding.* The reader-response journals serve this purpose in the 4th grade example.

Figure 2.4 shows which tasks and standards are aligned and also reveals that two of the standards identified are not aligned to a specific task in the unit:

- RL.4.3 Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., a character’s thoughts, words, or actions).
- RL.4.6 Compare and contrast the point of view from which different stories are narrated, including the difference between first- and third-person narrations.

Some may argue that students will need to describe the characters, setting, and events of the story when they use key details from the text to identify the theme. It is also possible for students to compare and contrast the point of view from which different stories are narrated by examining point of view in the different collections of stories. However, *although these things may occur, the unit has not been designed with the explicit intent to allow students to practice these skills and the teacher to assess*

Figure 2.4

**ANALYZING TASKS**

Standard	Tasks
RL.4.1 Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.	Students complete activities, participate in discussions, and respond to questions using details, examples, and evidence from text.
RL.4.2 Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text; summarize the text.	Students identify common themes. Students summarize the text. Reader Response: What is the theme of the story? How do the details in the text reveal the theme?
RL.4.3 Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., a character's thoughts, words, or actions).	
RL.4.5 Explain major differences between poems, drama, and prose, and refer to the structural elements of poems (e.g., verse, rhythm, meter) and drama (e.g., casts of characters, settings, descriptions, dialogue, stage directions) when writing or speaking about a text.	Students examine the unique structure of the different type of texts. Reader Response: How is the text structured? How does the structure affect the story?
RL.4.6 Compare and contrast the point of view from which different stories are narrated, including the difference between first- and third-person narrations.	
RL.4.7 Make connections between the text of a story or drama and a visual or oral presentation of the text, identifying where each version reflects specific descriptions and directions in the text.	Students identify criteria to use when comparing text and film. Reader Response: In what ways does the film reflect the descriptions and directions in the text? How does it differ? How do these differences affect the story?
RL.4.9 Compare and contrast the treatment of similar themes and topics (e.g., opposition of good and evil) and patterns of events (e.g., the quest) in stories, myths, and traditional literature from different cultures.	Students identify and examine common themes within the collections of texts. Reader Response: How do the texts in the collection treat the same theme?

them. We can consider these standards to be addressed only. The teacher may ask students to draw upon these skills or the skills may inadvertently occur, but they are not explicitly at the center of instruction and assessment in this unit.

Why is it important to distinguish between standards that are addressed, taught, and taught and assessed? Why not just include all the standards? One reason is practicality. The 4th grade example just presented describes in depth the reading literature portion of the unit. Students are also reading informational texts, writing, and speaking and listening within the unit. Including all standards from all areas would create a massive and unmanageable unit that could potentially go on for several months, therefore defeating the intent of organizing curriculum into units.

The other reason is focus. Educational researchers such as Rick Stiggins, W. James Popham, Robert Marzano, and Susan Brookhart have repeatedly discussed the impact of clear learning targets on students (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001; Moss & Brookhart, 2012; Popham, 1999; Stiggins, 1997). Prioritizing the standards within units will help teachers to identify learning targets, share those targets with their students, and develop and use appropriate learning activities. Students will be aware of what they need to know and be able to do, have plenty of opportunities to practice the skills within the standards, and receive appropriate feedback and guidance from their teachers.

Prioritizing a set of standards in one unit is not done at the expense of other standards. When standards are carefully organized throughout the year, students will have the opportunity to practice the skills related to all standards, which is the focus of Chapter 3.

## Taught and Assessed Standards in the Content Areas

The same concept of taught and assessed standards applies to the content areas as well. The difference, however, will depend on the specificity of the

content-area standards or content understandings. In many cases, these standards or content understandings are vague and open to interpretation.

For example, consider the following content understandings from across the United States. According to the *Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Social Studies*, the student is expected to understand “the domestic and international impact of U.S. participation in World War II. The student is expected to identify reasons for U.S. involvement in World War II, including Italian, German, and Japanese dictatorships and their aggression, especially the attack on Pearl Harbor” (Texas Education Agency, 2010). In California, students are expected to “analyze America’s participation in World War II. They examine the origins of American involvement in the war, with an emphasis on the events that precipitated the attack on Pearl Harbor” (California Academic Content Standards Commission [CACSC], 2000). In New York State, the following conceptual understandings describe what students need to know:

- 11.10 The United States participated in World War II as part of an Allied force to prevent military conquests by Germany, Italy, and Japan. United States policies during and immediately after World War II had a significant impact on American political, economic, and social life.
- 11.10.a Multiple factors contributed to a rise in authoritarian forms of government and ideologies such as fascism, communism, and socialism after World War I.
- 11.10.b The United States and the international community did not respond with force to aggressive German and Japanese actions that violated international treaties agreed to following World War I.
- 11.10.c In the 1930s, public opinion slowly moved toward supporting a more active United States involvement in world affairs.
- 11.10.d United States involvement moved from a policy of neutrality at the beginning of World War II and evolved into a pro-Allied position, culminating in direct and active United States involvement. (New York State, 2013)

Each of these documents provides information about what students should know about the United States entry into World War II, but none of them—regardless of the length of the description—offer specifics as to exactly what needs to be taught, what students need to be able to do with that knowledge, or how they can demonstrate that knowledge.

For the concept of taught and assessed to apply to these content standards, teachers first have to identify the “nonnegotiable.” What exactly will students need to know, for example, about German, Italian, and Japanese aggression before the start of World War II? What should they know about the attack on Pearl Harbor? I have sat through many conversations in which teachers have discussed what they teach and what they do not teach in a unit of study, and there is rarely unanimous agreement. It is through these conversations, however, that teachers unpack the curriculum documents and identify the specifics about what needs to be taught and assessed.

