LP Leverage Points: 8 Critical Actions

As noted previously, the audit review team focused most intensely on analyzing the district's practices that reviewers rated as *Leverage Points*. Therefore, in the following section of the report, even more detailed information is provided by Critical Action.

Each Critical Action is further defined by two to eight rubrics. Each rubric contains three descriptions representing the practices that are farthest from higher performing school systems to the practices that are most like higher performing school systems. For the practices in the *Leverage Points* category, those rubrics have been included and will be used to structure the audit findings. The ratings that the reviewers assigned for each rubric are highlighted and inform the *Recommendations* provided for improving each Critical Action. The *Recommendations* are provided in this section within the context of the rubric ratings and audit findings.

All eight Recommendations are listed together in Appendix D.

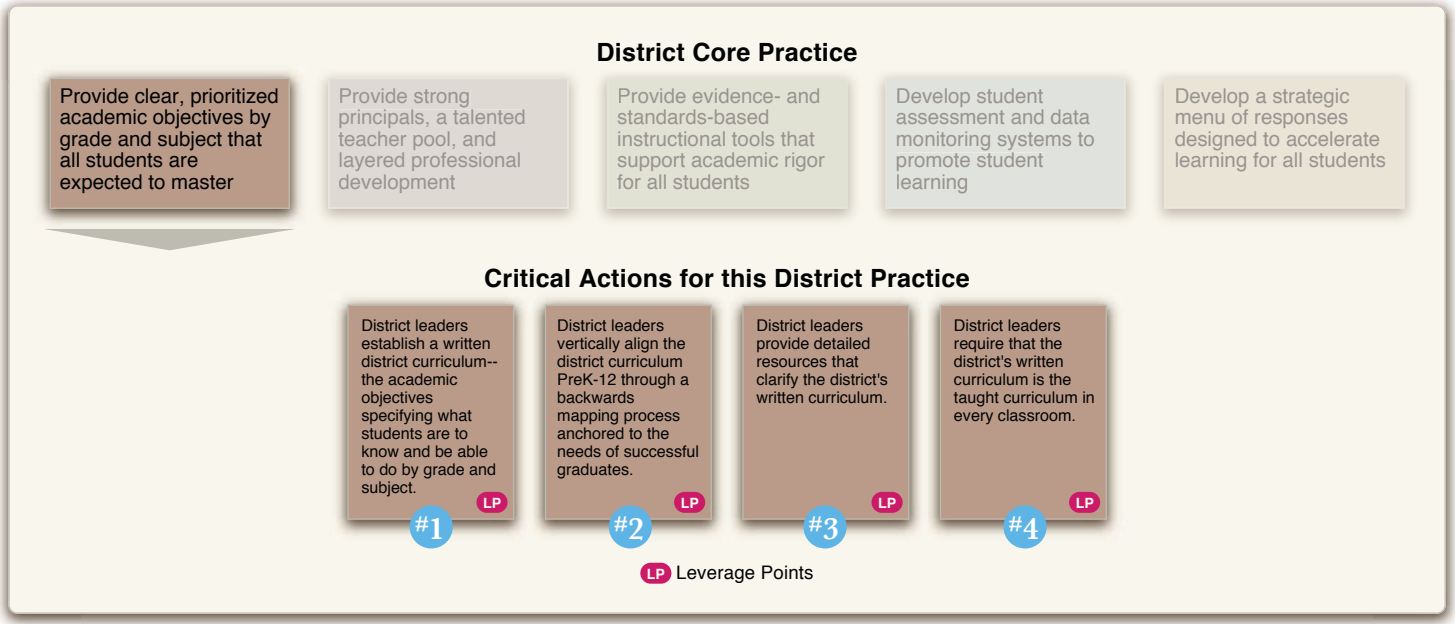
The eight Critical Actions reviewed in the *Leverage Points* section of this report are contained within four of the five themes in the Core Practice Framework: Themes 1, 2, 3, and 5. These eight Critical Actions are presented in the order that they appear in the Framework, not in a recommended order of action for WRSD. Theme 1 is the foundation for all actions within the Framework; therefore, the reviewers recommend that any *Leverage Points* Critical Actions within Theme 1 be addressed first.

Theme 1

Student Learning: Expectations & Goals

District Practice

Provide clear, prioritized academic objectives by grade and subject that all students are expected to master.



Perhaps the most important *Recommendations* within the Core Practice Audit for Winnisquam Regional School District relate to the development and delivery of a tightly aligned written curriculum. While district leaders clearly understand the importance of an aligned curriculum as well as the importance of aligning that curriculum to rigorous standards, the institutionalization of this curriculum is not a current reality. The first four *Recommendations* deal with this theme and practice—this includes all four Critical Actions related to this practice.

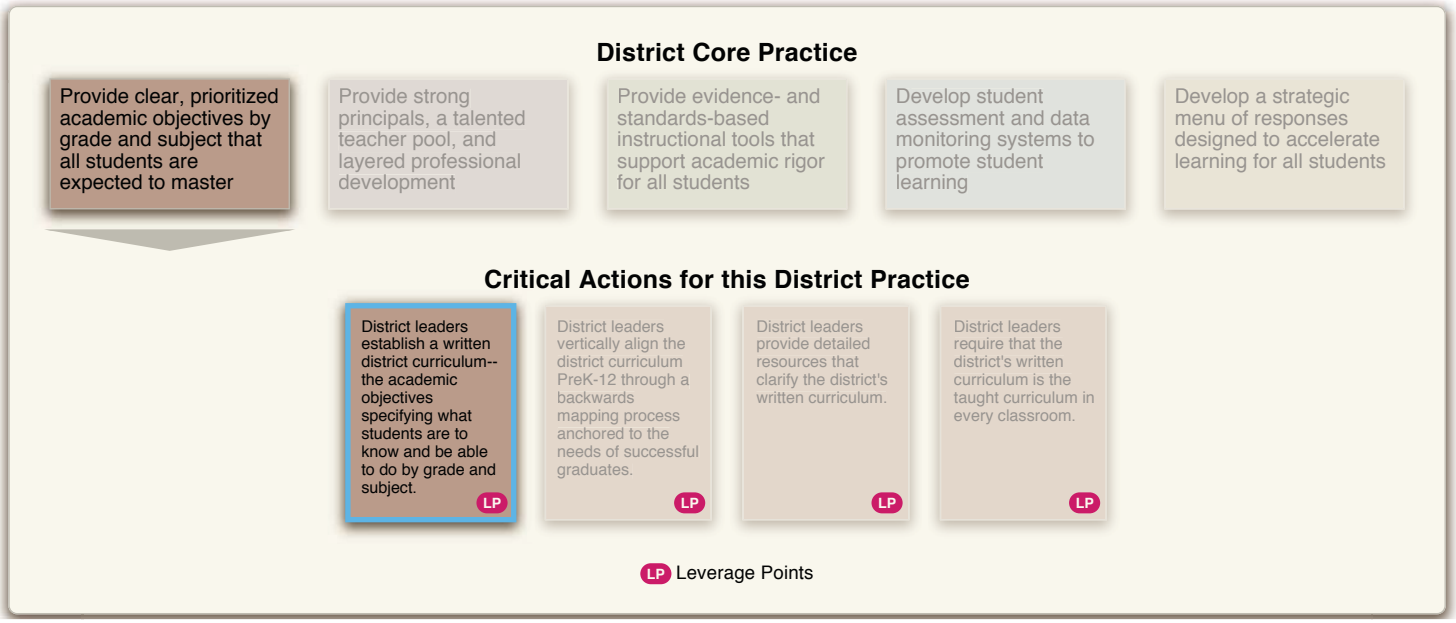
LP Leverage Points: Critical Action #1

Theme 1

Student Learning: Expectations & Goals

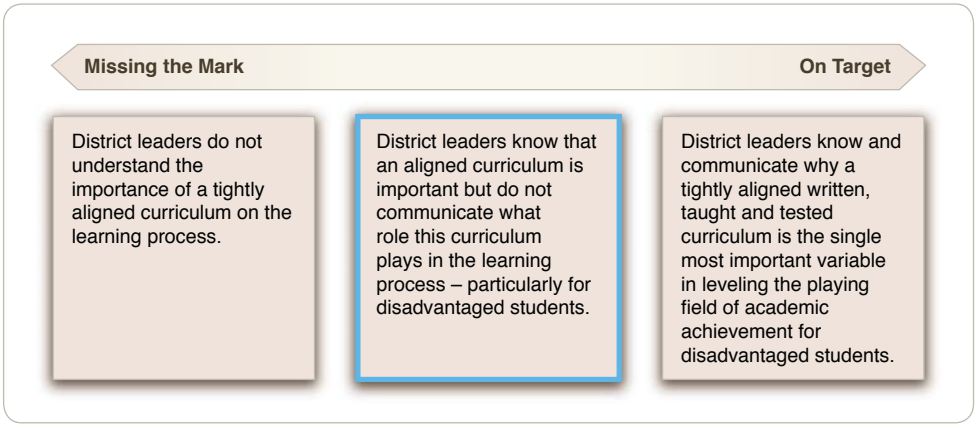
Critical Action

District leaders establish a written district curriculum—the academic objectives specifying what students are to know and be able to do by grade and subject.



Rubric #1

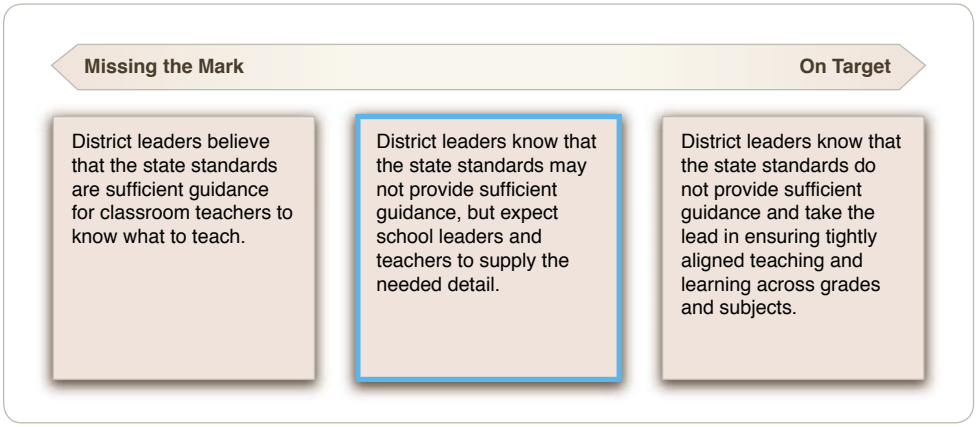
Curricular Beliefs and Knowledge



Findings: The district administrative team discussed the need to push the rigor of the curriculum down into the elementary level with the introduction of the national Common Core Standards. In nearly all interviews, educators discussed the demographics of the community and challenges faced by their students, but no one mentioned the impact that an aligned PreK–12 curriculum can have on leveling the playing field for students from varied backgrounds.

