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The Relationship Between State and District Content Standards: Issues of Alignment, Influence and Utility

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Abstract

At the core of standards-based reform are content standards--statements about what students should know and be able to do. Although it is *state* standards that are the focus of much public attention and consume substantial resources, many local school districts have developed their own content standards in the major subject areas. However, we know very little about the role state standards have played in local standards efforts. In this article we report on a study of the relationship between state and local content standards in reading in four states and districts. Through interviews with key personnel in each state, and district and analyses of state and local content standards in reading, we explored the alignment between state and district content standards, the path of influence between the two, and the role of high-stakes tests in state and districts reform efforts. Our findings suggest that alignment had multiple meanings and that state standards had differential utility to districts, ranging from helpful to benign to nuisance. This wide variability was influenced by the nature of the standards

themselves, the state vision of alignment and local control, districts' own engagement and commitment to professional development, and student performance on high-stakes tests. We explore implications for the future of content standards as the cornerstone of standards-based reform and argue that states must promote district ownership and expand accountability if state content standards are to have any relevance for local efforts to reform teaching and learning.

Standards-based reform has captured the attention and imagination of everyone—educators, policymakers, and the public. Behind it is a commitment to make high quality education a reality for all students regardless of their geographic, socioeconomic, cultural or linguistic backgrounds. Based on a theory of action, reformers argue that if there are challenging standards, aligned assessments, flexibility for schools to help students meet the standards, an accountability system, and professional development, then everything in the education system can be directed toward the standards, and both teaching and student learning will improve (National Research Council, 1999; O'Day & Smith, 1993).

At the core of the standards-based enterprise are content standards—statements about what students should know and be able to do. Rather than allow tests to establish default curricular standards, content standards are intended to define what educators and the public value, and to provide a transparent way of communicating those expectations to everyone. In general, it has been *state* standards that have been the focus of much public attention. States typically set content standards, select the assessments, and issue sanctions or awards. In fact, 49 of 50 states now have content standards in core subject areas (Education Week, 2003) and a great deal of resources—time, money, good will—have been expended to develop, disseminate, and revise them. Development of state standards seems to have two primary goals: first, to exert a coherent force over curriculum and assessment statewide, and reaffirm states' rights over educational decisions; second, to provide curriculum guidance to local districts where the real acts of teaching and learning occur. At the same time as states have been working on standards, many local school districts have developed their own content standards in the major subject areas (Massell, Kirst, and Hoppe, 1997). However, we know very little about whether state level standards have meaningfully influenced these local standards. For example, what is the relation between state and local standards—in particular, how aligned are they? What process have districts engaged in to develop their standards? What has influenced those processes? The answers to these questions provide important insights into the potential of state standards to improve teaching and learning, and ultimately, the future of standards-based reform. This is the focus of our study.

Background

The push for national content standards and a system of assessments gained widespread attention in 1992 after the release of the report of the National Council on Education Standards and Testing. Concerned about the quality of teaching and student achievement, the U.S. Department of Education supported efforts to develop both national and state content standards, believing that once these were established, then other elements in the educational system would cohere (O'Day & Smith, 1993). The groundbreaking work of

the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) pushed traditional understandings of what students could and should learn and be able to do. Release of the national math standards in 1989, following 10 years of research, consensus building, and educating communities about standards, seemed to convince everyone that content standards were both desirable and feasible. Efforts to develop content standards in English/Language Arts (ELA) did not enjoy the same extended timeline or positive reception. The Department of Education, critical of the broad nature of early drafts of the ELA national standards, which paralleled the 1987 California reading framework, and troubled by California's low ranking on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in reading, terminated funding 18 months into the three-year project. The two major professional language arts organizations, International Reading Association and National Council of Teachers of English, forged ahead with their own funds, but the development process remained difficult as continued efforts to create a consensus draft were met with debate and controversy among ELA professionals (Mayher, 1999). The national ELA standards were released in 1996 to a mix of criticism and praise both within and outside the discipline (Burke, 1996; Mayher, 1999; Myers, 1996).

As states turned their attention to establishing content standards, they used a range of strategies for involving educators, subject matter experts, and the public at large (Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 1993). The idea behind broad participation in state development of content standards seems to have three aims: 1) input--identify what students should know and be able to do based on first-hand experiences and understandings of people in local schools and communities; 2) output--to build a network for dissemination back to districts and schools; and 3) buy-in--to get people to understand, value, and support reform efforts at the state level. Although most states subscribed to this participatory model, there has been considerable variability across states with respect to who participates and how final decisions about standards are made. Other factors, such as changes in state leadership, the politically and ideologically charged process of state board approval, and controversies over content within subject areas have led many states to shape their standards in particular ways or revise them, sometimes more than once, in the last decade (Cusick and Borman, 2002; Massell, et. al., 1997). Further, there is increasing pressure from national and state legislatures, particularly in the subject matter of reading, to influence the content of state content standards in unprecedented ways (Allington, 2002; Paterson, 2000). As a result, state standards in the same subject area vary considerably from state to state (Massell, et al, 1997; Wixson & Dutro, 1999).

The challenge for all states, however, is to assure the translation or transfer of state standards to local school districts and, eventually, to teachers where implementation takes hold (Dutro, Fisk, Koch, Roop & Wixson, 2002; Stecher, Barron, Chun, & Ross, 2000;). While it might be assumed that local participation in state standards development would facilitate some degree of transfer, research clearly indicates that school districts play a crucial role in reform, filtering and shaping information states hope will influence classroom practice (Cohen & Hill, 2000; Hertert, 1996; Marsh, 2000; Spillane & Jennings, 1997; Standerford, 1997). As Spillane notes (cited in Olson, 2001), school districts can "amplify, drown out, or minimize" the impact of standards in schools. In addition the language of standards is itself subject to interpretation (Hill, 2001). State articulation of desired content in no way guarantees that the language embedded in state documents will be interpreted by local educators in ways states intend. Further, it is the local standards with which teachers are most likely to engage. For example, McGill-Franzen, Ward, Goatly & Machado (2002) found that teachers in a district that already had its own standards

assumed that the standards reflected the state standards or were identical to them even though the teachers had never had contact with the state standards; in fact, the district standards differed substantially from the state.

Given that content standards are a necessary starting place for reform, there is surprisingly little research on the standards themselves on in this transfer from state to local level. Part of the problem is that an analysis of standards requires subject matter expertise, and historically there has been a divide between those who study policy and those who study subject matter (Valencia & Wixson, 2000). A second, more insidious problem is that within much of the research related to standards-based reform, the three areas of standards, assessment, and accountability are often examined as a unitary “reform,” making it impossible to isolate a focus on content standards (e.g. Goertz, Floden, & O’Day, 1995; Koretz, et al, 1996; Lindle, Petrosko, & Pankratz, 1997; McDonnell & Choisser, 1997;). For example, surveys of teachers engaged in reform often ask if or how teaching has changed as a result of a new state test rather than asking about the content standards (e.g. Guthrie, Schafer, Afflerbach, & Almasi, 1994), and studies of reform that include content standards are most often situated in states with high-stakes assessment. Furthermore, research that directly engages content standards has tended to focus on either the process of standards development (e.g., Myers, 1994; Pearson, 1993) or the enactment of standards in the classroom (e.g., Firestone, Camilli, Yurecko, Monfils, & Mayrowetz, 2000; Bernauer, 1999; Desmond, Kerlavage, & Seda, 1998), with very little research focusing on the standards themselves or the relation between state and local standards. And, to add to the problem, the public often conflates content standards with performance standards (and performance standards are usually equated with test scores). A report released by the Public Agenda (2003) found strong public support for content standards but in the same report the authors also note that “raising standards” involves “trade-offs such as holding children back or forcing them to attend summer school,” clearly indicating a reference to test performance rather than content standards. So, more than 15 years after standards-based reform was launched, it is still difficult to find research specifically focused on content standards, the linchpin of reform.

We situate this study in the subject area of reading – unquestionably the most high profile, legislated, and hotly debated subject area, especially in light of the No Child Left Behind legislation and Reading First guidelines. Careful document analyses have found that content standards in reading look very different across states. In a study of state reading documents in 42 states, Wixson & Dutro (1999) found great variability in the way states conceptualized and organized the subject of reading. Some states provided specific standards at each grade level while others had standards only at targeted grades (usually, the tested grades); some standards included a great deal of specificity while others included only broad ideas about what students should learn; and some included content that could be considered inappropriate, others ignored important content (Wixson & Dutro, 1999). Reading content standards also have been increasingly subject to evaluations or “grading” by an array of organizations (e.g. Fordham, Achieve, AFT, CCSSO) resulting in inconsistent and debatable judgments about the quality of standards. While some state documents get high grades and others get failing grades, some actually get both high and failing grades from different groups, revealing that the criteria of various “graders” reflect a “mix of political, philosophical, and educational interests” (Valencia & Wixson, 2001). Such variability suggests that state content standards have uneven utility to districts and to teachers’ work. What is less clear, however, is just what relationship exists between state

reading standards and the development of local reading district standards. To investigate that question we conducted case studies of four states and districts. Specifically, we asked:

- How do state standards compare with local standards? Are they intentionally aligned?
- What is the intended and actual path of influence between the state standards and local district standards?
- How are the path of influence and the actual content standards affected by the presence or absence of high-stakes assessment?
- What are the implications of the state and local standards relationship for efforts to improve teaching and learning, and the future of standards-based reform?

Methods and Data Sources

We focused on four states and one district within each state. We chose states and districts that were part of a larger study of reform-oriented districts.¹ The districts were considered “forward-moving” in the sense that they were actively engaged in reform in the areas of teacher education, instruction, curriculum and assessment. Our affiliation with the larger study allowed us access to key informants as well as background information on each state and district. Three of the districts were in large, urban communities and one was considered semi-urban, lying outside the main city limits but demographically similar to the other three urban districts. All were racially diverse, included moderate to high numbers of second language learners, and served a significant number of students living in poverty. We include detailed descriptions of each district in our case studies.

Our primary data sources were documents and interviews. We conducted in-depth analyses of the reading standards documents in each of the four states and districts for grades 1, 3 or 4, 7 or 8, corresponding to two of the grades tested in each state (none of the states tested at first grade).² Our analysis focused on structure/form, domain

¹ For the past 5 years, the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy has been engaged in research on the connections between policy environments and teaching practice. Drawing on a sample of four states, large urban districts within those states, and school and classroom samples within these districts, CTP researchers have been investigating how teachers' work and student learning opportunities reflect and are shaped by various policy environments and contexts in which they work. The results of this investigation are beginning to emerge in Center reports—see Darling-Hammond, L., Hightower, A. M., Husbands, J. L., LaFors, J., Young, V. M., & Christopher, C. (2003), "Building Instructional Quality: 'Inside-Out' and 'Outside-In' Perspectives on San Diego's School Reform;" Gallucci, C., Knapp, M. S., Markholt, A., & Ort, S. (2003), "Standards-Based Reform and Small Schools of Choice: How Reform Theories Converge in Three Urban Middle Schools"; and Bascia, N. (2002), "Triage or Tapestry? Teacher Unions' Work Toward Improving Teacher Quality in an Era of Systemic Reform," all three available on the Center Website: www.ctpweb.org. Several book-length manuscripts with more complete presentations of findings are under development.