## Additional Implications for Evaluating, Creating, or Revising Curriculum

Certain indicators show that all the standards identified within the unit have been given equal weight. One is when all or most of the standards have been listed in a unit, as in the 4th grade example. Possibility does not indicate alignment. There need to be sufficient and focused practice and assessment opportunities within the unit for a standard to be considered taught and assessed. Including all standards in one unit does not allow for the necessary time to practice the embedded skills. Even with the identification of taught and assessed standards, standards will need to be revisited throughout the year to provide opportunities for reinforcement and attainment.

A second indication that careful thought has not been given to the identification of standards is when the standards identified in the overview or introduction to the unit are not the same as those identified in individual lessons. This mismatch suggests that the standards being taught are not

necessarily those being assessed. Unfortunately, I have found this to be a common problem with textbooks and other learning materials.

So the following question arises: What do you do if you are working with a curriculum in which it is difficult to determine the focus standards? The task then becomes to prioritize the standards by clearly identifying and labeling those that are taught and assessed, and distinguishing them from those that are addressed. For existing or published curriculums, this may mean reviewing existing tasks to determine which standards are truly being taught and assessed. Although this effort may take some time, it is time well spent. Without such distinction, the unit will not be cohesive, and it will be very difficult to ensure that all users of the curriculum will understand the focus of instruction and assessment.

An additional strategy for ensuring that the standards identified are those that are taught and assessed is to actually code the standard into the document and create a unit blueprint. For example, if the original 4th grade document were coded with the standards, it would look like this:

Throughout the unit, students read a variety of different text and film collections [RL.4.5, RL.4.9]. They complete different activities and participate in discussions about the texts and films, referring to details and examples that support their thinking [RL.4.1]. These activities allow students to identify and examine common themes [RL.4.2, RL.4.9] within the collections of texts, and examine the unique structures of the different types of texts, including folktales, stories, nonfiction, drama, and poems [RL.4.5]. They also provide students with the opportunity to identify criteria to use when comparing texts and their film versions [RL.4.7].

At different points in the unit, students complete written responses in which they summarize the text [RL.4.2] and respond to the following questions, using specific evidence from the text [RL.4.1]:

- What is the theme of the story? How do the details in the text reveal the theme? [RL.4.2]
- How is the text structured? How does the structure affect the story? [RL.4.5]

- In what ways does the film reflect the descriptions and directions in the text? [RL.4.7]
- How do the text and the film differ? How do these differences affect the story? [RL.4.7]
- How do the texts or films treat the same theme? [RL.4.9]

A benefit to coding the standards as the unit is created is that it ensures that the tasks within the unit are strongly aligned and can be taught and assessed. Teachers can make decisions about the type of texts, activities, and assessments as they draft the unit. The process also reveals areas where alignment between a task and a standard is weak so that that area can be revised and made stronger, or when a standard selected for a unit early in the design process no longer makes sense and should be removed from the unit.

## Summary: Alignment to Standards

Two critical areas to examine when evaluating or designing curriculum for standards alignment are (1) degree of alignment and (2) communication of standards that are taught and assessed. Although curriculum documents may claim alignment, the degree to which the curriculum is aligned may vary. Tasks can be weakly, moderately, or strongly aligned to standards. A quality curriculum will ensure strong alignment, meaning the tasks and standard are difficult to distinguish from each other and the intent of the standard remains intact.

Listing a standard in a unit of study is not enough to claim that it is sufficiently emphasized throughout the unit. Standards that are addressed, taught, and taught and assessed may all be included in one unit. A high-quality curriculum document will communicate the difference between these standards or include only those that are taught and assessed, allowing teachers to make purposeful decisions about what to teach and how to teach it and to share learning targets with their students. Students should be given the opportunity to practice the skills embedded in the standards and receive guidance and feedback from their teachers before being assessed.

Understanding degree of alignment can help educators identify those tasks in need of revision and revise them to increase the degree of alignment between the task and the standards. In addition, it can help them to analyze the standards to reveal those that are taught and assessed, as well as those that are simply addressed. The coding of standards will ensure both alignment and the inclusion of standards that are taught and assessed in a unit of study.

### Tools and Activities for Evaluation, Design, and Revision

- **Degree of Alignment**—This activity is helpful in establishing a common understanding of the degree of alignment between tasks and standards (see Figure 2.1 for an example). With this understanding, educators can evaluate tasks in an existing curriculum to determine their degree of alignment and, when necessary, revise them so they strongly align to the standards. Educators can also use this understanding to design strongly aligned tasks.

- **Analyzing Tasks for Strong Alignment**—This activity allows educators to see the connection between what students are asked to do and the standard itself (see Figure 2.2 for an example). It is helpful in clarifying the criteria for a strongly aligned task.

- **Determining Alignment in a Curriculum**—A chart like the one in Figure 2.3 can be used for sampling tasks within a curriculum to ensure that they are strongly aligned and revise those that are not.

- **Coding Standards**—Coding of standards into tasks ensures strong alignment and identifies weakly or moderately aligned tasks in need of revision (see example on pp. 43–44).



### Checklist for Evaluation, Design, and Revision

- The tasks are strongly aligned to the standards. It is difficult to distinguish between the task and the standard, all skills identified in the standard are included in the task, and the task honors the intent of the standard.
- The standards that are *taught and assessed* are clearly identified and distinguished from those that are *addressed*.