Rubric #2

Curricular Beliefs and Knowledge

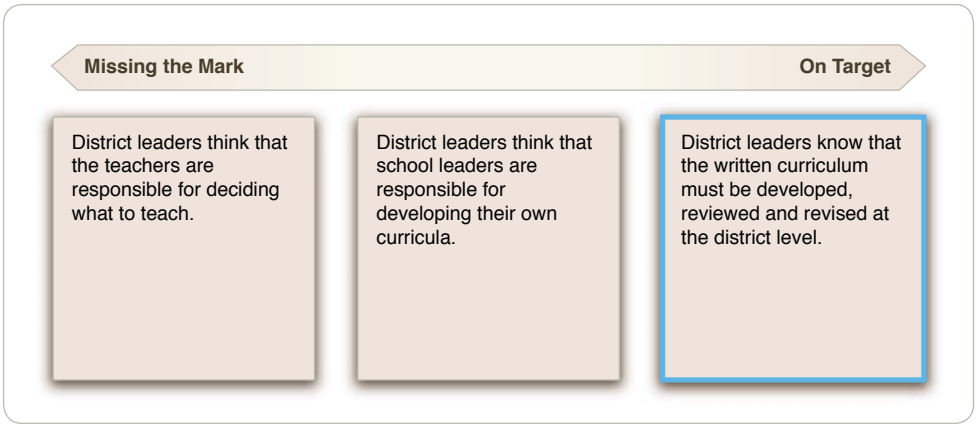


Findings: District and school leaders clearly communicated that teachers in the district were well-versed in the New Hampshire state standards, the Grade-Level Expectations (GLEs) and Grade-Span Expectations (GSEs). This familiarity was confirmed by teacher focus groups at each school, as they all referred to the GLEs and GSEs when asked how they knew what they were to teach. In addition, secondary teachers were aware of the coming national Common Core Standards. Although orchestrated at the district level, work is underway by middle school and high school teachers to align their expectations and translate their unit plans into an Understanding by Design (UbD) format. Elementary teachers are similarly working on developing more detailed curriculum materials in writing and science (although the work is taking a different form). When reviewing the

documentation submitted to illustrate the district's written curriculum, reviewers encountered multiple different formats, different language, and different content among all of the materials provided for various grades and subjects. Although standards and competencies were woven throughout most documents, it was actually difficult to discern if any overarching structure guided the subject and grade-level work. The reviewers' conclusion was that it did not. District leaders are providing the forum for these curriculum meetings to occur, but the overarching curriculum framework that would help ensure alignment of these efforts is not yet occurring at the district level.

Rubric #3

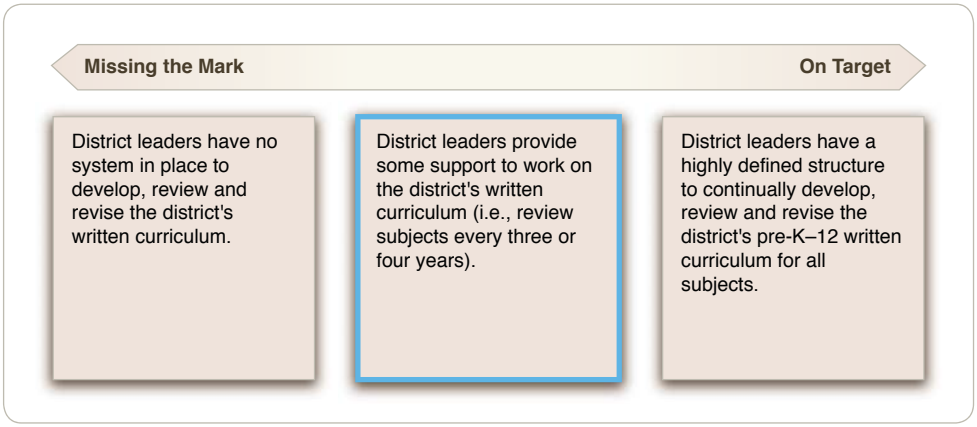
Curricular Beliefs and Knowledge



Findings: Reviewers discerned through interviews with district leaders that they knew the importance of developing curriculum district-wide. In a smaller district like WRSD, however, the lines differentiating areas of responsibility among the district, school, and classroom levels are often less clear than in a larger district, as many individuals serve multiple roles in different levels of the district. Although leaders know the district's role in establishing the curriculum, the size of the district complicates the execution of that knowledge. For instance, when high school teachers in WRSD develop course competencies, that work is done for the entire district; so one could reasonably assume that product to be a "district-wide curriculum." However, assuming a district-wide algebra curriculum is in place simply because all algebra teachers worked on the course competencies would be erroneous. The *district* role in developing curriculum is to maintain focus on the PreK–12 learning continuum. For instance, considering algebra within such a continuum identifies implications for the rigor expected in earlier grades that would never come to light if algebra teachers worked independently from fifth-grade teachers, for instance, in establishing course competencies. No evidence was presented in documentation or during the site visit that this type of PreK–12 consideration is part of the curriculum development process or product.

Rubric #4

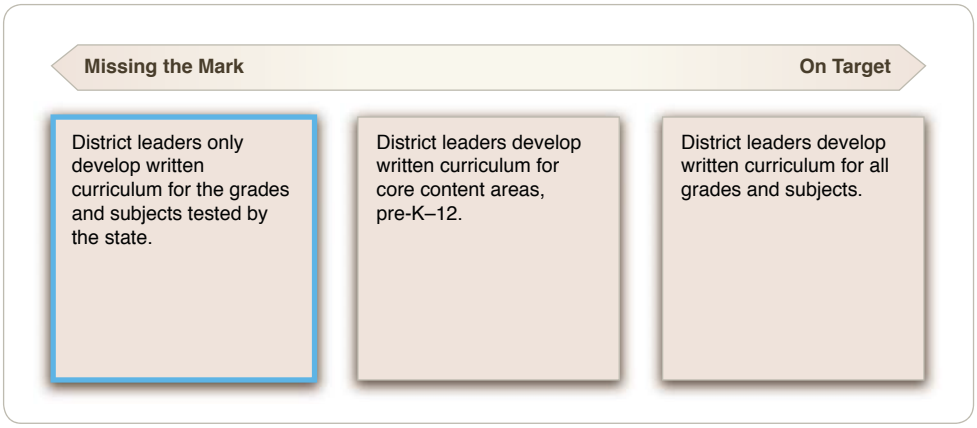
Curriculum Development Process



Findings: As mentioned previously, district leaders provide some support for the curriculum development work by convening elementary and secondary teachers across the district in separate curriculum development and professional development sessions. In the absence of a clear district curriculum, however, reviewers were challenged to determine if that support is sufficient. No single, well-defined process was mentioned in interviews or submitted documentation describing a comprehensive plan for developing, reviewing, and revising the curriculum for PreK–12.

Rubric #5

Curriculum Development Process

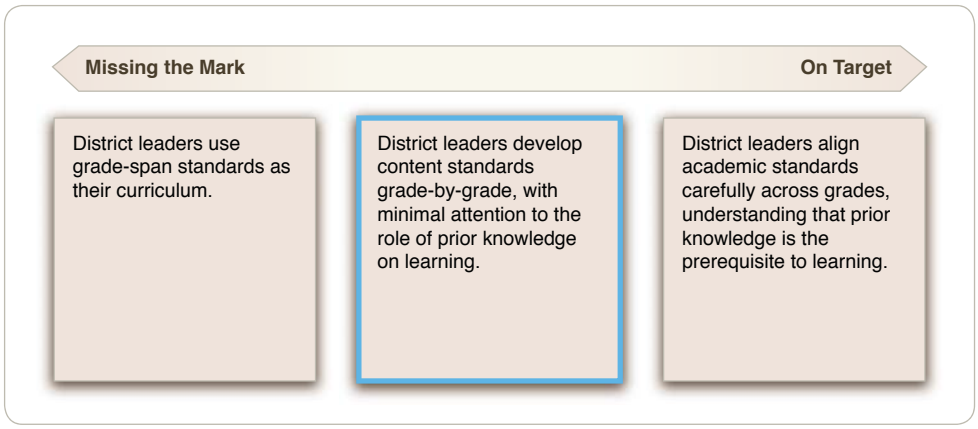


Findings: To illustrate the district's curriculum, district leaders submitted curriculum materials for Grades K-8 in writing, technology, and science. Additional curriculum resources for Grades K-8 reading and mathematics Power Standards were located on the district's website. At the high school level, on the other hand, district leaders submitted the course competencies developed by teachers for nearly 68% of the high school courses listed in the current Program of Studies. In reviewing these submitted documents, it appears that student expectations (state and national) are embedded throughout these multiple documents and formats. There is no one document that illustrates the PreK–12 learning continuum in any subject. Also of

note, no K-8 social studies curriculum materials were located, nor were any discussed in interviews. (Social studies are not part of the statewide testing program in New Hampshire.)