² What is consistent about standards is that they are always in flux. We focused on state and local documents in place between the fall of 2000 and December 2001.

Table 1
Focus of Standards Document Analysis

	Structure/Form	Domain Strands	Content	Philosophical Orientation
Definition	<p>Organization of standards document</p> <p>Example: Broad areas or clusters of what students should know and be able to do (e.g. functions of language vs modes, grade level breaks or bands, specific learnings and how those are organized within the document)</p>	<p>Areas within language arts that are included in the standards and subareas under each</p> <p>Example: Reading - decoding - comprehension Writing, Listening, Speaking Literature</p>	<p>Specific content included in the standards.</p> <p>Example: Decoding, vocabulary, reference skills, dispositions, etc.</p>	<p>Approach to language arts that underlies the standards.</p> <p>Example: Is there a clear emphasis on skills or process at the expense of the other?</p>
Rationale	<p>Structure/form of standards provide information on issues of philosophy, clarity, and specificity.</p>	<p>Decisions about how to carve up the content area influence the weight given to various areas within ELA.</p>	<p>Coverage of the same or similar content is fundamental to most conceptions of alignment.</p>	<p>Another indicator of alignment. Philosophical orientation can signal agreement/disagreement between state/local approaches to ELA.</p>
Data produced	<p>Organization of documents was compared across states as well as within each state (state/district comparison). Number of standards compared</p>	<p>Domain strands were compared across the states as well as within each state (state/district comparison)</p>	<p>Quantitative and qualitative analysis of overlap and difference between state and district standards.</p>	<p>Qualitative characterizations of documents based on the types of processes or skill-oriented benchmarks, the descriptive 'front-matter' included in documents, and additional information on state and local political contexts around ELA content.</p>

strands, and the content and philosophical orientation of the standards (see Table 1). Two of three researchers analyzed each of the standards documents. Where disagreements arose around interpretation, a third researcher examined the data. Each researcher created memos and charts with our initial analyses of the four focal areas and then created detailed memos on each state/district comparison at each of the targeted grade levels.

Following document analysis, we interviewed a state and a district level reading specialist in each of the four focus sites. We created separate interview protocols for state and district informants. Our questions focused primarily on understanding the current reading standards and assessments that were in use in the state or district and how they were developed, the expectations that each group (state, district) had for the other in relation to standards-based reading reforms, and any dilemmas faced by each group in relation to the standards, assessments, or curriculum that are part of those reforms. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing state and district-specific conversations to emerge from the more general protocol questions (Kvale, 1996). Each interview was transcribed for analysis. We used methods of grounded theory to analyze the interview transcripts: the transcripts were read multiple times by each author; themes were identified, compared, and honed; and codes for analysis were created from those themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The codes included: intended path of influence, actual path of influence, issues of local control, accountability (including role of state assessments), specificity, philosophical approach, professional development, role of leadership, role of curriculum, state-driven reform, district-driven reform, process used to develop, communicate, and implement content standards. After conducting interviews, each author wrote reflective memos that then were also used in analysis. In addition, we searched for both confirming and disconfirming evidence of our emerging understandings across document analyses, transcripts, and memos. We also shared our case studies with staff from the larger project familiar with each context to ensure that our factual information on each state and district was consistent with their understanding.

To construct our case studies of each state/district relationship, we drew on interview transcripts, state and district documents, our research memos and standards analyses. As part of this process, we constructed charts that allowed us to address issues within each case and compare and contrast across cases.

Findings

In this section, we discuss each of our case studies, beginning with brief overviews of each state and district as well as information about our informants.³ We then discuss our analysis of the alignment between state and local standards and the process states and districts engaged in to construct their standards. Next, we examine the intended and actual path of influence between state and local standards policy. We end each case with a “capsule” on each case, highlighting key issues that arose in our analysis. Finally, we discuss key issues across the four cases in the cross case analysis.

³ To protect the identities of our informants we have not described them or their positions in detail. All names—states, districts, and personnel—are pseudonyms.

State A/Birchwood School District

State/district context. State A, situated in the northwest section of the United State, is a state of 6 million people, approximately 1 million of whom are students. The demographic distribution of students mirrors that of the overall state population with approximately 75% of the students White, 10% Hispanic, 7% Asian, 5% African-American, and 2 % American Indian. Nearly 6% of these children are English language learners and 14% live in poverty.

Birchwood is a medium-sized urban district serving about 18,000 students in 25 elementary schools, 4 middle schools and 4 high schools. At the time of the study, the student population was roughly 49% White, 20% Asian, 13 % Black, 16% Hispanic, and 2 % Native American, making it more diverse than the state average but consistent with other urban areas in the state. Approximately 12% of Birchwood's students were classified as English language learners and 43% were eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. Turnover of teachers and administrators was on the rise, with as many as 10 new principals and over 100 new teachers coming to the district in one year. Like many urban districts, Birchwood was challenged to improve student achievement with limited resources.

Informants. Our state informant, Barbara, had been at the state level for several years working primarily in the area literacy and literacy assessment. Our district informant, Mary, had been with the district for more than 15 years and had served in a variety of teacher and administrative capacities related to literacy, English-as-a-second-language, and curriculum.

The state/district alignment. At the time of the study, State A had separate content standards for reading that consisted of four broad standards: The student 1) understands and uses different skills and strategies to read; 2) understands the meaning of what is read; 3) reads different materials for a variety of purposes; and 4) sets goals and evaluates progress to improve reading. Each one was followed by several (1-5) more specific "indicators" that defined what students should know and be able to do to meet the standard. For example:

- 1.0 The student understands and uses different skills and strategies to read
- 1.1 uses word recognition and word meaning skills to read and comprehend text such as phonics, context clues, picture clues, and word originals, roots, prefixes, and suffixes of words
- 1.2 build vocabulary through reading

These content standards and indicators were designed to be applicable to all stages of reading development, although originally the state focused only on the tested grade levels (grades 4, 7 and 10). In 1998, however, feeling a need for more specific descriptions of what teachers at all grades should focus on (not just the tested grades), the state contracted with outside consultants to develop "frameworks" for K-4. According to Barbara, our state informant, the request for the framework came primarily from small districts that felt they "didn't have the expertise" or were hesitant to address the state mission from a small district's vantage point. However, other evidence suggests that state personnel, themselves, may have also wanted the state to produce grade level benchmarks, feeling that the content standards were too broad to provide necessary guidance to locals.

The framework in place at the time of the study specified "suggested characteristics to be worked toward by the end of each grade" (e.g. 1st grade: uses initial,

final and medial sounds to identify as well as confirm text; 4th grade: uses affixes, syllables, letter clusters, and knowledge of sound and letter patterns automatically) and it linked each characteristic to specific content standards and indicators. The “characteristics” or benchmarks in the framework were not organized by specific content standard and, in fact, most of them referenced more than one specific content standard and indicator. This is a somewhat unusual way to present these characteristics to teachers or school districts. On the one hand, such a relatively long list of benchmarks (approximately 25 at each grade) that are not organized or clustered conceptually appears to be a list of disconnected outcomes for each grade. On the other hand, cross-referencing each of the benchmarks to more than one state standard and indicator sends the message that most of what students do and learn in reading serves multiple purposes and can be used in a variety of contexts.

According to the person who headed the revision of the Birchwood reading standards in 2000, they *referred* to the state content standards and grade level frameworks but they clearly created their own. Birchwood’s reading content standards were organized by the four broad state reading content standards but not by the more specific indicators nor did the state grade level benchmarks appear. However, under each content standard, the district listed many specific standards; overall there were almost twice as many district content standards as the list of benchmarks in the state framework at grades 1 and 4.

It was difficult to determine the actual overlap of learnings in these two documents, in part because none of the wording was identical (except the four broad standards) and, in part, because they were organized so differently (see Table 2). When we analyzed the conceptual similarity between the learnings, we found that only 30-50% of the state benchmarks were embedded in the much longer detailed list of district outcomes. In other words, a majority of state benchmarks were not found in the local document. The additional district standards were concentrated in the areas of skills and strategies, and reading for meaning. For example, the district provided many more standards related to decoding and reference skills, and it also provided elaborations of reading strategies that were compressed into a single state characteristic (e.g. “selects and integrates most appropriate strategies for reading . . .”). In general, the state benchmarks tended to cluster skills and strategies into larger chunks and to emphasize their use in reading. The district tended to identify specific skills and strategies, sometimes requiring their identification in isolation, other times in application. At the level of the broad state content standards, the district document was clearly aligned with the state. At the level of specific district standards and state benchmarks, there was a substantial difference that appeared to represent different conceptual orientations to reading and reading instruction.

The intended and actual path of influence. The original expectation from the state perspective was that local districts would use the state content standards as a basis for discussion to develop their own local standards. Once the grade level benchmarks were developed, the hope was that locals would include them as well. In fact, Barbara, our state informant, believed that “if they’re [local districts] only using the broad strokes [content standards], you could say anything aligned with it.” The written introduction to the framework documents confirmed the state expectation that districts would both use and adapt the benchmarks, noting that the: “framework supports reading curricula developed by individual school districts to reflect the specific nature and culture of the community. The combination of efforts at the local level and use of this framework should ensure that all elements of the [state content standards] are addressed at each grade level.”

The actual path of influence from the state to local districts is one we would call “distribution” or “dissemination.” With the state’s history of local control, limited resources for standards-based reform (at the time of this study, less than \$1 million appropriated by the legislature), and a weak professional reading association, the primary mechanism for communicating with locals was through a series of stand-alone workshops, information posted on the state department website, and interaction with regional educational consortiums that were supposed to have more direct contact with teachers. At the time of this study, there was only one person at the state level responsible for both reading and writing curriculum *and* assessment – there had been another person for a couple of years but he had resigned to go back to the classroom. As a result, there was even less direct outreach to teachers than in the past.

Table 2
Sample points of similarity and difference between
State A and Birchwood standards

State A (From state Framework)	Birchwood School District
Grade 4	Grade 4
<p>STATE STANDARDS 2.0 Understands the meaning of what is read</p> <p>No parallel at state level</p> <p>No parallel at state level</p> <p>-Uses and compares story elements and structure when describing reactions to, retelling, or summarizing fiction texts (link to state standards 1.4, 2.1, 3.3)</p> <p>-Identifies and uses text structure, main idea, supporting details, text organizers, and illustrative materials when summarizing or referencing nonfiction material (link to state standards 1.5, 2.1, 3.1)</p>	<p>STATE STANDARDS 2.0 Understands the meaning of what is read</p> <p>-Makes inferences and predictions about story elements or characters based on their actions, dialogue, or thoughts and nonfiction texts supported with evidence from the text (in writing)</p> <p>-Demonstrate comprehension of main idea and supporting details of fiction and nonfiction texts</p> <p>-summarizes a story including characters, setting, and plot in a logical sequence (in writing)</p> <p>No parallel at district level</p>

<p>Table 2 cont. -View the same text from different perspectives including those of different cultures (link to state standards 2.3, 3.1, 3.2, 3.4)</p>	<p>-Demonstrates willingness to consider other point of view</p>
<p>STATE STANDARDS 1.0 Understands and uses different skills and strategies to read</p> <p>Uses dictionary, glossary, index, table of contents, and thesaurus to check</p> <p>spelling, meaning, and synonyms (link to state standards 1.2, 1.5, 4.1)</p> <p>No parallel at state level</p> <p>Uses affixes, syllables, letter clusters, and knowledge of sound and letter patterns automatically (link to state standards 1.1.)</p> <p>Understands some of the functions of word classes, including elements of tense, subject, and object (link to state standards 1.1, 1.2)</p> <p>Revisits and analyzes texts and illustrations for a specific purpose, including identifying story elements and literary devices (link to state standards 1.4, 3.3)</p>	<p>STATE STANDARDS 1.0 Understands and uses different skills and strategies to read</p> <p>-Explains when and how to use the dictionary to aid in defining, spelling and pronouncing words</p> <p>-Uses pronunciation key to aid in pronouncing words</p> <p>-Uses knowledge of word structure to comprehend text (inflectional endings added to base words, singular and plural nouns with corresponding verb, tense, possessive case, comparative and superlative case of adjectives, compound words, prefixes, suffixes, base words, abbreviations for titles, weeks days, months, measurements, addresses, a.m./p.m)</p> <p>No parallel at the state level</p>

The outreach that did exist focused primarily on the state test or broader issues of reform (leadership, school improvement) rather than on the standards themselves. For example, the state sponsored an annual winter conference and summer institutes at five sites around the state that focused broadly on state reform and were attended primarily by district-level people. There was also an annual workshop focused on the state test at which state assessment personnel showed “people” (primarily assessment directors) sample test items, sample student responses, specific scoring guides, and the website which included the content standards and released items from the test (they could not post the reading passages because of copyright restrictions). When the content standards were first

introduced, the state also distributed kits with sample reading selections modeled after the test that teachers could use for teaching and for classroom assessment. According to Mary, our district informant, the kits were not packaged well or used because there was no professional development around them. Although they were sent to schools, they often “sat on the library shelf and some teachers have never heard of them.”

The data suggest that state personnel assumed that a focus on the test would promote dialogue at the local level around the standards and instruction. Barbara told us, “We’ve got to find a better delivery system for getting that [released items from the test] into the hands of teachers and helping them to understand that it’s more than just a practice test. You know, when 50% of the kids in the state can’t identify an example of an alliteration in a Gwendolyn Brooks’ poem, that doesn’t mean that we need to all immediately begin teaching alliteration, but we need to be more thoughtful about how we teach literary devices, and how explicit are we, and how do we model how to use them, and how does that impact our understanding of text – that kind of thing. We’re all really hoping we’ll have a much deeper level of impact.”

Nevertheless, she seemed to know the state was not having much impact. Barbara believed that the state was interacting with the “same 200 people” all the time and that there was no systematic mechanism at the district level for those people to share information locally. She saw the state efforts as “hit-or-miss.” We concur, and add that they seemed to be hitting or missing around the test rather than around the content standards.

The actual influence of state outcomes and outreach efforts on the district changed over time, partly due to the phase-in of the state frameworks and partly due to a change in language arts leadership at the district level. After the state released the broad standards and indicators, the district spent 1 1/2 years working collaboratively with teachers to develop specific grade-level standards based on the broad standards. Although all teachers in the district were invited to participate in these grade-level discussions, the effort did not have much influence on teachers or principals nor was it a focus for the district. Three things contributed to this lack of influence: 1) the state assessment had not yet been released either in pilot form or final version; 2) the district had just adopted a new reading series that had not been accompanied by much professional development nor had it been linked to the standards; and 3) the director of curriculum “didn’t have his eye on language arts.” Several years later, the local content standards were revised somewhat to reflect a stronger emphasis on phonemic awareness, phonics, and decoding at the primary grades. This time the standards received more attention from teachers and administrators most likely because the state test scores had been released and district performance was lower than hoped for, and because there was a new district language arts coordinator and a new instructional focus in reading.

Our analysis suggests that although Birchwood did use the state content standards and, to a lesser extent, the state benchmarks as they developed their own, the most powerful influence seemed to be the language arts coordinator in place at the time and the reading textbook adoption, both of which came with a particular philosophy or approach to reading instruction and standards-based reform. In the span of five years, the district had three different district language arts coordinators: the first, a person with a special education background; the second, someone who subscribed to a balanced literacy model; and the third, a former principal and special education coordinator. Each one brought his

or her perspective on literacy to the position and thus to both the standards and instructional programs. For example, language arts coordinator #1 began a textbook adoption process by piloting several, fairly scripted reading programs and looking at the alignment between the programs and the broad content standards (which could be found in most programs because they were so broad). The next language arts coordinator continued the textbook review process but expanded the type of materials substantially to include the use of multiple materials including leveled books and a basal program, which represented a philosophical shift from coordinator #1. And, the third language arts coordinator took a stance similar to the first coordinator, stopping the textbook review process begun by language arts coordinator #2, mandating one highly scripted reading program for all schools (grades K-4), and revising the district content standards to have a stronger decoding emphasis. In addition, the third language arts coordinator developed a district assessment system with state-like items that was given to all students three times a year “to get ed reform right in front of teachers’ faces.” Mary, our district informant, worried that these district tests would drive teachers to do more test preparation instead of better teaching. She confided that her philosophy was more in line with the second language arts coordinator than the third.

Mary believed that Birchwood administrators were very “conscious” of what was going on at the state level but, like Barbara, felt that their awareness rested on test scores and low-achieving schools more than on the standards. In fact, much of the district professional development was focused on helping students perform well on the test. Mary said,

“we’re very conscious of [state] . . . from the stick point of view, if you will. I think [from] the carrot point of view, . . . there are reasonable content standards and there’s a reasonable expectation that all students should master certain skills and this is what our students need to move forward in their careers. . . . But, I think at the moment the stick piece in districts like ours, which are poor, low-performing, districts, has taken precedent.”

Barbara confirmed this by acknowledging that the state required but did not monitor district reading improvement plans -- they simply monitored progress toward the targeted achievement goal. Interestingly, Mary did not object to the state goal setting or accountability but she did want them to focus more on “best practices and what makes a good reading program.” At the same time, however, perhaps because she has been through district life with three different language arts coordinators, Mary was cautious about what she wanted from the state. She noted, “they need to be careful in terms of not buying into one philosophy vs. another. . . . I think reading reform will look different in every district . . . I suppose that’s why I put an emphasis on setting the standards and providing some supports, but not to expect that it will look the same in every district.”

Birchwood Capsule

- **Birchwood content standards were aligned with the four broad state outcomes but they were not aligned with the grade level benchmarks. They were much more detailed, numerous, and at times, took a different focus than state benchmarks.**

- **The state expected that districts would use both the broad content standards and the specific grade level benchmarks to create their own content standards but it provided little professional development focused on the standards**

or instruction; the majority of outreach was in the area of test awareness and preparing students for the tests.

- **Poor performance on the state test and multiple changes in language arts leadership in the district, accompanied by changes in philosophy and textbook choices, exerted the most identifiable influence on local grade level standards.**

- **Because the state did not monitor district content standards – it only monitored test scores—the district was free to create standards any way it saw fit. As a result, the state influence at the district level resulted in a focus on test preparation.**

State B/ Independence School District

State/district context. State B is a large and complex state in the northeast, serving approximately 2.9 million students in 714 school districts, most of which are small and rural. The majority of the students, however, are located in several urban “city” districts around the state. Nearly 50% of the state’s students are from minority backgrounds and 25% are from low-income families. Eight percent of the state’s children are English language learners.

Independence School District is technically a sub-district of one of the large city school systems in the state. Because of the size (more than 1 million students) and influence of the city system, the city’s sub-districts relate to the state somewhat differently from districts in other states. The city has its own educational governing body and exerts substantial control over the smaller local sub-areas under its supervision, each of which operates with its own school board. As a result, sub-districts are a step further removed from the state than school districts in most other states. The majority of the 14,000 students are children of color: 40% African-American, 37% Hispanic, and 19% Caucasian. Almost 70% of the students are members of low-income families and 10% are English language learners. The district had worked for many years on building a “balanced literacy” approach to language arts that combined instruction in skills and strategies with a great deal of meaningful reading and writing. In addition, they provided school-based literacy coaches, in-depth professional development in reading and writing, and required schools to allocate a specified amount of time during the school day for literacy instruction.

Informants. We interviewed Pat, a high level state administrator who had been working on issues of language arts curriculum and assessment for more than 10 years. At the local level, we interviewed Ruth, a district administrator who had deep subject matter knowledge about reading and writing instruction, and a good deal of experience with professional development.

The state/district alignment. The state content standards for language arts are broad statements centered on the functions of language (i.e. Language for Information and Understanding; Language for Literary Response and Expression; Language for Critical Analysis and Evaluation; Language for Social Interaction). Under each standard are key ideas for receptive (listening and reading) and expressive (speaking and writing) modes that define the standard. These are followed by performance indicators and examples of evidence for elementary, middle, and high school levels. For example, Standard 1 for elementary reading reads:

Students will read, write, listen, and speak for information and understanding

Students:

- gather and interpret information from children’s reference books, magazines, textbooks, electronic bulletin boards, audio and media presentations, oral interviews, and from such forms as charts, graphs, maps, and diagrams
- select information appropriate to the purpose of their investigation and relate ideas from one text to another

Also included in the standards document is a chart that overviews language activities that support the standards, criteria, and indicators of growth as well as annotated samples of student work. Believing that teachers needed more specific indicators, the state produced a resource guide detailing performance indicators for each standard according to grade bands for K-1, 2-4, 5-6, 7-8, 9-12 (see Table 3, column 1). For each standard at each grade level band there is a list of performance indicators unique to that standard as well as a list of 10-18 additional performance indicators that apply and appear across all four English Language Arts standards. On average, there are approximately 50 individual standards in reading for each grade level band.

The Independence School District content standards were not based on the state standards. Instead, like the other districts in the city, they used standards for English/Language Arts developed by an outside group that had been adopted by city district. As performance standards, they are intended to specify not only what students should know and be able to do but “how good is good enough.” They are organized quite differently than the state standards both in terms of the major organizers and grade level. The major organizers for the district standards are a combination of modes and content of language arts (Reading, Writing, Speaking/Listening/Viewing, Conventions, Literature) compared with functions of language at the state level, and they are clustered by elementary, middle, and high school rather than narrower grade bands. The performance standards and work samples are intended to represent expectations for students “at approximately the end” of 4th grade, 8th grade, and 10th grade, and to guide teachers’ assessment of student work in the classroom. Consequently, they provide far less direction for teachers at the other grade levels than do the more specific grade level bands at the state level. Furthermore, by sheer numbers alone, the district standards suggest larger chunks of learning than the state, even when the Literature standards are joined with the Reading standards (i.e., approximately half the number of standards appear at the district level across grades 4 and 7 as compared with the state).

Such big differences between the state and city reading standards made it difficult to determine the actual conceptual points of overlap between the two and may, in part, explain why the district did not attend to the state standards and why educators might have difficulty navigating across the two. In fact, Ruth, our district contact, admitted that she had never looked at the state document but had assumed that someone at the city level had worked with the state to assure alignment. Pat, our state informant, concurred – people at both the state and city level had reviewed both documents and found them to be “in alignment.” Our analysis indicated that this alignment was applicable only at a broad level, such as reading for meaning, reading a variety of genres, and requiring students at grades 4 and 7 to read a minimum of 25 books each year (see Table 3). At a finer level of

analysis however, the state indicators tended to be more specific and detailed while the district indicators seemed to take a more “holistic” approach to teaching and learning. The majority of district learnings under Reading and Literature could be found in some form in the state Reading standards but often a broad district standard was broken out into several more specific state standards; furthermore, many district standards appeared to require a higher level of processing (understanding vs. identification). In addition, the state included many standards that simply were not found at the district level.