Rubric #6

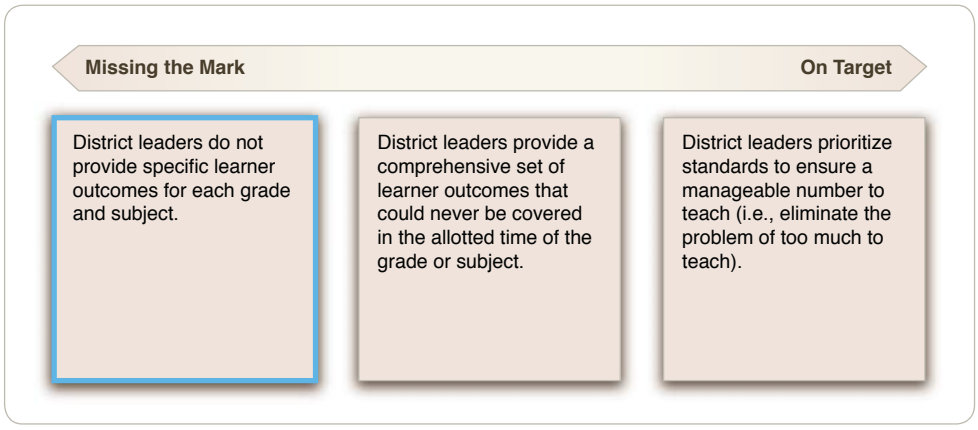
Curriculum Development Process



Findings: With the notable exception of social studies, district leaders and teams of teachers are currently developing grade-by-grade content standards based on the state curriculum frameworks and national Common Core Standards. The fatal flaw of this effort is that the teams of teachers are working largely independently from one another, therefore not resulting in a coherent view of student learning PreK–12. In fact, the focus of the current work seems to be on transferring the middle school and high school expectations into a particular format more than on ensuring that the K-5 pipeline makes certain that students are ready for middle and high school work. Even on a superficial level, the effort to put the entire middle and high school curriculum into the UbD format (e.g., identifying essential questions) is not mirrored in the elementary curriculum documents, except for K-5 science (which does include essential questions for each unit, although the format of the documents is different). The GSEs in social studies at the state level are particularly problematic for guiding instruction in any particular grade, as there is nothing developed locally to distinguish the expectations from grade to grade.

Rubric #7

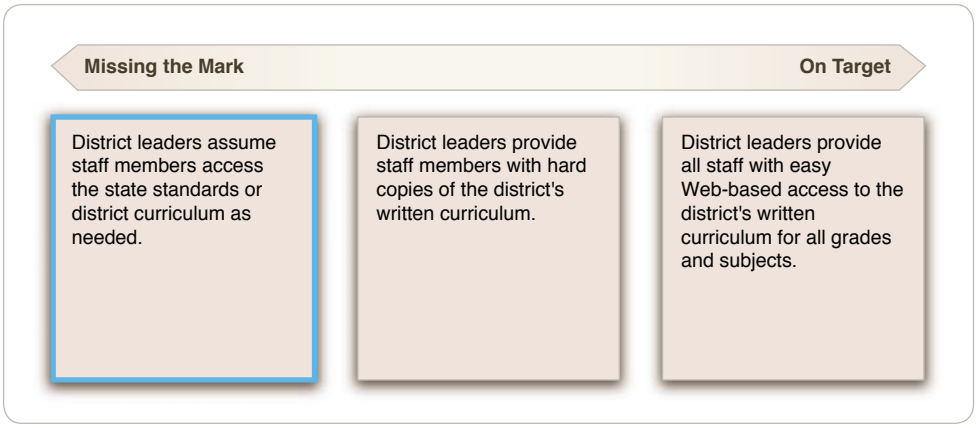
Curriculum Development Process



Findings: The course competencies developed for each high school course provide an important level of detail about the learning expectations for students. For all other grades, however, there is an uneven attention to such specificity. The Power Standards for mathematics and reading do prioritize some GLEs for teachers, but no documentation was submitted to indicate how teachers are to deal with the GLEs/GSEs not deemed to be Power Standards. There does not appear to be any such prioritization for other content areas in Grades K-8. The UbD work could serve to prioritize some standards, but reviewers could not discern if the current, early work will accomplish this goal.

Rubric #8

Curriculum Distribution



Findings: District leaders indicated that their goal was to make all curriculum documents available online eventually. Currently, however, only the Power Standards for reading and mathematics (Grades K-8 and Grade 10) are available online. All hyperlinks to the New Hampshire Curriculum Frameworks are out of date.

Recommendation #1

Critical Action

District leaders establish a written district curriculum—the academic objectives specifying what students are to know and be able to do by grade and subject.

- **Develop a tightly aligned PreK–12 written curriculum outlining the knowledge and skills students will master by grade and subject.** Teachers and leaders are doing a lot in WRSD. One of the auditors' primary concerns, however, is that all of the various efforts—particularly related to curricular work—are not guided by a highly intentional, well-defined process. For example, reviewers were unable to access one central document for any subject area that showed exactly what was to be taught and learned at each grade level (e.g., PreK–12 WRSD Math Curriculum). While various resources and materials at a given grade (e.g., Grade 4) included references to standards (primarily state standards), those standards were never seen within the context of the full PreK–12 continuum.

- **Understand that the state standards do not provide the structure referenced above.** The state standards must be clarified across grades[1] and subjects so that every teacher in the district knows exactly what to teach and *to what level* if students are to be able to access rigorous coursework in high school and be college and career ready upon graduation. The district's written curriculum must become the *sense maker*, thereafter, for every instructional decision in the district. This type of curricular coherence can never be achieved by teachers working independently at different grade levels.

- **Define the system by which curriculum for every grade and subject will be developed, reviewed, and revised.** This structure should provide for continuous improvement of the written curriculum, rather than cyclical reviews. In many higher performing districts, vertical teams of teachers from across the district spend summer months on this work. Understanding that curriculum development requires particular skills; district leaders ensure these teachers are trained in these skills. Teams may meet monthly throughout the school year to monitor how well the curriculum is being implemented and what impediments teachers may be encountering. Monthly monitoring typically defines the work to be done the following summer. Currently, neither district nor school leaders could provide any formal documented process for curriculum development, review, or revision. In addition, teachers across the district were unable to articulate a clear understanding of the process. This process needs to be clearly articulated, ongoing, and dynamic.

  Once vertical teams in language arts, mathematics, social studies, and science have tightly aligned the written curriculum to rigorous coursework at the high school level, then district leaders need to ensure this same work is completed for all subject areas. Keep an important caveat in mind when developing the district's written curriculum—*quantity is not quality*. A primary error in the development of the written curriculum is to place far too many learning objectives or standards at any given grade or subject for a

teacher to teach or student to learn. Originating from U.S. textbooks that consistently contain far more topics than those in higher performing countries, a tendency to place far too many standards by grade continues. Set clear and prioritized standards by grade with a manageable number of topics that will be taught and assessed in greater depth.

- **Tightly align each core content curriculum to rigorous coursework at the high school level.** For example, if all students are to have the option to complete Calculus in Grade 12, then we already know what they must be able to do by the end of Grade 11, etc. Continuing this mapping leads to the set of skills that must be mastered in kindergarten if students are to be on the ramp to successful post-secondary options. Far too many educators, students, and parents find out that students are woefully underprepared for rigorous high school work once they reach high school. Kindergarten through Grade 2 are linchpin grades to ensure students are ready to tackle Grade 3 work at the level required. Pay special attention to the level of rigor in the written curriculum at these grade levels.

- **Provide all staff with easy access to the district's written curriculum.** Given the technology of the day, it is most common for this curriculum to be Web-based. Start simply, and provide access to core content PreK–12. School leaders and teachers should have daily access to this content. Continue to build this online center to include curriculum for all grades and subjects in the district. Providing curriculum electronically rather than in hard copy also facilitates easier maintenance of the resources by eliminating concern that teachers may be working from outdated versions.

[1] Ensure that the written curriculum details a subject's specific learning objectives for each grade. If a learning objective stays the same across two grades, then the depth to which the objective is to be learned must be differentiated. For example, perhaps a skill will be introduced in one grade, developed in the next, and mastered in a third. Teachers in any given grade must be able to clearly differentiate the knowledge and skills students are to attain in their grade from the grades before and after. (For an outstanding article on the importance of alignment and the role of prior knowledge to effective learning, see Classroom Research and Cargo Cults, Hirsch, E.D., 2004. http://www.hoover.org/publications/policy-review/article/7262).