The intended and actual path of influence. The state curriculum document explicitly stated that it respects the tradition of local choice “that empowers educators to select texts, identify products, and use a rich array of instructional strategies and activities to meet students learning needs.” It was designed to “provide assistance while allowing for creativity in the development of instructional materials at the local level.” Pat acknowledged that several local districts, including our site, had developed their own set of standards. But, she felt confident that they were aligned with state standards because the state had done an alignment study and because the standards were “covering the same areas even though they might be construed slightly differently.” She also continually

Table 3
Sample points of similarity and difference between
State B and Independent standards

<p align="center">State B From Core Curriculum Guide Grades 2-4</p>	<p align="center">Independent School District Elementary</p>
<p>Standard 1 – Students will read, write, listen, and speak for information and understanding READING Students will read a minimum of 25 books or the equivalent per year across all content areas and standards</p>	<p align="center">READING E1a-Read 25 books of the quality and complexity illustrated in the sample reading list</p>
<p>No parallel at state level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •compare and contrast information on one topic from two different sources •locate and use library media resources with assistance, to acquire information •read and understand written directions 	<p>E1b- Read and comprehend at least 4 books on the same subject, or by the same author, or in the same genre, and produces evidence of reading that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •makes and supports warranted and responsible assertions about the texts •draws the texts together to compare and contrast themes, characters, and ideas <p>no parallel at local level</p> <p>no parallel at local level</p> <p>E1d- The student reads aloud, accurately (in the range of 85%-90%), familiar material of the quality and complexity illustrated in the sample reading list, and in a way that makes meaning clear to listeners by:</p>

<p>Table 3 cont.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • uses self-monitoring strategies, such as rereading and cross-checking • apply corrective strategies, using classroom resources such as teachers, peers, and reference tools • read aloud at appropriate rate • read with increasing fluency and confidence from a variety of texts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • self-correcting when subsequent reading indicates an earlier miscue <p>No parallel at district level</p> <p>No parallel at district level</p> <p>No parallel at district level</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Reading</p> <p>Standard 2- Students will read, write, listen, and speak for literary response and expression</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses specific evidence from stories to identify themes; describe characters and their actions and motivations; and relate sequences of events <p>no parallel at state level</p> <p>no parallel at state level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • recognize the differences among the genres of stories, poems, and plays • explain the difference between fiction and nonfiction 	<p style="text-align: center;">Literature</p> <p>E5 The students responds to non-fiction, fiction, poetry, and drama using interpretive, critical and evaluative processes; that is, the student:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identifies recurring themes across works • analyzes the impact of authors’ decisions regarding word choice and content • considers the function of point of view or persona • considers the differences among genres

referred to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) as a checkpoint for everything they did at the state level, quite concerned that the state’s criteria for student performance on the state test was consistent with NAEP results for their state.

Outreach efforts at the state level were handled primarily through regional centers and, at the time of this study, the state was also planning a new 3-tier federally funded professional development model for schools participating in the Reading Excellence and Reading First programs. The plan was to work with university experts who would work with school reading coordinators, who, in turn, would work with teachers in their schools on “scientifically-based reading research.” Interestingly, the content standards were not mentioned as part of this professional development model. In addition, Pat talked about the professional development opportunities for teachers to score the state test and the availability of exemplar learning experiences connected to the standards that were available

on the web and in the standards resource guide. She acknowledged however, that their prior efforts with professional development networks were:

“most successful with the people who are coming out looking for help.”[But], the people who are struggling, just to keep their schools functioning often don’t have the opportunity to do that.”

This statement corroborated Ruth’s perspective; she could not recall much interaction with the state around the content standards or professional development except receiving binders of assessment models and instructional strategies, as well as notifications of “mandates” through the mail. To her knowledge, no one in her school district had participated in the development of any state level language arts standards or assessment or in test scoring activities. Three factors likely contributed to the loose connection between the state and local reading efforts, both in terms of content standards and in terms of outreach efforts. First, the statewide emphasis on local control and approval of the city district’s own content outcomes allowed the district to feel that it was aligned with the state without attending to the specifics of the alignment. Second, the district had a long-standing, successful relationship with well-respected local university faculty to provide professional development in reading and writing. In addition, the district itself possessed a good deal of expertise in literacy instruction and was able to translate this into extensive support for teachers. For example, although Ruth was responsible for several subject areas, she was extremely knowledgeable about the teaching of reading, and spent several days each week in classrooms observing, modeling, and talking with teachers about good reading instruction. Third, the city system of which Independence School District was a part, had established a strong connection, both financial and philosophical, with an independent group working on standards, assessments, and professional development. The city system had contracted with them, at a sizeable cost, to develop the city’s content standard and to provide professional development around the city standards and reform efforts in general. This included leadership “conferences” for administrators to educate them about principles of learning around reading and math, on-site subject matter staff developers who modeled and co-taught with classroom teachers, and an assortment of grade level meetings and workshops where teachers worked together on reading instruction and examination of student work. The district also used the reading performance assessments developed by this group for grades 4 and 7 that were aligned with the city standards. All these efforts were designed to send a consistent message from the district and engage teachers in discussions about best practices for “balanced literacy” instruction.

In sum, Independence School District had invested an enormous amount of time, money, and energy into a cohesive program of professional development in literacy that had its own set of standards and strategies for building teaching capacity. Ruth told us that they had always

“believed that if you teach well, if you assess well and then teach to what kids know, then they will be terrific readers and writers. . . . if you used that assessment and if you had terrific staff development for teachers, and if students were in fact scaffolded in their learning, the kids would do great in their testing.”

The district did, in fact, reap the benefits of their approach, demonstrating a slow but steady improvement of test scores across the previous 15 years. The combination of

investment in their local professional development and rising scores on the state tests assured the district that they were on the right track, without specific attention to the state content standards.

Pat, our state informant was aware that the state content standards were not a focus at the local level. She said,

“I think . . . whether we all like it or not . . . [it is] the standards-based assessment that really clearly show direct evidence of what we mean by reading and writing for information, or writing for critical evaluation . . . that sort of thing . . . that has made a huge difference in instruction across the state, particularly in those schools that didn’t necessarily pay a lot of attention to the standards when they were just standards.”

This belief was confirmed when the state actually did a standards implementation study and, according to Pat, found that having the test in place was what really made the difference. Pat acknowledged that as a result of that study they (at the state level) were “all a little sadder but wiser.” In 1999, the state implemented a new, higher level reading test for grades 4 and 8 that was developed by a committee of teachers and aligned directly to the performance indicators in the standards. Prior to that they had used a “rather low level shelf-test” for grades 3 and 6. Surprisingly, the content standards, which had been developed in 1996 did not change when these tests changed. In Pat’s view, this shift to the new tests and participation of all elementary teachers in some sort of test scoring experience “fired” up teachers’ attention to the standards. It is unclear, however, whether this “fire” was actually focused on the standards or if it was on the test.

This test orientation was also reflected at the district level. As we have noted, Independence School district focused on their own subject matter professional development in line with their partnerships and local assessments, and student performance had been on a gradual but steady incline. Nevertheless, according to Ruth, they did conduct “a sort of genre study” of the new state test to be sure they were in step and found it “really quite good,” and consistent with the district emphasis on balanced literacy and higher level literacy (i.e. comparing two pieces of literature). However, the issue of alignment between the test and the standards was almost an afterthought that followed studying the actual test, and the basis for judging alignment was made at a very general level. Ruth offered that if you placed “the assessment next to the standards which say, ‘read 25 books but read 4 of them in one genre or by one author,’ . . . they’re pretty well aligned.”

Independence Capsule

- **District content standards were not modeled after or influenced by the state standards--they were the city standards, which had been approved by the state.**
- **The nature of the alignment between the city standards and state standards was quite global. The standards were organized and conceptualized differently, and included different levels of detail regarding learning.**
- **Confidence in content alignment between the state and district content standards rested on 1) improved student test scores, 2) general philosophical compatibility, and 3) acceptance at the state level of the city standards.**

• **The district’s (and city’s) long-standing financial and philosophical commitment to an independent consulting group, university partnerships, and their own local professional development drove the focus of instruction. Little state or city professional development related to the content standards made its way to the district but it was neither missed nor desired.**

State C/Seaview School District

State/district context. State C, located in the western United States, has more students than any other state with more than 6 million in over 1,000 districts and more than 8,000 schools. Its students are diverse ethnically, linguistically, and socio-economically. Forty-three percent are Latino, 36% Caucasian, 8% African-American, and 12% Asian and other. Nearly 50% of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and 25% are designated English language learners. Schools in the state employ more than 300,000 teachers.

Seaview School District reflects the state’s diverse student population. In 2000-2001, Seaview students numbered more than 142,000 and reflected the demographic diversity of the state, with Latinos comprising roughly one-third the student population, Caucasians 25%, African-Americans almost 20%, Asians and others with more than 20%. About 60% qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, while 30% were English language learners. At the time of the study, Seaview employed approximately 7,400 certificated teachers in nearly 180 schools.

Informants. Our state informant, Chris, had spent more than 10 years working in the area of reading policy for the state department of education. Our district informant, Jane, had worked for Seaview in the area of standards and assessment for several years and was involved in the district-level reform efforts in literacy instruction.

State/district alignment. State C’s content standards in English language arts are organized grade-by-grade, K-12, and include standards in four broad areas: reading, writing, listening/speaking, and written and oral language conventions. Each of those four areas is divided into sub-sections; for instance, reading is divided into “Word Analysis, Fluency, and Systematic Vocabulary Development,” “Reading Comprehension,” and “Literary Response and Analysis.” Each of those areas includes a standard followed by benchmarks that are further organized by sub-topic. For instance:

1.0 Word analysis, Fluency, and Systematic Vocabulary Development (Grade one)
Students understand the basic features of reading. They select letter patterns and know how to translate them into spoken language by using phonics, syllabication, and word parts. They apply this knowledge to achieve fluent oral and silent reading.

Concepts About Print

1.1 Match oral words to printed words

Phonemic Awareness

1.4 Distinguish initial, medial and final sounds in single-syllable words.

State C’s standards are among the most detailed of state documents. This high level of specificity has been met with mixed reviews. Some argue that the level of specificity is too prescriptive and intrusive into teaching. However, for those who argue that specificity is a desired characteristic of standards, State C’s document has often been held up as a model for other states.

Shortly after we began to examine the relationship between state and local standards in State C and Seaview, the district adopted the state standards in English language arts, replacing the standards that had been developed by the district. According to a letter from the superintendent's office dated January 30, 2001, the new standards documents for distribution in Seaview would include: "1) the state standards in their entirety and 2) clearly identified supplementary district standards that are consistent with state standards."