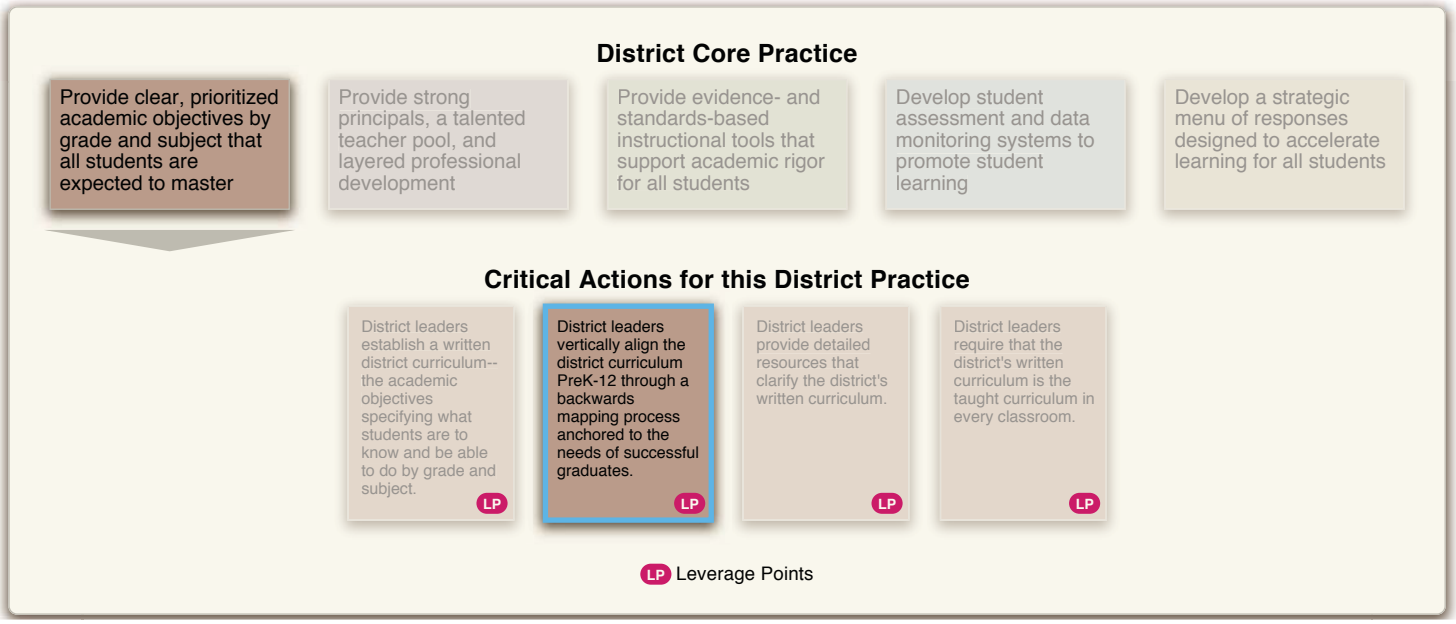
LP Leverage Points: Critical Action #2

Theme 1

Student Learning: Expectations & Goals

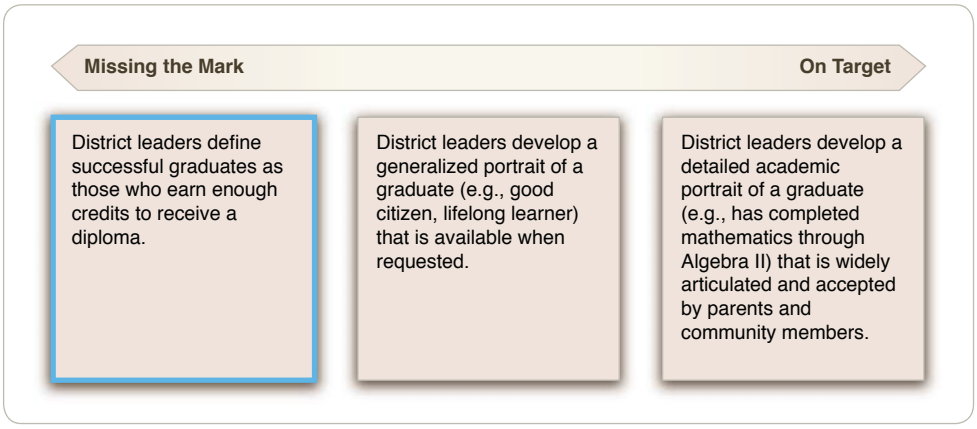
Critical Action

District leaders vertically align the district curriculum PreK–12 through a backwards mapping process anchored to the needs of successful graduates.



Rubric #1

Curriculum Anchors

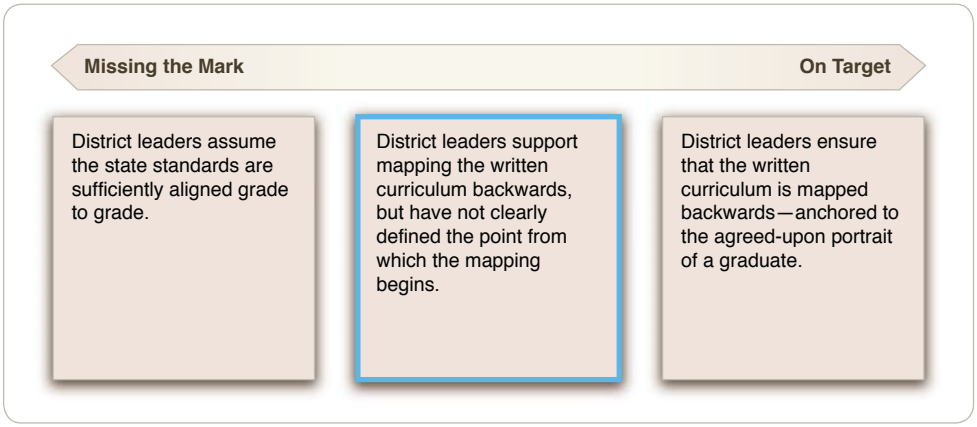


Findings: When asked how successful graduates are defined within the district, interviewees provided a myriad of responses. There was no common definition offered beyond the idea that students demonstrate mastery of the course competencies in the required high school courses. Students are required to complete 21.5 credits to graduate (4 English, 3 math, 3 social studies, 2 science, 1.5 physical education, .5 health, .5 art, .5

freshman seminar, 6.5 electives [including Information and Communication Technology]). Various interviewees also offered descriptions of prepared graduates that included readiness for post-secondary education or trades, ability to collaborate, creativity, and leaving with transcripts that reflect real skills.

Rubric #2

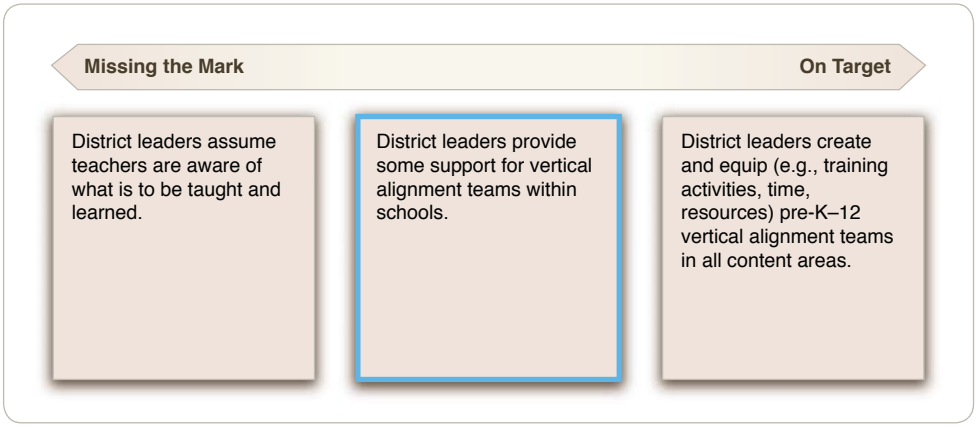
Curriculum Anchors



Findings: In discussions of the anticipated implementation of national standards, administrators communicated the need for increased rigor in earlier grades. However, all curriculum development work presently underway in the district is occurring independently at the elementary and secondary levels. No concerted effort appears to be in place to ensure that work at the elementary level is meaningfully and explicitly linked to the expectations being established at the middle and high school levels. For instance, the 2010-2011 Program of Studies details eight different course sequences in mathematics, originating from three different courses taken in eighth grade (General Math, Pre-Algebra, and Algebra I). Because the elementary and secondary curriculum development efforts are on parallel, but disconnected, tracks, it appears that consideration has not been given to which Grade 8 course (and by extension the higher-level high school math courses) should be the anchor for the elementary curriculum. That is, do students who progress successfully from PreK to seventh grades in WRSD reasonably expect to enroll in general math, Pre-Algebra, or Algebra I (and, by extension, ultimately enroll in AP Calculus)? The courses students take in high school should be directed by their interests and personal goals rather than dictated by the preparation level provided by the K-8 curriculum.

Rubric #3

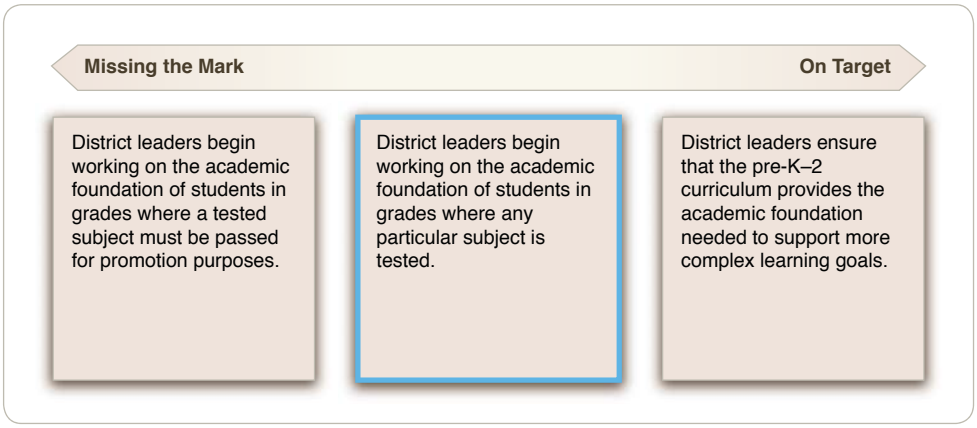
Curriculum Alignment



Findings: Middle school and high school educators meet in vertical teams for curriculum meetings regularly. Educators from the elementary schools meet regularly for curriculum work and professional development. These meetings begin with general information, and then teachers break into grade-level working teams. Interviewees described "working to make stronger connections between fifth and sixth grades," but all of the efforts described were focused more on the logistical transition of students (e.g., students' preparation to change classes) and less on the academic pipeline represented in the curriculum (e.g., what students needed to know to be ready for sixth grade).

Rubric #4

Curriculum Alignment

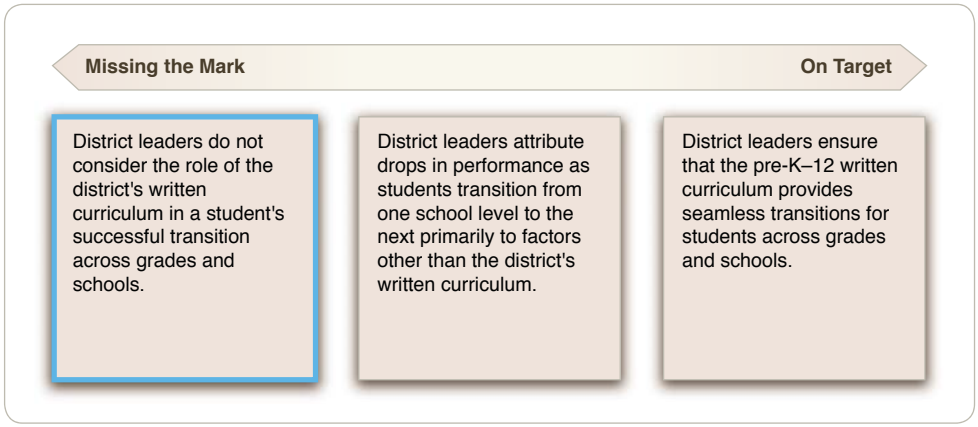


Findings: The nature of New Hampshire's NECAP testing helps facilitate a broader understanding of collective responsibility for student learning. Elementary educators in WRSD expressed that they recognized that the third-grade NECAP (which occurs in the fall) was actually a reflection of what students learned in K-2. However, that awareness—and the accompanying understanding that elementary grades provide the foundation for advanced work—does not seem to have had much impact on the curriculum development process in the district. The curriculum development work that is ongoing occurs separately by level, with grade-level teams developing curriculum at the elementary level and separate

department teams developing curriculum at the secondary levels. Therefore, the focus appears to be on creating curriculum for each grade or subject in a vacuum rather than considering the entire PreK–12 continuum of learning.

Rubric #5

Curriculum Alignment



Findings: Interviewees indicated that it was a known challenge to maintain rigor across school transitions. Yet, most of the information provided about how educators in WRSD were addressing these transitions focused on behavioral or logistical challenges students faced. Efforts to ease student transitions included having teachers from the previous grade (e.g., fifth grade) visit students in the following grade (e.g., sixth grade) prior to the NECAP in the fall to provide an inspirational pep talk about the importance of the assessment, particularly since receiving teachers may not have yet established the same rapport with the students. Similarly, in one school, fifth-grade teachers are departmentalized to give students practice changing classes like they will encounter in middle school. The district-wide implementation of Positive Behavior Intervention Strategies (PBIS) as a behavior management model was also cited as a mechanism that eased student transitions from school to school. While all of these efforts certainly do impact how well students adjust from one school setting to another, the focus on these types of issues neglects the single most significant variable in student preparedness: the alignment and rigor of the curriculum.

Recommendation #2

Critical Action

District leaders vertically align the district curriculum PreK–12 through a backwards mapping process anchored to the needs of successful graduates.

We already know that students who are not on the ramp to *college and career readiness* by Grade 8 face overwhelming challenges to ever getting on that ramp. Therefore, students who participate in General Math in Grade 8 would rarely be expected to access Calculus in high school.[2] More tellingly, in most states students' fifth grade math scores on the state assessment will predict their likelihood of ever reaching AP Calculus, etc. The importance of mapping backwards from a rigorous endpoint to ensure graduated steps in any curriculum beginning in kindergarten cannot be overstated.

Ensure that whatever evidence you accept as a student's readiness to receive a diploma actually translates into a clearly defined set of guaranteed skills.

- **Develop a detailed academic portrait of a WRSD graduate.** This profile should be grounded in research and be clear and specific about the knowledge and skills graduates will possess in all core content areas. More importantly, determine how you will provide evidence that students have mastered these skills. Many leading educators are now embracing the *college and career readiness benchmark* on a nationalized test as the evidence of a successful graduate. It would be difficult to argue for less. Earned course credits, unfortunately, do not ensure that high school graduates have mastered the skills to prepare them for college or a skilled career.

  > *The phenomenon of giving increasing percentages of students credit for courses whose content they have not learned may be labeled "course credit inflation" by analogy with the concept of grade inflation. In the case of grade inflation, the knowledge and skill level of the median student receiving an "A" decline over time. In the case of course credit inflation, the level of content mastery by the median students receiving credit for a course with a given title declines over time. If the decline is dramatic, then course completion can lose its ability to predict student success in college.*[3]

- **Begin with the end in mind.** Some district leaders want all students to have an equal chance of accessing the district's most rigorous and elite coursework, yet do not create the only learning ramp that can lead them to it. If a student is to access rigorous coursework in any core academic subject in Grade 12, then you already know exactly what skills they need as they exit Grade 11 to be prepared for those courses. Mapping backward—Grade 10, 9, 8—leaders can clearly state what students must know and be able to do by the end of kindergarten to be on a learning ramp that can grant them access to a Grade 12 course. Far too many students are so shortchanged in early grades that they can never get back on track to academic rigor. District leaders need to make certain that the written curriculum—beginning in kindergarten—has been anchored to the end goals for all graduates.

- **Provide the foundation for articulation of teachers across all grades in any given content area.** Different than curricular development teams, these vertical teams gather periodically throughout the year to extend teachers' knowledge of the full PreK–12 learning continuum for their subject areas. In particular, the team activities help deepen teachers' knowledge of their exact role in the learning continuum. Of course, teachers at the elementary level will be involved in activities with multiple teams – primarily the core content areas. Lead teachers of the vertical teams often serve strong roles within curricular development work also.

- **Address every possible variable that is within your control to create a seamless learning transition from one school level to the next.** Typically, there will be a drop in student performance wherever the district's grade spans separate. For instance, if a school district organizes K–5, 6–8, and 9–12, an observer will likely note decreased student performance in Grades 6 and 9. Interestingly, if a neighboring district organizes K–8 and 9–12, the drop in performance will typically only be seen at Grade 9. Explanations for this common performance pattern usually focus on characteristics of students. It is true that students encounter a number of transitions as they progress through a school system, from changing school buildings to adjusting to different teachers' personalities to meeting increasingly rigorous academic expectations. All of these transitions introduce variation and adjustment into the educational process. However, do consider the effect that your system has on students. Decreased student performance across schools is primarily a reflection of educator practices, particularly the strength of alignment and articulation across schools. District leaders play an important role in creating seamless transitions for students from one school level to the next. The district's written curriculum is one of the first issues to investigate. Does the strength of your curriculum's alignment minimize or exacerbate the transitions that students experience in your system? What support for students and teachers must be built into the system at transition years?

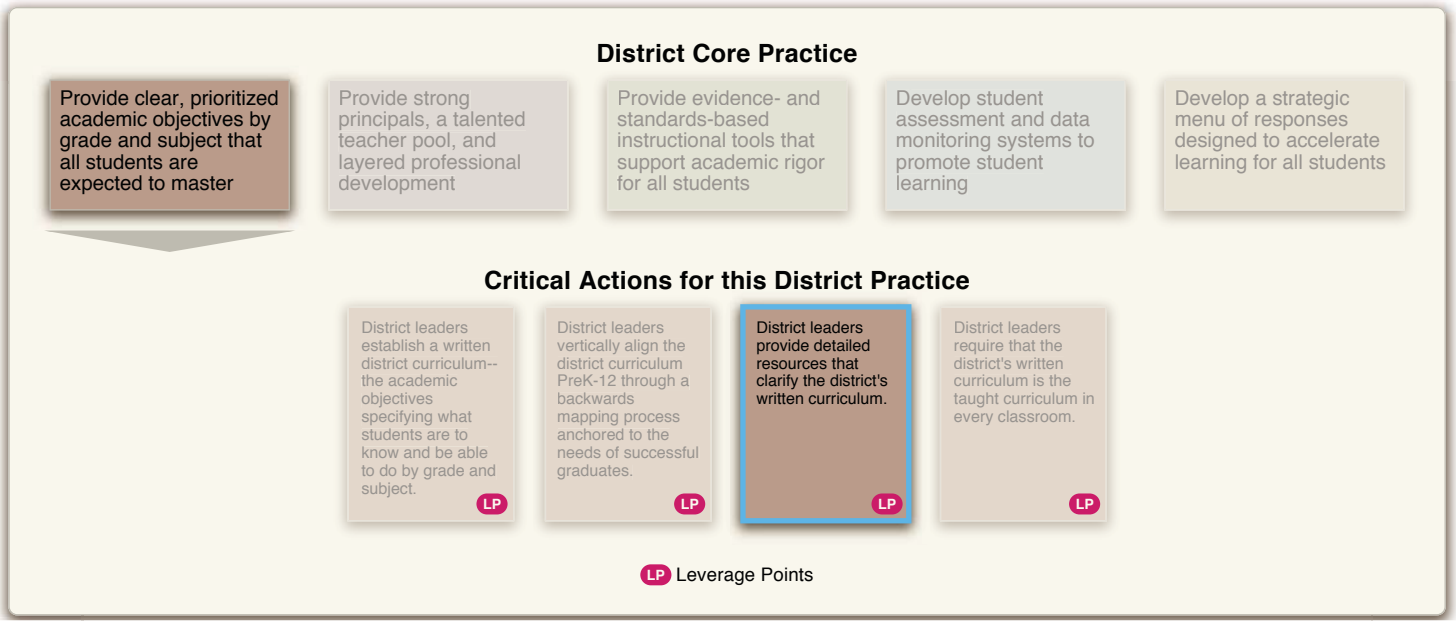
[2] The reviewers strongly encourage WRSD leaders to do a longitudinal study of math participation in the district. While a math sequence document provided to reviewers showed a possible path from General Math to AP Calculus, reviewers would predict that no greater than 2% of any given class would actually be able to do this. (http://nc4ea.org/files/preparation_matters-04-01-09.pdf) While showing a pathway to rigorous coursework from any given eighth grade course is laudable, it is also a bit misrepresentative if, in fact, no students can successfully maneuver the pathway. In addition, the number of students who exit Pre-Algebra in eighth grade and make their way to AP Calculus should be examined.

[3] http://nc4ea.org/files/orange_juice_or_orange_drink_02-13-06.pdf

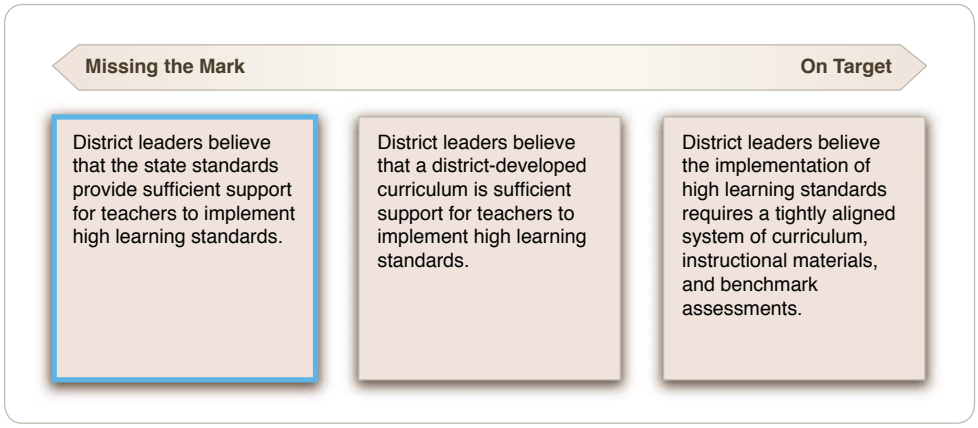
LP Leverage Points: Critical Action #3

Theme 1
Student Learning: Expectations & Goals

Critical Action
District leaders provide detailed resources that clarify the district's written curriculum.