The district standards, developed around the same time that the state adopted English language arts standards in 1998, were written by groups made up of teachers, site administrators, curriculum and assessment specialists, business and community members, university representatives, parents, and subject area consultants. A memo from the district indicates that these district standards reflected content from standards developed by national subject matter organizations, such as National Council of Teachers of English. Our comparative analysis of the original district standards and the state standards suggests that the two documents differed in several ways (see Table 4). Although the district document indicated that the state standards were one of several sources it used in the development of its own standards (and this was apparent in the wording of several benchmarks), the documents were organized differently. For instance, Seaview organized its document around three primary headings: Reading; Writing; Speaking, Listening and Viewing. The district also wrote its benchmarks or indicators as performance standards and included more than the state (72-75 to the state's 49-53 at the grade levels we analyzed). The number of district benchmarks that had a corresponding state benchmark varied across grade levels. At first grade, 50 percent of the district's performance standards had a corresponding state benchmark, while at 4th grade 35 percent corresponded to the state document. At first grade 73 percent of the state's benchmarks had a coordinating indicator in the district's document, whereas at 4th grade that number was 49 percent.

These differences in numbers of benchmarks suggest that the district document was more specific than the state's and that the district drew more heavily on the state document at first grade than at fourth grade. Our analysis showed that the district document drew most heavily on the state document in the areas of word analysis and language conventions at first grade and included more detail than the state in more process-oriented areas such as writing process and comprehension strategies. The Seaview document seemed to carry the level of detail found in the "word analysis, fluency and vocabulary" state benchmarks to areas that are more process oriented. For instance, of the first grade district indicators that do not overlap with the state document, 22 of them are process-oriented and 4 of them are skills-focused. In this way, the original Seaview document could be characterized as more focused on process than the state document.

The district administration's primary argument for recently adopting the state standards draws on the concept of alignment: "the state accountability system, most state-sponsored professional development opportunities, and the state curriculum adoption process are all aligned with state academic standards." A district memo stated that the district-developed content standards were also "closely aligned" with the state standards. However, the district delineated several reasons why they believed it was important to replace those district standards with the state standards, including: state assessments will be based on state standards; the state accountability system and related improvement programs will be linked to state standards; the state textbook adoption process requires alignment between materials and state standards; professional development is increasingly

tied to state standards; and the new standards-based report card must align with information that parents receive on state assessments. Although the state did not require districts to adopt state standards as their own, the state’s emphasis on standards clearly led Seaview to view that adoption as necessary. Seaview seemed to desire visible evidence that they were attending to the curricular emphases in the state standards and clearly did not feel comfortable with the more broad level of alignment that had existed between their original standards and the state standards. Jane, our district informant, said “it is exciting to see that we are talking the same talk that is coming out of the state capital.” In explaining why this was important, she emphasized the need to have district curriculum aligned with the state tests.

The intended and actual path of influence. The state saw a direct path of influence on district practice through curriculum adoption and a strong emphasis on state standards and state-sponsored professional development. The nature of the state/district relationship is not as clear as in some of our cases. State and district informants described a relationship concerned with alignment and involving “pressure.” Chris, the state informant, expressed her hope that all teachers have had exposure to and professional development around the state English language arts standards, but also emphasized that even if teachers hadn’t had extensive professional development around state standards

Table 4
Sample points of similarity and difference between
State C and Seaview standards*

<p style="text-align: center;">State C English Language Arts Content Standards Grades 4</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Seaview School District Content and Performance Standards Grade 4</p>
<p>2.0 Reading Comprehension—Students read and understand grade-level-appropriate material. They draw upon a variety of comprehension strategies as needed (e.g., generating and responding to essential questions, making predictions, comparing information from several sources). The selections in Recommended Readings in Literature, Kindergarten through Grade Eight illustrate the quality and complexity of the materials to be read by students. In addition to their regular school reading, students read one-half million words annually, including a good representation of grade-level-appropriate narrative and expository text.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Reading</p> <p>Content Standard 4.3—The student understands, analyzes, interprets, evaluates and extends the meaning of a wide variety of significant literature—nonfiction, fiction, poetry, and drama. The student applies the necessary skills to read and comprehend thoroughly literary and informational text, connecting text with prior knowledge and personal experience.</p>
<p>No parallel at state level</p>	<p>4.3.1—The student reads and demonstrates a thorough understanding of the text when responding to nonfiction, fiction, poetry, and drama using interpretive, critical, and evaluative processes.</p> <p>-Explains the main idea of the text.</p>

<p>Table 4 cont.</p> <p>3.0 Literary Response and Analysis— Students read and respond to a wide variety of significant works of children’s literature. They distinguish between the structural features of the text and the literary terms or elements (e.g., theme, plot, setting, characters).</p> <p>3.1 Describe the structural differences of various imaginative forms of literature, including fantasies, fables, myths, legends, and fairy tales.</p> <p>3.2 Identify the main events of the plot, their causes, and the influence of each event on future actions.</p> <p>3.3 Use knowledge of the situation and setting and of a character’s traits and motivations to determine the causes for that character’s actions.</p> <p>No parallel at state level</p> <p>No parallel at state level</p> <p>No parallel at state level</p> <p>3.4 Compare and contrast tales from different cultures by tracing the exploits of one character type and develop theories to account for similar tales in diverse cultures.</p> <p>3.5 Define figurative language (e.g., simile, metaphor, hyperbole, personification) and identify its use in literary works.</p>	<p>-Analyzes literary elements of texts.</p> <p>-Describes the setting and the sequence of events</p> <p>-Compares themes and genres, characterization, plots and settings.</p> <p>No parallel at district level</p> <p>-Describes characters by examining reasons for the characters’ actions</p> <p>-Recognizes one-dimensional characters as opposed to fully developed characters.</p> <p>-Determines the author’s purpose and analyzes the author’s choice of words, choice of content, writing style, point of view, and characters’ point of view.</p> <p>-Makes inferences, draws conclusions, and forms opinions about the events, characters, and setting based on supporting evidence for the text.</p> <p>No parallel at district level.</p> <p>No parallel at district level.</p>
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* Note: The Seaview standards in this table are from the district’s original standards that were in use prior to the adoption of the state standards.

specifically, they will be teaching to the standards because of the alignment of standards with adopted programs, state professional development and the newly developed state assessment. This assumption about the alignment between tests and standards was

reflected in her comment that, “Even if they [teachers] don’t have experience with the standards themselves, they will probably be using much of the prescribed content of the reading language arts frameworks because that is part of our total professional development delivery system.” In her 10 years at the state education department, Chris said that she had seen the state becoming increasingly prescriptive.

Chris also sensed that districts were feeling pressure from state requirements: I think there’s pressure from the state assessment now, there’s pressure from the materials that are adopted, there’s pressure to tie those materials to professional development. My guess is that there may be districts that are seeing this as a little too much pressure, actually. We have a very extensive coordination process and it leaves little to local choice, and I get complaints about that from time to time.

One possible cause for the pressure districts may feel from the state is the accountability system. All schools were given a score by the state to indicate school quality. Until 2002, the score given to schools was based almost entirely on scores on the SAT-9, the standardized test that the state was using prior to this year. According to Chris, the state now plans to use additional data, including students’ performance on the new state test and attendance data to rate school quality.

When speaking about the advice she would give districts from the state perspective, Chris emphasized compliance with the state’s policies and philosophies about reading instruction. She described the need for districts to “focus on getting kids to read early on,” and emphasized the need to use “scientifically-based reading research.” She also urged districts to emphasize language development for English language learners “because so many of us in [the state] are second language learners, that merely learning how to decode doesn’t help if you don’t have the language.” She also urged districts to “comply with the programs.”

Another example of the state’s role in district policy involves professional development. At the time we spoke with Chris, the state was debating its role in district professional development. Some at the state level were proposing that the governor’s office direct professional development, mandating particular programs for districts that aligned with state English language arts standards. Another legislative group was proposing the opposite—that districts be given funds to purchase professional development that would meet their perceived needs. Chris supported the latter, but with the state providing a “menu” of approved professional development programs from which districts could choose. Another issue of professional development in the state involved state restrictions on the kinds of professional development programs that were eligible for state funds. The state passed legislation restricting state funding of professional development to a list of approved providers whose programs were deemed consistent with the state’s philosophies and emphases in reading. In this case, that meant a focus on the explicit teaching of phonics as a necessary skill in learning to read. Chris expressed concern that the restrictive nature of this legislation had been divisive and had not necessarily resulted in better, more effective, programs.

Seaview clearly did feel pressures from the state to comply with state-driven reforms in reading. Jane acknowledged that it could be difficult to keep up with state expectations for student achievement and professional development. However, she continually emphasized her positive feelings about the district’s move to align as closely as possible with state expectations. Her feelings seemed rooted primarily in the need to demonstrate increased performance on state assessments, as she emphasized the

connection between aligning curriculum to state expectations and ensuring that students will achieve higher test scores.

Jane spoke more, though, about district efforts in reading than she did about state efforts. The district's primary reform effort, called "Plan for Student Achievement" (PSA, a pseudonym) consisted of several efforts, including aligning literacy instruction with the district (i.e., state) frameworks, instituting 2-3 hour literacy blocks at all grade levels, additional funds for materials in first grade, before and after school literacy programs for targeted students, summer programs for targeted students, and peer literacy coaches in all schools. This reform program began implementation in 2000-2001, the year that the district adopted state standards in place of their district-developed standards. Jane explained that the PSA was first drafted by the city's Board of Education; the ideas were then taken to focus groups of local educators and community members and to community meetings to be discussed, further refined and developed. The PSA requires all teachers to teach reading and writing in ways that support the literacy standards. During the development of PSA, those standards were the district-developed standards, while during the first year of implementation those standards became the state standards. The district provided professional development—both district-wide sessions and site-based programs led by peer coaches to provide opportunities for teachers to learn about the new reforms and work together to plan for classroom implementation. As Jane excitedly told us, and the district's website confirmed, Seaview's reading scores on the state assessment had risen in some grade levels since the start of PSA.

The district also recently adopted one of two basal textbooks offered by the state for elementary reading. According to state documents about the adoption process, alignment with state literacy standards was the key criteria for the state's current curriculum adoption. Jane told us that the text they selected was the clear choice in Seaview, as it seemed "much more in line with our approaches to language arts" which she characterized as "balanced literacy." The district adoption committees, including classroom teachers, staff developers, advocates for special student populations (bilingual, GATE, special education), parent, and community members approved the text in July 2002. The district adoption occurred six months after the state adopted the two programs and implementation began in 2002-2003. Jane explained that the district had originally planned to implement the new reading program in 2003-2004, but moved the start date due to financial incentives from the state to districts that adopted one of the mandated programs that year. Grades 3-6 began implementing the new program in November 2002 and grades K-2 began in fall 2003.

Seaview certainly wanted to *appear* aligned with the state and it was aligned in the highly visible areas of reading programs and standards. The district adopted state standards and Jane talked positively about the district being "aligned" with the state and "talking the same talk" as the state. Yet, the district's approach to literacy, as reflected in their earlier standards, seemed largely unchanged; the district's approach seemed much more influenced by their longstanding professional development investments, organized around a district-wide reform effort, a philosophical stance emphasizing a balanced approach to literacy instruction, and the fact that test scores in the district were rising, which validated the district's approach.

The state expected to exert control over curriculum, instruction, and professional development, though it did not seem successful in fundamentally changing the district approach to reading instruction. The district had successfully achieved the appearance of alignment while retaining its emphasis on a balanced approach to literacy.