Rubric #1
Curricular Beliefs

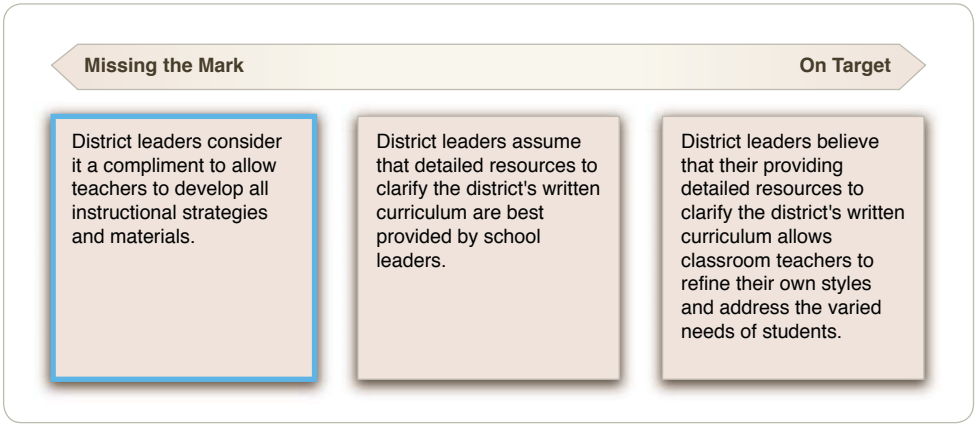


Findings: Winnisquam Regional School District currently has a loose system of curriculum, instructional materials, and assessments in place. The district's informal approach to curriculum, instruction, and assessment may seem appropriate for the size of the district and the number of schools needing to coordinate their efforts. However, a tightly aligned, purposefully designed instructional system is equally beneficial for both teachers and students, regardless of a district's size. As discussed in previous findings, the current

curriculum development efforts, underway separately at elementary and secondary levels, seem to be occurring without the benefit of an overarching and common goal in mind. Similarly, interviewees indicated that a new focus this year was the development of common assessments, particularly in science. The NWEA *MAP* tests serve as benchmark assessments in reading and mathematics, so common assessments can provide a needed supplement to those periodic assessments as well as provide formative assessment data for other content areas. However, to be most useful to teachers, the common assessments must be tightly aligned with a clear, agreed-upon curriculum in place K–12, a need in WRSD discussed in Recommendation 1.

Rubric #2

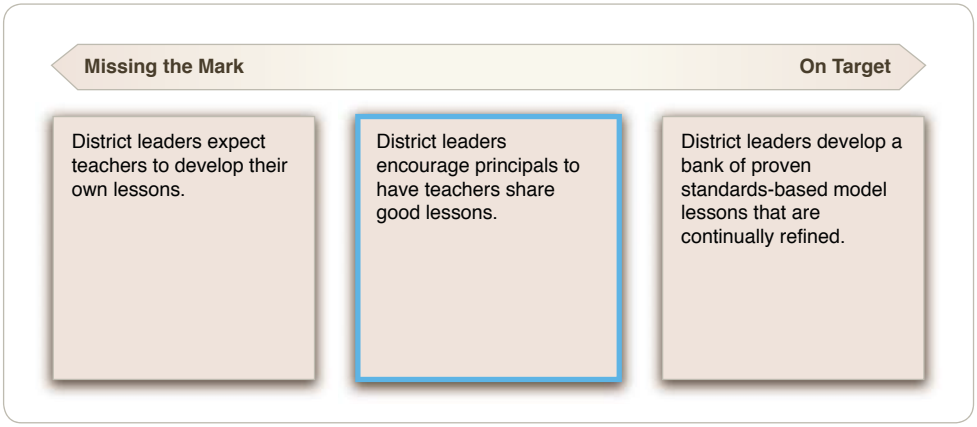
Curricular Beliefs



Findings: The new K-5 Writing Portfolio Curriculum Guides include comprehensive instructional and assessment suggestions. For most grade levels, the reading and mathematics Power Standards website includes documents that "unwrap" the standards and detail associated instructional resources, activities, and assessment ideas. Several of the UbD unit plans developed at the high school level also include instructional suggestions. It was unclear from interviews and documentation what the policy expectation is relative to these instructional resources. That is, are teachers expected to proceed through the Writing Curriculum Guide from cover to cover, or are the activities suggestions that any teacher may or may not choose to implement? Higher performing schools typically are tight about the curriculum (as described in Recommendation 1) and loose about the means of teaching the curriculum (the support for which is discussed here). Yet, in those same schools, teachers welcome strong, clearly aligned instructional resources as a vetted shortcut to quality materials.

Rubric #3

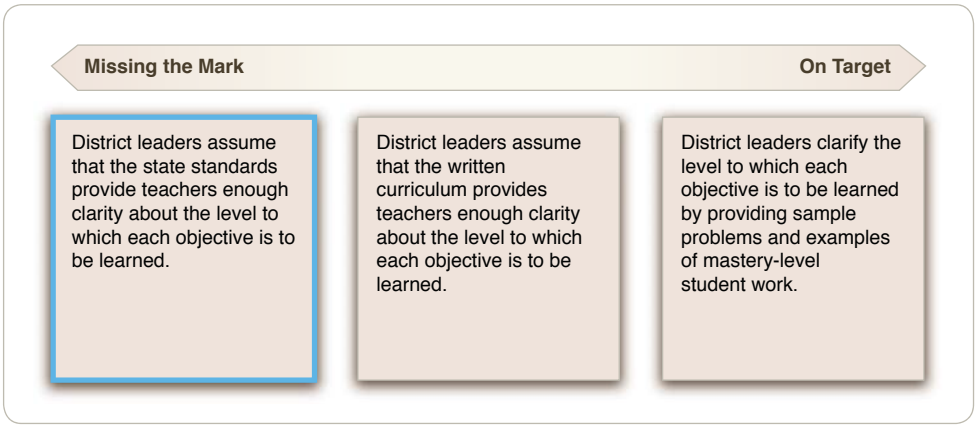
Curricular Clarification



Findings: Many teachers and school leaders described a growing trend toward common lesson planning at several schools. The developing PLCs in some schools also provide forums for sharing effective lessons. Teachers at one elementary school referred to a milk crate full of lessons and instructional ideas that are shared among all grade-level teachers. Currently, there is not a way to catalog and share proven lessons district-wide.

Rubric #4

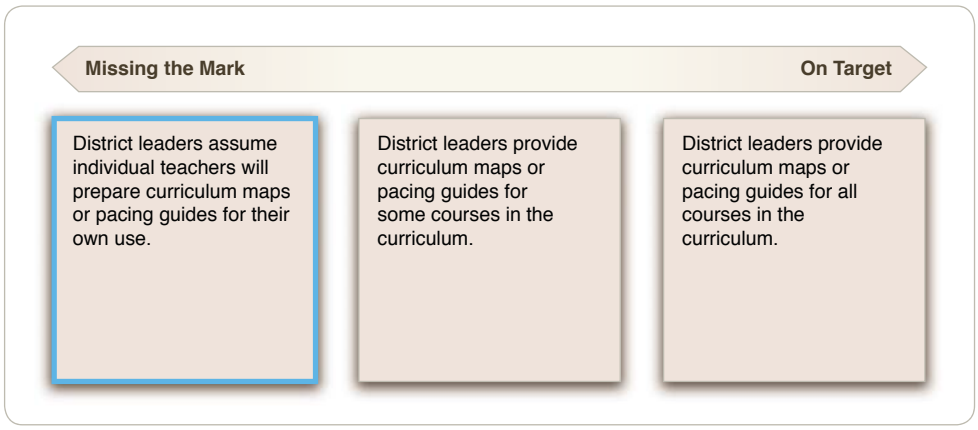
Curricular Clarification



Findings: Reviewers found sample assessment items associated with the Power Standards for reading and mathematics for most, but not all, grades. None of the curricular materials submitted for high school courses included that type of clarifying resource. There was also no curricular document detailing the level of mastery required of students (e.g., in which grade a concept should be *introduced* if mastery is expected in Grade 4). A teacher in one school noted the benefit of coordinating instruction across grade levels: “It would be great if we could get together and coordinate our curriculum maps. I’d like to meet with the [grade after mine] to make sure I’m teaching what they expect students to know, and I’d like to meet with the [grade before mine] to talk about what I am expecting students to already know.” This type of clarification is particularly important for content areas or school levels guided by Grade Span Expectations.

Rubric #5

Curricular Clarification



Findings: Most educators explained that they go to their instructional program (e.g., *Story Town*) to determine the order and pacing of their instruction. Among the curriculum materials submitted for high school courses were course outlines that provided a rough outline of the units for each course and, in some cases, the associated GLEs or GSEs. For Grades K-8, the Power Standards resources included very broad instructional calendars in several (but not all) grades for reading and mathematics. In some schools, teachers of the same grade or subject coordinate their instruction and develop common curriculum maps.

Recommendation #3

Critical Action

District leaders provide detailed resources that clarify the district's written curriculum.