Seaview Capsule

- The district adopted state standards with minimal district additions, even after engaging in a lengthy process to construct their own content standards in language arts.
- The original district standards reflected a different philosophical orientation toward reading instruction than that of the state.
- The state expected to influence district practice through standards, mandated curriculum, and state-sponsored professional development.
- The district achieved the appearance of alignment with the state, but seemed to maintain its commitment to its longstanding philosophy and investments in professional development that were bolstered by rising district test scores.
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State D/Pine River School District

State/district context. State D, a southern state, has a long-standing interest in public education. Strong state leaders, an active State Board of Education, and assertive policymakers and business leaders have created an atmosphere where education issues are at the fore. The district, Hilltop, enjoys an exchange of knowledge and personnel with state agencies, leading to an unusually well-informed, well-connected district administration.

Pine River School District covers over 800 square miles, and it includes urban, suburban, and rural communities. Pine River operates over 100 schools, approximately 40 of which are magnets, and in 2001-2002 the district enrolled more than 100,000 students. Approximately 20% of the students qualify for free or reduced-priced lunch programs, lower than the state average of about 40%. In 2000, the racial breakdown of the student population was roughly 60% Caucasian, 30% African American, 5% Hispanic, and 5% other. The Hispanic population grew from less than 1% in 1998 to over 3% in 1999, creating an urgent need to better support English language learners. Population growth and, by extension, school building capacity are serious concerns within the district: analysts predict there will be over 130,000 students in Pine River by 2010 and schools are already crowded and in need of repairs.

Informants. Our district informant, Sarah, was a leader in language arts curriculum in Pine River. She had worked for the district for several years and knew the district's history well. Our state-level informant, Jim, was in a leadership role in the area of reading curriculum and instruction and had been employed by the state department of education for more than a decade.

State/district Alignment. State D has content standards in K-12 English language arts that consist of grade by grade standards and benchmarks organized around three “strands”—oral language, written language, and media/technology use. One set of standards is common across grades K-5 and another set is used for grades 6-12. Each standard is then broken out into more specific benchmarks by individual grade level. For instance:

Competency Goal 1: The learner will develop and apply enabling strategies and skills to read and write.

1.01 Develop phonemic awareness and demonstrate knowledge of alphabetic principle:

- count syllables in a word
- blend the phonemes of one-syllable words
- segment the phonemes of one-syllable words
- change the phonemes of one-syllable words
- change the beginning, middle, and ending sounds to produce new words

The “competency goal” above appears in the standard course of study for grades K-5. Five benchmarks are included under the above standard at first grade (i.e., 1.02, 1.03, etc). Most of the standards are followed by 5-10 benchmarks at each grade level. In addition to defining organizing strands, common standards by large grade clusters, and grade-by-grade benchmarks, the standard course of study document also defines smaller grade clusters that share an overall emphasis within the English language arts curriculum. The document is organized by these smaller grade clusters (K-2, 3-5, 6-8, 9-12). Each of these grade clusters represents a major section of the document and each of those sections begins with a narrative introduction that discusses and provides a rationale for particular literacy skills and processes that are emphasized at those levels.

Our informants at both the state and district level discussed state legislation, passed in 1996, requiring increased attention to phonics in the revisions to the state standard course of study. The revision of the state standards that followed that legislation, approved by the legislature in 1999, is the document that is currently in use. Even with the legislated increase in phonics study, the state document explicitly emphasizes a balanced approach to literacy (the term “balanced literacy” appears several times in the document).

Pine River School District used the state standard course of study as required by state law. It required that all districts adopt the state standards but it also encouraged districts to add to or adapt those standards as long as they did not eliminate any of the state standards. The district created “assessment cards” that included all state standards and benchmarks, plus those added by the district. The cards were constructed as checklists that teachers could use to assess students’ progress. Sarah, working with a group of teachers, had chosen to make additions to the state document, particularly at kindergarten, first, and second grades. The number of additions and adaptations varied by standard, ranging from none to several. For instance, the district added one benchmark to the state’s first ELA standard (Goal 1) at first grade, made no changes to Goals 2 and 3, and added three benchmarks to Goal 4. In addition to adding benchmarks, the district made some minor changes in the wording of some benchmarks, the order in which some benchmarks were listed, and in the structure of the document (for example drawing attention to some benchmarks by printing them in bold type) (See Table 5).

As Sarah explained, through their changes they hoped to make the language of the standards clearer and more “teacher-friendly.” In addition, they had begun to make the developmental continuum clearer through the addition of benchmarks at some grade levels. Sarah said,

“I’ve been doing a lot of work in developing some lessons based on the objectives. . .and, in doing so, [realized that] it could be much more teacher-friendly. There’s an awful lot of repetition of ideas. . . . When I get unbelievably qualified teachers and lead teachers working with me and

we have to have a lengthy conversation about an objective, I find that problematic.”

Although the district clearly felt permission to adapt the state document, Sarah emphasized that they did not change the document’s overall organization. She explained that this decision was not based on perceived pressure from the state, but was an internal decision made so that teachers will clearly see the relationship between state and local documents. Because the district document necessarily included all of the state’s standards and benchmarks, alignment was a given. The changes made by the district added some specificity to some sections, but the changes did not seem to alter the philosophical approach from that of the state. As we discuss below, both state and district felt that they were aligned in their philosophical approach to reading.

The intended and actual path of influence. From the state perspective, districts were required to follow the state standard course of study, but the instructional decision-making and materials adoption was locally determined. For instance, at the time of this study the state provided a list to districts of recommended textbooks that had been determined by the state to be aligned with state standards. Districts could purchase these books at discounted rates due to state contracts with publishers, but the state did not require that districts choose materials from the list. Jim, our state informant, emphasized local control in his description of the relationship between his state and districts. He explained that the state did not monitor the teaching practices or materials of districts, but rather

“the state assessments are the accountability piece. So we say you must follow the curriculum—the test is based on the curriculum—if you do well on the test the assumption is that you’re following the curriculum and that you are being taught if you do well on the assessments.”

Individual districts’ responses to the state standards appeared to vary according to size and resources. Jim explained that, generally, the larger districts developed materials and added specificity beyond the state standards. These districts also provided more specific instructional recommendations through professional development programs. He emphasized that these changes and extensions were supported by the state. The smaller districts were more likely to adopt the state curriculum as their own without additions or district-designed support materials.

According to Jim, the state explicitly supported local control and encouraged districts to actively engage with state standards policy. When asked what advice he would give to districts regarding the state-level reforms in reading, Jim said: I would say stay close to your professional organizations, know what is going on in reading research, what’s coming out of the research funded by the federal government because that’s going to be really influential in how grants are awarded in the future. And, be knowledgeable so that when there is a controversy you can try to see all sides of the question and try to be someone who really knows what the issues are. Given this stance, it is not surprising that Sarah did not express anxiety about accountability when discussing relationships between her district and state policy in literacy.

The district looked to the state for guidance and for the mandated content, but assumed that changes to the state standards document were necessary and clearly felt welcome to make those changes. In Sarah’s words, “the district takes it to the next step,

but without [the state] having done it to begin with it would be much more difficult.” After the state approved the new version of the standards for the transition year, 2000-2001, the state sent the document to all districts and provided access to the document on the web. At that point, Sarah, working with two lead teachers, analyzed the document and began writing additional benchmarks at certain grade levels. This team then sent their revisions to teachers for discussion and honed their revisions based on teacher feedback. This is a process that they will likely repeat, as the state legislature mandated that the standards be revised every five years. The district “literacy assessment cards,” that were the district’s version of their content standards, were the primary document to which teachers were encouraged to refer. According to Sarah, this document also became the basis for district professional development.

From the local perspective, the most recent revisions to the state standards were prompted by both the requirement that state standard course of study be revised every five years and a jump onto the “bandwagon of the phonics movement,” to use Sarah’s words. The phonics emphasis within the previous iteration of the standards was required to be increased by a state law passed in 1996-1997. According to Jim, the revisions were preceded by an 18-month study of the research in phonics with an emphasis on research funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Development (NICHD). As more specific language was added to the previous version of the state standards and benchmarks

Table 5
Sample points of similarity and difference between
State D and Pine River standards

State D Standard Course of Study Grade 4	Pine River School District Expectations for Fourth Grade-- Receptive Literacy
Goal 2: The learner will apply strategies and skills to comprehend text that is read, heard, and viewed.	Goal 2: The learner will apply strategies and skills to comprehend text that is read, heard, and viewed.
<p>2.01 Use metacognitive strategies to comprehend text and to clarify meaning of vocabulary (e.g., reread the text, consult other sources, ask for help, paraphrase, question).</p> <p>2.02 Interact with the text before, during, and after reading, listening, and viewing by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • setting a purpose using prior knowledge and text information. • making predictions. • formulating questions. • locating relevant information. • making connections with previous experiences, information, and ideas. 	<p>-Uses metacognitive strategies to comprehend text and to clarify meaning of vocabulary (e.g., reread the text, consult other sources, ask for help, question, paraphrase).</p> <p>Interacts with the text before, during, and after reading by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -making predictions. -formulating questions. -making connections with previous experiences, information, and ideas. -Sets a purpose for reading using prior knowledge and text information. -locates relevant information for specific purposes.

<p>Table 5 cont.</p> <p>2.03 Read a variety of texts, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fiction (legends, novels, folklore, science fiction). • nonfiction (autobiographies, informational books, diaries, journals). • poetry (concrete, haiku). • drama (skits, plays). <p>No parallel at state level</p> <p>2.04 Identify and interpret elements of fiction and nonfiction and support by referencing the text to determine the:</p> <p>No parallel at state level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • plot. • theme. • main idea and supporting details. • author’s choice of words. <p>No parallel at state level</p>	<p>Reads a variety of texts, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -fiction (legends, novels, folklore, science fiction). -nonfiction (autobiographies, informational books, diaries, journals). -poetry (concrete, haiku). -drama (skits, plays). <p>-Reads and comprehends grade appropriate text.</p> <p>Identifies and interprets elements of fiction and nonfiction and supports by referencing the text to determine the:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -conflict -plot -main idea and supporting details. -theme -author’s choice of words. -point of view (author/characters)
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in the area of phonics, the positive feedback from teachers about the increased specificity led the state to include more specific language across the standards document during the most recent revision. Indeed, although clearly wary of the “phonics bandwagon,” Sarah also viewed the changes as positive because teachers had found the increased detail helpful. We would note that, although specificity was added to the State D document in the area of word identification, it is still not nearly as detailed as the State C document.

Both State D and Pine River viewed their relationship as very positive and “philosophically aligned.” Pine River’s talk of their “relationship” with the state referred specifically to the state English language arts directors. Sarah’s positive response to state standards seemed in part due to her perception that they shared a balanced view of literacy. She viewed the state and local approaches as “so aligned” in their philosophical approaches to the subject. She described a close relationship with the state, meaning that she talked often with state English language arts personnel and that district folks were often invited to join in state efforts. She described the state as very constrained by the legislature, yet able to accommodate those requirements while supporting “research-based

best practices” in literacy. That collaborative relationship was aided by the fact that the state department and district offices are located in the same city. State personnel often visited the district and participated in staff development and district staff often served on state committees. Unlike some of our other cases, the district did not seem concerned with appearing to be *aligned* with the state. In one sense, it was aligned, including all the required state standards but in another, it was able to chart its own course within those guidelines. Because the state supported the district in these local adaptations and efforts, there was a good deal of thinking and discussion at the local level about their vision of language arts curriculum and instruction. In addition, both the state and the district relied on improving test performance to validate their approach to standards-based reform.