Leaders in higher performing districts indicate that providing teachers with a clear and detailed curriculum of what students are to know and be able to do by grade and subject is merely *the first step* in a very lengthy development and support process. These leaders say that the work of *unpacking the standards*—helping to detail and define them through pacing guides, student exemplars, model lessons, and sample assessment items—begins the moment the curriculum is developed. Given the uneven curricular development of the core subjects in WRSD, some subject areas may well be prepared to proceed with this recommendation before others. It is highly recommended, however, that 1) district leaders set the expectations for how—and in what order—detailed resources will be developed, and 2) district leaders ensure that resource development in any given subject area does not precede the development of a tightly aligned, rigorous written curriculum across all grades.

- **Study the role of district leaders in higher performing districts and schools relative to the support they provide for curriculum delivery.** These leaders understand the importance of providing detailed resources to clarify the district's written curriculum. By providing these resources, they allow classroom teachers to refine their own teaching styles and to address the varied needs of students. Consider the alternative: teachers have to figure out what they are supposed to teach, what materials they are supposed to use to teach, what instructional strategies to use, how to differentiate instruction for varied learners, and how to measure to see if students have learned the content. That scenario – all too common across the country – leads to uneven student achievement and teacher burnout!

- **While the reviewers understand the budgetary constraints facing WRSD, the fundamental importance of an aligned and rigorous curriculum to all teaching and learning expenditures requires that WRSD leaders determine how they might garner monies for this work.** While it is only one of many possible approaches, leaders might consider the following. Identify a K-12 leader for each core content area. This curricular specialist might be given a release period during the day to attend to curricular development and implementation. Each of the core content specialists would be responsible for planning specific work in their subject area for the monthly curricular meetings.

- **Develop a bank of proven standards-based model lessons that are continually refined.** Work closely with school leaders to identify the most effective lessons being taught in their schools. Also, study student performance data to determine which teachers have experienced the most success on given objectives. Begin to collect the lessons associated with teaching those objectives. Leaders in higher performing school systems often attach these proven lessons to the respective learning objectives in a Web-based curriculum resource center. Then teachers can begin to review lessons from across the district that have proven most effective. Build a system that

allows teachers to continue to comment on posted lessons and to offer suggestions for further refining them.

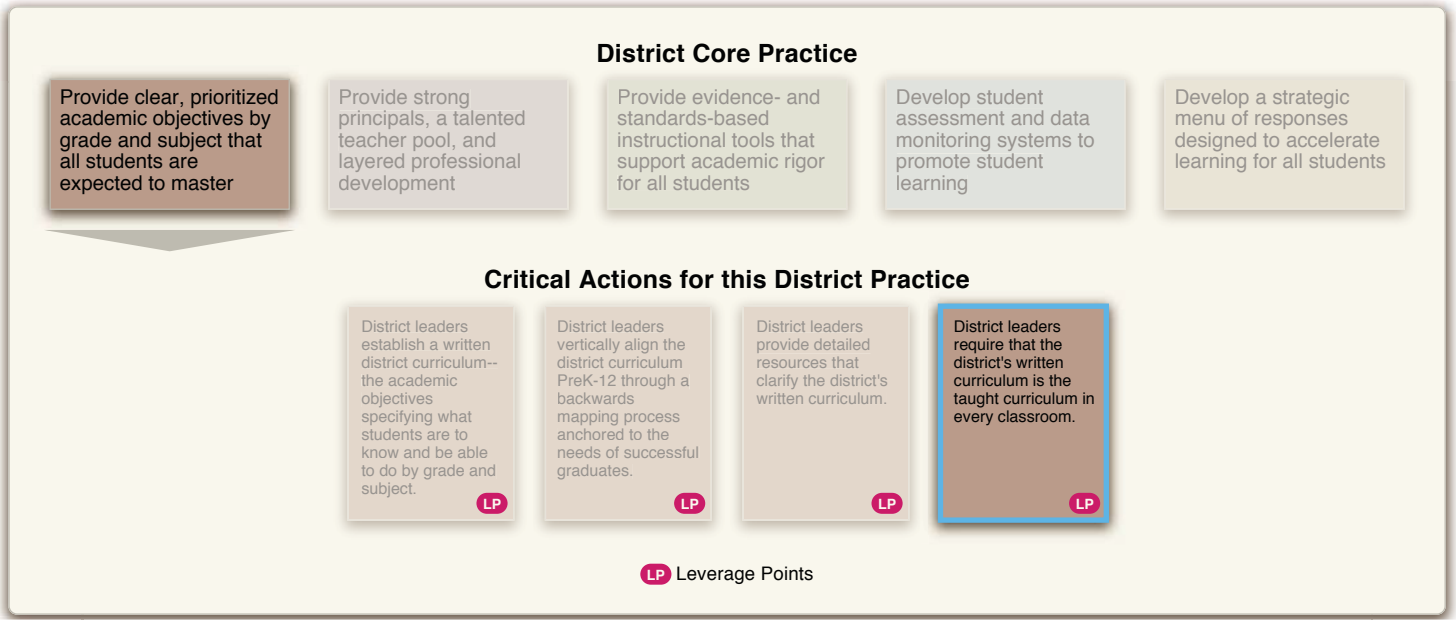
- **Begin to provide the clarity needed for teachers to know the level to which each academic objective is to be learned.** A first step toward achieving this clarity can be to code all academic standards on some type of rubric (e.g., academic standard needs to be 1) introduced, 2) developed, 3) mastered and 4) assessed.) Soon after receiving this clarity, however, teachers need concrete examples of what that level of learning "looks like." Further clarity is typically provided in one of two ways: 1) by showing sample assessment items that students should be able to successfully answer if taught at the correct level, and/or 2) by presenting student exemplars. The sample problems included in the Power Standards for some grades begin to address this need, although without the anchor of the level of mastery expected at each grade.

- **Provide curriculum maps or pacing guides for all courses in the curriculum. Begin by providing pacing guides for all core subjects, PreK–12.** At the most basic level, pacing guides may simply show the learning standards organized by weeks across the school year. Curriculum maps or pacing guides are often used interchangeably, although some educators use the term curriculum maps to indicate a more inclusive document – offering a sequence for delivering content, associated resources or materials for teaching that content, and a tool for collecting data about the implemented curriculum. Either way, there are a plethora of resources for creating curriculum maps or pacing guides at your disposal on the Internet. The most important thing to remember is that these guides or maps should be developed at the district level and used by all teachers in the district.

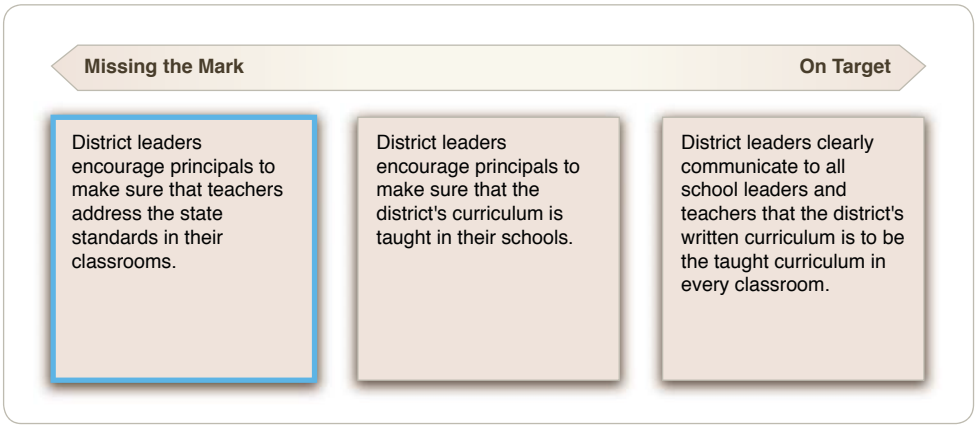
LP Leverage Points: Critical Action #4

Theme 1
Student Learning: Expectations & Goals

Critical Action
District leaders require that the district's written curriculum is the taught curriculum in every classroom.



Rubric #1
Expectations

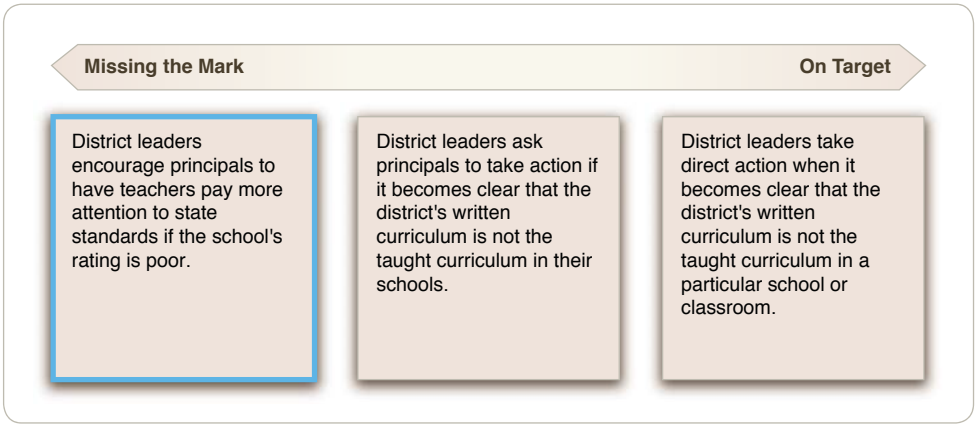


Findings: When asked what teachers are expected to teach in any particular grade or subject, school leaders always first referenced the state GLEs/GSEs. Certainly, with an absence of any coherent document to reference as the district curriculum, it is understandable that leaders and teachers would refer to the state standards for guidance about student learning expectations. Establishing a clear expectation that the district written curriculum is to be the taught curriculum in every classroom is predicated on the existence

of a distinguishable district written curriculum. Of course, district leaders should proceed with that development while also communicating that the eventual expectation will be that students of the same grade or subject across the district will learn the same content and skills (because it is one part of a tightly aligned sequence).

Rubric #2

Accountability



Findings: Although varied curricular documents have been created in a number of grades and content areas, the primary expectation communicated to teachers by the administrative team is that they are to teach the GLEs/GSEs. Each leader spoke with pride about how well-versed all teachers were with the state standards. Again, in the absence of a clear written district curriculum, that default position is easily understood. However, the size of the district and the collaboration level of the administrative team provide considerable opportunity to address quickly any deviation from the written curriculum, once one is developed, implemented, and monitored. It may be important to note that the distinction between district leaders and principals in the above rubric descriptions do not apply well to Winnisquam Regional School District in which the school leaders serve integral roles as "district leaders" through their position on the district administrative team.