Pine River Capsule

- **The district standards included all of the state standards and benchmarks, as required by law, with additional district benchmarks.**
- **The state supported local control and encouraged districts to “own” the standards. They expected that districts would use the state standards in their entirety, but also encouraged districts to add to standards to meet local needs. They also provided districts with lists of suggested materials, but did not mandate a particular program.**
- **The local response to state standards seemed to be influenced by a compatible philosophy and relationship with state personnel, as well as local conversation around state standards.**
- **The state viewed test scores as default proof of alignment between state standards and local curriculum and instruction.**

Cross-Case Analysis

Below, we discuss the state/district cases in relation to one another. First, we present key findings from our cross-case analysis; then, we draw on those analyses to characterize relationships between state and local standards.

While the desire for state and local standards to be aligned with one another was universal, alignment took on different forms and meanings in these four states.

Every informant at the state and district levels spoke of the alignment between state and local standards and curriculum. Yet, in State B that meant very broad alignment in terms of philosophical approaches to language arts teaching and learning, even though the standards themselves were different; whereas in State C alignment meant adopting the exact state standards, even though the philosophical approach in the district was quite different. In State A, the state and local standards were aligned at the broad level of the standards, but the district standards appeared to reflect a different stance towards reading processes and instruction. In State D, where the district was required to use the state standards, the philosophical approach to reading seemed aligned. What we see here is that definitions of alignment and the motivation for alignment varied significantly across these four forward-moving sites. In some cases, the district goal for alignment or for labeling its outcomes as “aligned” seemed to be politically rather than educationally motivated. Interestingly, two of three districts with well-developed, highly successful professional

development efforts did not orient their professional development around the state standards or have content standards that were substantially aligned with state standards. Their individual district efforts did, however, reflect understanding about best practice and research-based approaches to reading instruction.

In states that encouraged local control or interpretation of state standards, locals were especially likely to engage in conversations about the meaning and implementation of the standards.

Local conversations around state content standards occurred when there was a genuine need for engagement. In State D there was an expectation that districts would adapt standards; in State A, the broad cross-grade content standards coupled with grade level frameworks that were “suggestive” rather than mandated (as well as difficult to use) encouraged district conversations. In both these cases, the state standards played a useful and supportive role in promoting productive local conversations. Locals were encouraged to use the state standards as a starting point rather than an ending point. The situation was different in both State C and State B. In neither site did it appear that state standards were a primary focus of local conversation. In State C, the standards were introduced after the district was well on its way with successful professional development based on their own, original set of content standards. They saw no need to change direction and simply placed the state standards on record. Similarly, in State B, conversations around the state and even the city standards were both largely irrelevant because the district had set into motion other productive conversations about teaching and learning.

The influence of state standards on local standards varied in kind and degree. Local forces and conditions—especially district leadership, philosophy, and ongoing investment in professional development—exerted as much or more influence in shaping local standards as the state standards.

The districts we studied engaged state standards in very different ways during their own standards development processes. For instance, the state standards seemed to play a less central role in local standards development when districts were heavily invested in their own ongoing reform efforts. The district leadership in Independence invested a good deal of time and resources to building a relationship with outside consultants and partnerships.. This relationship was the focus of reform in the district, shaping professional development efforts and local conversation about content standards and instruction in language arts. Similarly, Seaview was heavily invested in district-level reform when their original standards were developed, and the state standards were just one of many resources used in that development process. Birchwood district did not have the same kind of commitment as Independence and Seaview to a model of professional development, but it was strongly guided by the particular philosophies and instructional approaches favored by the three local language arts leaders who cycled through the district. The state standards were broad supports but each of the local leaders played them out in very different ways.

Another influence on the role state standards played in local standards efforts appeared to be the philosophical stance toward reading at district and state levels. For example, the positive local stance toward state standards in Pine River seemed due in large part to the district’s sense of philosophical alignment with state language arts leadership.

One could imagine a less congenial relationship between state and local language arts leaders if the philosophical approaches to content were less simpatico. The district in particular emphasized the importance of aligned philosophy to maintaining such a positive working relationship with the state. Both state and district leaders spoke of one another as colleagues working toward similar goals. However, the emphasis on local control in State D would seem to mitigate conflict even in the absence of philosophical alignment. Districts in State D were allowed enough flexibility (to add to state standards, to choose curricula) that districts may have felt less pressure to ‘toe the line’ (or appear to toe the line) regarding philosophical approaches to content.

In contrast, the emphasis on state control in State C appeared to exert more pressure on Seaview to comply with state standards, so that they chose to align their local standards with the state in very visible ways, even as their long-standing philosophical approach to reading seemed to differ from that of the state. The wholesale adoption of state standards put to rest any need to prove alignment between state and local standards but it did not fundamentally change the direction they had taken.

Local views of, and approaches to, the alignment between state and local standards were heavily shaped by local test scores. .

When test scores were good or improving, districts assumed their standards were aligned with state standards. Further, improving test scores appeared to validate districts’ attention to their own reform efforts. This was the case in Independence district where state and local standards looked very different and yet the district pointed to test scores as evidence of alignment between local and state standards. Rising test scores validated Independence’s continued relationship with their outside partners in their language arts reform. Similarly, in Seaview, where state standards had been adopted more in theory than in practice by the district, the district pointed to test scores as evidence that state standards were being well-addressed by their district reform program. In Birchwood, which had focused much of its energies on implementing its new curriculum textbook adoption, the district looked to steady or improving test scores as evidence of alignment between the curriculum and state standards.

Test scores were also used by some states and districts as evidence of alignment between standards and instruction. In State D, for instance, where the state and district standards were philosophically and literally aligned (because the district was required to use the state standards), the state pointed to test scores as evidence that the content in the state standards was being taught in district schools. In short, positive trends in test scores appeared to be a more powerful lever than state content standards at the local level. As a result, there was a focus on tests across all four cases and less focus on standards in three of the four.

Under certain conditions, state standards can be benign, a nuisance, or helpful to local efforts.

All four cases represent examples of what we have called forward-moving districts, actively engaged in reform with improving student achievement over time. What is most interesting is that these districts were situated in states with quite different reading content standards and expectations for local standards implementation.

Overall, state content standards were differentially helpful to the four districts depending on the particulars of the district, the nature of the state content standards, and the expectations of the state. Each of our cases was positioned quite differently around these factors. Below, we use our cases to characterize three relationships between state and local standards policy.

State Standards as Benign: State B. The state standards seemed to have no apparent negative or positive impact on local efforts in Independence School District. It was heavily invested in district-driven reform that was conceptualized and implemented independent of the state. It had invested significant time, funding and personnel in high-quality reading instruction and professional development and, therefore, was not looking to the state to provide support in those areas. The state and the city allowed Independence to chart its own course as long as it was deemed “aligned.” Both the state and district looked to test scores to assure themselves of this alignment.

State Standards as Nuisance: State C. Seaview’s reform agenda was well underway when the district decided to adopt the state standards. In an increasingly state-controlled environment, adopting the state standards provided a highly visible symbol of aligned policies. The district, however, continued on its own path of reform and test scores continued to improve. It is not clear that state standards played any significant role in the results of the district efforts; that is, it seems likely that the district efforts would be reaping similar benefits if their own standards were still in place. However, the need to change district standards mid-stream due to perceived pressure from the state took valuable time and resources from the district’s ongoing reform agenda and had the potential to send confusing messages to teachers and administrators who were having good success with the original set of district standards and their in-depth professional development. In this way, the state standards could be deemed a nuisance.

State Standards as Helpful: States A and D. The state standards seemed to be helpful to Birchwood to the extent that they chose to engage with them. The district engaged with the very broad state standards, and felt free not to include the more specific indicators and grade-level benchmarks. This broad focus fostered district conversation as they constructed their own standards around the state’s and allowed the district language arts leaders to select instructional emphases they felt would be most helpful for the district needs. Although the state standards seemed to play a helpful role in Birchwood, State A is also a case of the state test receiving more state emphasis than the standards. District concern about test scores combined with the state focus on test-related professional development and limited contact with districts around instructional issues led much of the conversation in Birchwood to be about the state test rather than the content standards.

The factors present in State D also seemed to converge in ways that fostered positive engagement with state policy at the local level but in a different way than in State A. Although State D was the only state that legislated district use of state standards, the state also emphasized local control of curriculum materials and instruction, which encouraged local conversation and adaptation of standards. In addition, the mid-level specificity of the state standards seemed to provide enough detail to guide local efforts, but not so much that they became prescriptive. Further, the perceived philosophical alignment between state and district approaches to language arts seemed to foster both trust and conversation among language arts leaders at state and local levels. As a very large district,

Pine River also benefited from economic and personnel resources that allowed it to develop and conduct significant professional development opportunities for teachers. The state provided significant guidance on issues of curriculum for those districts that needed it, but the state did not attempt to control local choice of curriculum materials.

Implications

The evidence here points to multiple meanings of alignment and differential influence of state content standards on district reform. Although, in theory, state content standards are envisioned to be helpful guides for school districts, our data suggest this is not always the case nor is alignment between state and district content standards necessary for school districts to enjoy improvement in teaching and learning. The districts in this study did not ignore issues of what students should know and be able to do—in fact, they devoted significant time and resources to these issues. Rather, it was that state standards did not always productively contribute to the discussions or decisions about curriculum and instructional practice. The relationship between state and district content standards is complex, however, and, we would argue, in need of attention if content standards are to resume their rightful place in the reform dialogue and gain prominence in practice as well as theory. As many studies have demonstrated, school districts are not inert entities nor are state departments of education omnipotent; instead the two negotiate a delicate balance of power as they pursue effective standards-based reform. This is surely the case with respect to content standards themselves.

So, what can be learned from this study that will help states and school districts? What will renew attention to the “content” in content standards and lead to improved teaching and learning? We believe policies are needed that (a) promote district ownership of content standards and (b) expand accountability beyond test scores.

Promoting district ownership. Our findings suggest that a productive state/local standards relationship requires districts to have a voice in their own content standards and curricular issues while, at the same time, attending to the direction of the state. The tension here, as in so many other policy arenas, is one of local control versus state mandate. Based on our cases, we suggest two areas in which the tension can be productively negotiated. One concerns the nature of the standards themselves and the other concerns differentiated state support for districts. Underlying both of these is a belief that conversation around issues of instruction at the school level as well as district level is essential to deep and meaningful standards work (Applebee, 1996; Cohen & Ball, 1990; Darling-Hammond & Ball, 1999; Darling-Hammond & Falk, 1997; Standerford, 1997; Watson & Supovitz, 2001). Such focused conversation represents an “opportunity to learn” for teachers and builds capacity for instructional excellence (Cohen & Hill, 2000; McGill Franzen et al, 2002; National Research Council, 1999). In our cases, it was the conversations around standards—or other, more relevant, subject-specific, district-specific reforms—that seemed to be important in efforts to improve classroom practice. Therefore, it was not the presence of standards per se but standards-in-action that fostered understanding of the concepts represented in standards and the instructional strategies to achieve them.

As to the nature of the standards themselves, we are drawn to the perennial debate around the optimum specificity or “grain size” of the standards. Many have raised questions about the trade-offs between standards that, on the one hand, are broad enough

to allow for many curriculum designs and approaches and, on other hand, subject to multiple interpretations and confusion (Consortium on Policy Research in Education, 1993; McGill Franzen et al, 2002; Valencia & Wixson, 2001; Wixson & Dutro, 1999). The data from this study lead us to question the utility of very specific content standards for district reform efforts. Indeed, in three of our four districts where locals had engaged in conversations to create their own standards, we could find alignment between local and state content standards only at a broad level, yet these districts were enjoying success. This raises the question of the need for states to create detailed standards documents, especially given the time and expense required to produce them. Furthermore, research in reading has not been able to link high student achievement to such a detailed set of skills as we find in many standards documents, nor has it been able to identify distinct and independent reading comprehension subskills (Davis, 1968; Bruce, Osborn, & Commeryas, 1993).

At the other extreme, it does not appear that having broad, global content standards or standards only at tested grade levels is sufficient. Interestingly, overly broad standards did not exist in any of the sites we studied nor does it seem to be a trend in other states (Valencia & Wixson, 2001; Wixson & Dutro, 1999). The work to translate very broad state level standards into grade-bands or individual grade-level benchmarks requires time, money and expertise. Therefore, it can be an onerous process for districts, particularly smaller districts that have limited financial and personnel resources. Even among the large districts in this study, informants in all four states told us that there was a need for standards across grade levels (in bands or individual grade levels) to help create a more coherent approach to standards-based reform. But the specificity created by some states far exceeded what appeared to be useful to districts.

These findings argue for what we call “middle level” specificity in state level standards—standards that guide districts to teach and think about important areas for student learning but do not detail precise learnings (i.e. know the -ed, -est, -ing endings; define simile, metaphor, hyperbole, personification) or instructional activities or strategies (i.e. fill in a story map; engage in Readers Theater). Mid-level specificity leaves room and, in fact, requires that districts engage in substantive conversations about teaching and learning, and it leaves districts with options to pursue curricular strategies that fit with their local contexts. Furthermore, it suggests that the time, resources, and effort spent in developing very specific, fine-tuned state reading content standards may not be prudent. Not only is it enormously expensive but such an approach may hinder rather than support local efforts.

We recognize that this view of mid-level standards is not uniformly embraced; some argue that districts overemphasize tests because state standards lack “clarify and specificity (Olson, 2001) which has led more states to develop fine-grained content standards (Oseid, 2003) and some organizations to promote specificity (Finn, Petrilli & Vanourek, 1998). However, our findings suggest that when state content standards are too fine-grained and districts feel the pressure to adopt them, even though they have already established another set of standards or a successful approach to reform, there may be superficial adoption or a veil of adoption behind which districts continue on their own paths. It is not that districts intentionally reject state standards or even misunderstand them; it is that having done a good deal of local thinking and on-the-ground work, they may find state standards that are too specific confusing and distracting to their local efforts. As a result, they may end up forcing connections between their own efforts and the state mandates in an effort to comply; in the process, they may undermine their prior

progress. Furthermore, studies of local policy enactment suggest that there is *always* local interpretation whether states want it or not (Hill, 2001; Spillane, 1996). Mid-level specificity in state content standards communicates that local interpretation is necessary and valued rather than unavoidable and off-track, empowering districts to engage with state efforts rather than avoid them.

As concerns the second strategy for promoting district ownership, differentiated state support, our cases provide good evidence that school districts can chart different courses to improved student achievement. Some do this with direct support from the state and some do it without. We were struck by the productive relationship around content standards between the state and district in just one of our cases (State D) where the district and state personnel mutually constructed a level of support that fit the district needs. In the other three cases, states either did not offer or districts did not take advantage of state level discussions around content standards. As others have demonstrated, we suggest that the most productive way to build capacity for reform seems to tailor support to local strengths and needs (Borko, Wolf, Simone, & Uchiyama, 2003; Borko, Elliott, & Uchiyama, 2002).

This brings us back to our findings regarding the path of influence of state content standards on district efforts and occasions a closer look at both the process and substance of those relationships. States clearly need multiple mechanisms for communicating with local districts if they are going to focus attention on high quality content standards. Too often, state outreach takes the form of informing district personnel of regulations and procedures, especially related to state tests, or distributing the content standards. Such efforts are important, to be sure, but they also often overlook the needs of standards enactors (i.e., classroom teachers and district supervisors) and the substantive ideas behind the standards. States also tend to neglect the unique contexts of local districts—their previous professional development efforts, instructional programs and interventions, student and teacher populations, local content standards, and more. To expect all districts to want or need a similar type of support from the state is unrealistic and disrespectful of local initiatives and effort. It is not surprising then, that locals often view the state efforts as regulatory rather than helpful. States need to offer districts a range of support options that will further their local standards work.

Expanding accountability. Educators, policymakers, and the public have been repeatedly cautioned against relying on a single test score for accountability purposes (Elmore, 2002; Linn, 2000) but this study adds a new layer of importance to the caution—the risk that the real work of reform—attention to high quality, worthwhile content standards—will be lost. Specifically, we were somewhat surprised to find that the forward-moving districts in our study relied primarily on the results of state tests as evidence that their local content standards were aligned with the state standards, and that teachers were attending to the standards in their instruction. Such assumptions, we believe, need to be questioned on several fronts.

First, although all the states were judged to have English/Language Arts tests that aligned with their state standards (Education Week, 2003), when we took a closer, subject-matter look at these tests for grades 4 and 7/8, we found they were all focused on broad areas of comprehension. In general, the tests required students to read selections and respond to both literal and inferential comprehension questions. The nature of alignment between state standards and the state tests was thus at a very general level. As others have found, a substantial number of specific state reading standards were not tested (Olson, 2001; Stetcher et al. 2000).

In some sense, we understand that content standards that enable students to read and understand (such as decoding skills) can be assumed to be in place if students are successful on state reading comprehension tests. However, we would argue that many of the specific state standards (i.e. “know the endings of words,” “use dictionary guide words,” “define figurative language”) certainly do not have to be operating for students to score well on these state reading assessments. In addition, many content standards that states have deemed important do not lend themselves to large-scale assessment (e.g. “read a wide variety of texts”). And, as these cases and others have demonstrated, districts can achieve success using a variety of approaches if they attend broadly to state standards and have well-developed local professional development models in place (Cunningham & Allington, 1999; Goertz, Floden & O’Day, 1995; Stein & D’Amico, 2002). Furthermore, in practical terms, it is simply impossible to assess all reading content standards, whether they are very specific or broad, given the constraints of large-scale group state assessments. All of this suggests that it is wrong to equate state tests with state standards at the level of specific content standards—it simply does not, should not, and cannot exist.

A second concern is related to the impending implementation of No Child Left Behind and the press for more testing. By some estimates there will be a twofold increase in the number of tests administered (Karp, 2002) and the expense associated with these tests will be largely borne by states. Such costs on already strapped state budgets, together with the controversy surrounding state performance assessments are likely to result in more states giving up their state-developed assessments in favor of less expensive and less controversial “off-the-shelf” tests (Education Week, 2003). The shift may lead states and districts to revise their content standards to align with these new tests and to take a step back to lower level expectations, which is just the kind of test driven instruction standards-based reform was designed to counter (Darling-Hammond, 2002; Klein, Hamilton, McCaffrey & Stetcher, 2000; Koretz and Barron, 1998). At the same time, the standards that are not easily tested will begin to slip off the radar screen even though they are viewed as important outcomes. These are potential dangers that we will need to monitor and, in our view, guard against.

The challenge then, for both states and districts, is to develop a workable plan for accountability beyond test scores; not simply because it is now a well-accepted belief that reliance on a single measure is inadequate but because it is the only way to keep the focus on the standards themselves. A full accountability system must address the state standards that are not tested on state tests and help districts give voice to the other standards they have deemed to be important for their students. Districts as well as states need to create broader accountability systems and states need to value them.

Conclusion

Certainly no research has suggested that simply having content standards in place is enough to enact change. Indeed, research on systemic reform has pointed to the need for many factors, including high quality curriculum frameworks, materials, and assessments tied to the standards; better instruction and more widely available course offerings that reflect this high quality curriculum; more intensive teacher preparation and professional development guided by related standards for teaching; more equalized resources for schools; and more readily available safety nets for educationally needy students (Cohen & Hill, 2000; National Research Council, 1999; O’Day & Smith, 1993). However, it is clear

that content standards are the linchpin and without careful and substantive attention to them, the entire system is likely to falter. This study raises several issues about the form and role of state content standards in school districts' standards-related work.

Our findings are limited by the cases we selected for study and our reliance on a limited number of informants. All districts were forward moving, actively engaged with reform in ways that not all districts are, or even can be, given the resources needed. Further, all of them were experiencing modest gains in student achievement.. They were also fairly large districts and had allocated central office resources and staff who focused on subject-specific issues of teaching and learning. This may have minimized their need for state support or direction as compared to smaller districts without the same resources. However, it is also the case that each of these districts had struggled with low test scores, was serving large numbers of second language learners and children from low-income families, and they were driven to seek ways to improve. Although we cannot disentangle the influence of size, power, and past performance here, these districts do provide examples of successful possibilities.

In addition, we cannot generalize to other content areas. It may be that the issues of process and assessment in reading are different than those faced by other disciplines. Although some issues we have discussed appear to apply to other content areas (e.g., specificity, conflation of tests with standards, the relationship between local and state reform efforts), the particularities of disciplines influence the nature of debates around, and development and interpretation of state standards. This argues for more research into policy implementation by content area specialists.

Finally, focusing our study on the state and district levels does not tell us about the translation of district standards into classroom practice. Knapp (1997) and others have pointed out that successful reform requires learning on the part of both the organization and the individual. Here we chose to focus on the more global levels of the organization—the state and the district—because the press for improved performance and the path of influence between states and teachers clearly passes through the district. And, in fact, we learned that the message at the state and district levels was not always in-sync and that professional development around teaching and learning was more often provided at the district level than the state. Although studying responses to state standards at the district level provides insights into the opportunities teachers will have to engage with the ideas in state standards, it is only through analyses of classroom practice that we can truly see the impact of state standards on children's learning. We are intrigued with the finding that some district standards look quite different in form and content than state standards and what that might suggest for future research into teachers' implementation of standards. Many studies assume that it is the state standards that should be in teachers' minds as well as practice but these findings suggest that researchers would be wise to consider both the local and state standards in their research. Indeed, most teachers are likely to have more direct contact and understandings of district standards than state standards, especially in grade levels that are not included in statewide testing.

In sum, all of our participating districts were engaged in important and substantive local conversations about language arts curriculum and instruction, whether around state standards or locally-driven reform efforts. This finding alone is heartening. However, it is the role of state standards in those discussions that is at issue in this study. States have devoted a tremendous amount of resources to the development of content standards, yet this study reveals that the link between state and local content standards is a complex one—tighter state control and alignment does not necessarily lead to greater fidelity; nor is

greater fidelity necessary to positively impact student success. Further, our findings suggest that the relationship between standards and assessment must be thoughtfully considered if standards are to have any relevance at all. If state standards are going to be useful guides to meaningful school reform, they must invite conversation and adaptation, and instill locals with the authority to be responsible to local contexts for teaching and learning.

Note

Authors are listed alphabetically. The cases we present here are, no doubt, more complex than we can portray here. We are grateful to the state and local people who generously shared their work and thoughts with us.

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