Recommendation #4

Critical Action

District leaders require that the district's written curriculum is the taught curriculum in every classroom.

This action is best clarified by a *what* and *how* statement. *What* teachers teach is non-negotiable; *how* they teach it must be informed by their professional judgment. Tragically in the United States, educators have confused teacher professionalism with each teacher having the right to make decisions about what they teach. The result—curricular chaos—has had a devastating effect on student learning.

Unless a teacher plans to stay with the same students throughout the PreK–12 years, that teacher's work must be carefully connected and tightly aligned to experiences both before and after his/her own.

- **Clearly communicate to all school leaders and to teachers that the district's written curriculum is to be the taught curriculum in every classroom.** Of course, this expectation can only be enacted when you are certain that the following conditions are met.

  1. *A clear, specific, and rigorous written curriculum does indeed exist.* The variance noted in curriculum development work across subjects requires that district leaders be absolutely certain when, for any given subject, they can in fact clearly communicate that the written curriculum is to be the taught curriculum.

  2. *All teachers have been given adequate opportunity to become knowledgeable regarding the written curriculum.* This requires varying levels of training support as well as easy access to the written curriculum.

- **Clearly communicate to all principals that they are accountable for ensuring the integrity of delivery of the district's written curriculum in all classrooms.** Work with principals to determine how they can be certain that this expectation is being met in their schools. For example, district leaders and principals in higher performing school systems regularly report that the learning objective of each lesson is posted daily in a visible place within each classroom. As a result, in quick walkthroughs or visits, the leaders know exactly what the lesson objective is and can observe how the activities of the lesson are related. Whatever the solution, be certain that the principal understands that he/she is responsible and that you will both provide whatever support is needed and monitor to ensure the practice is enacted.

- **Ensure that district leaders are prepared to monitor the communicated expectations.** The two primary methods for ensuring the fidelity of the taught curriculum are 1) benchmark assessments and 2) observations.

- **Prepare a response plan to be enacted if district leaders determine the written curriculum is not the taught curriculum in all schools.**

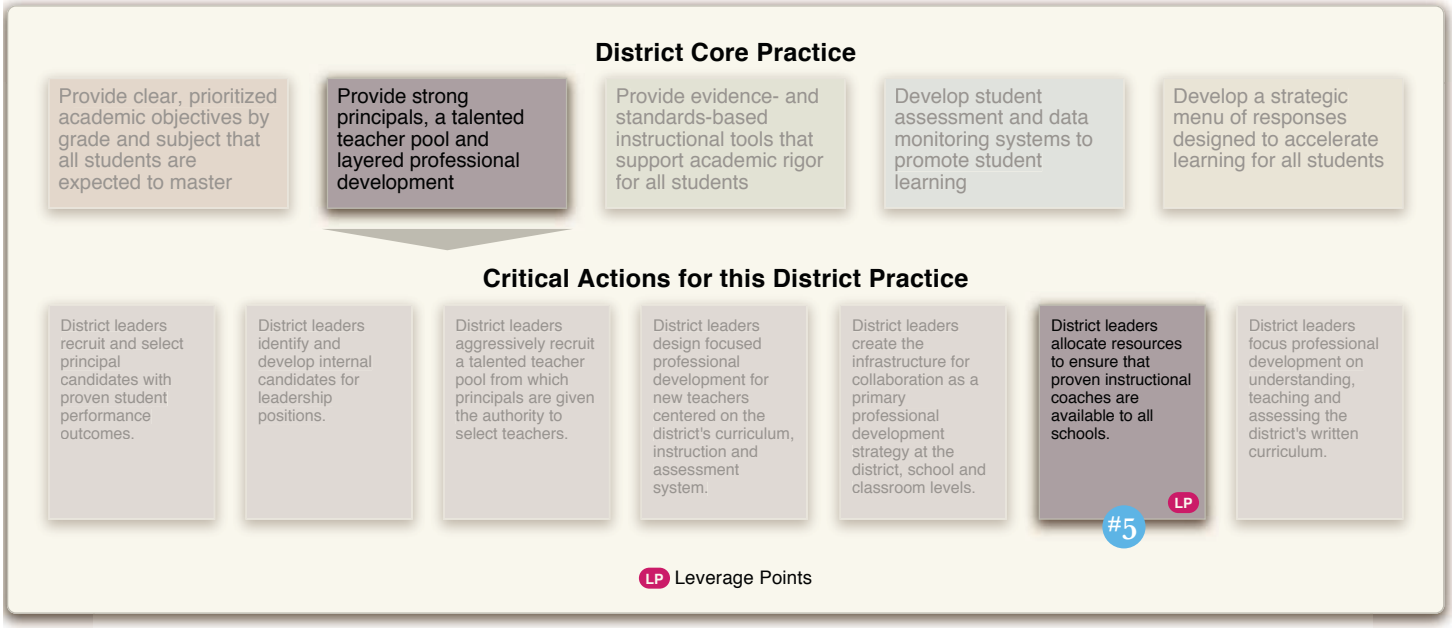
District leaders can leave no room for confusion or uncertainty relative to this expectation.

Theme 2

Staff Selection, Leadership, & Capacity Building

District Practice

Provide strong principals, a talented teacher pool and layered professional development.

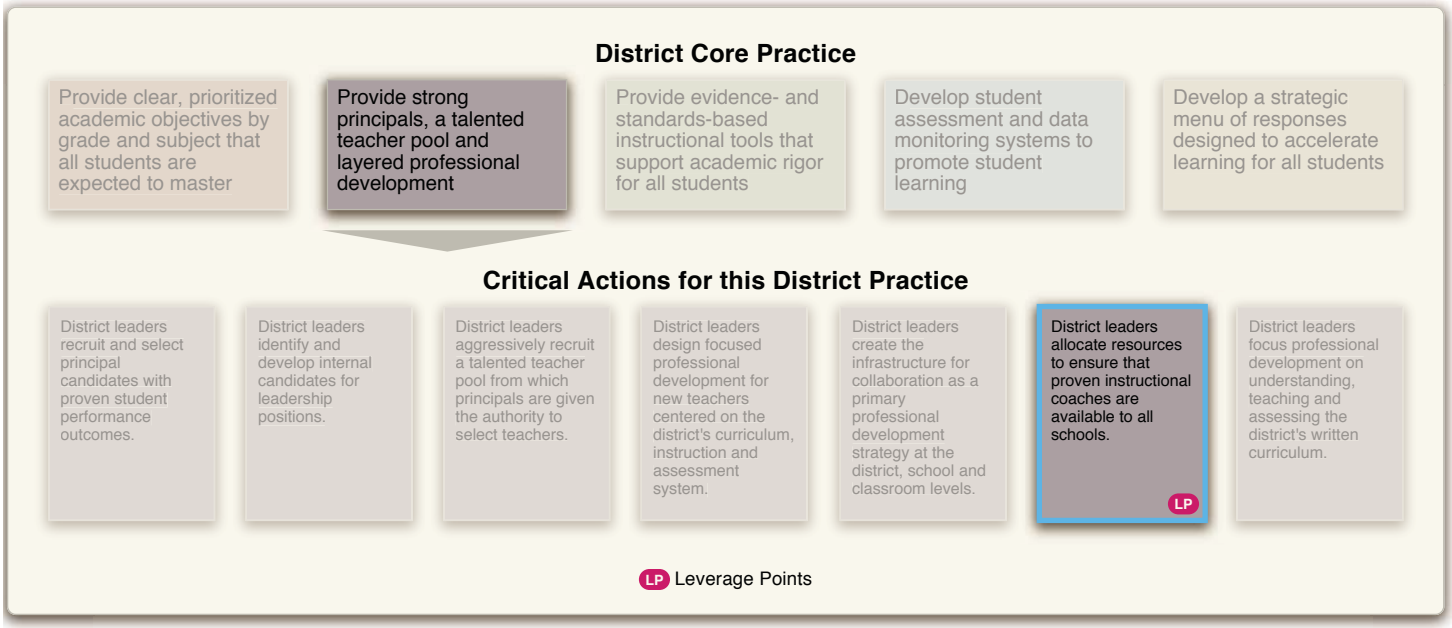


The next recommendation—*Recommendation 5*—deals with district practices relative to staff selection, development, and support. Only one of the seven Critical Actions related to this practice at the district level have been categorized as *Leverage Points*.

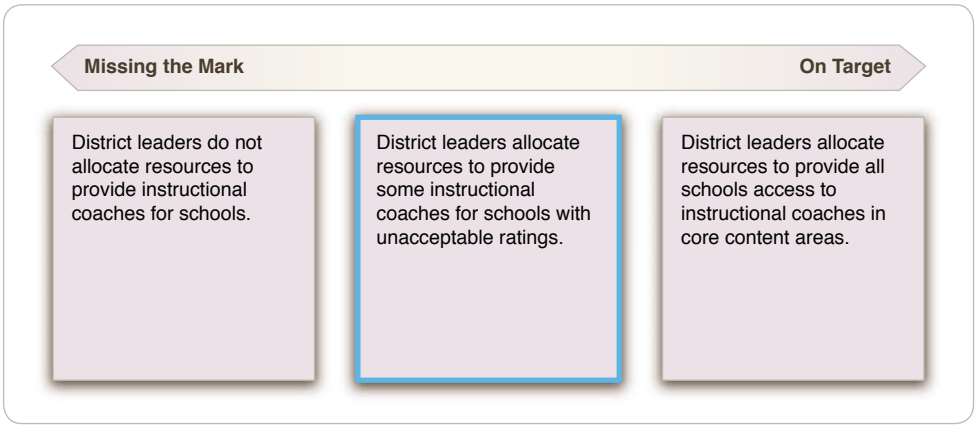
LP Leverage Points: Critical Action #5

Theme 2
Staff Selection, Leadership, & Capacity Building

Critical Action
District leaders allocate resources to ensure that proven instructional coaches are available to all schools.



Rubric #1
Resource Allocation

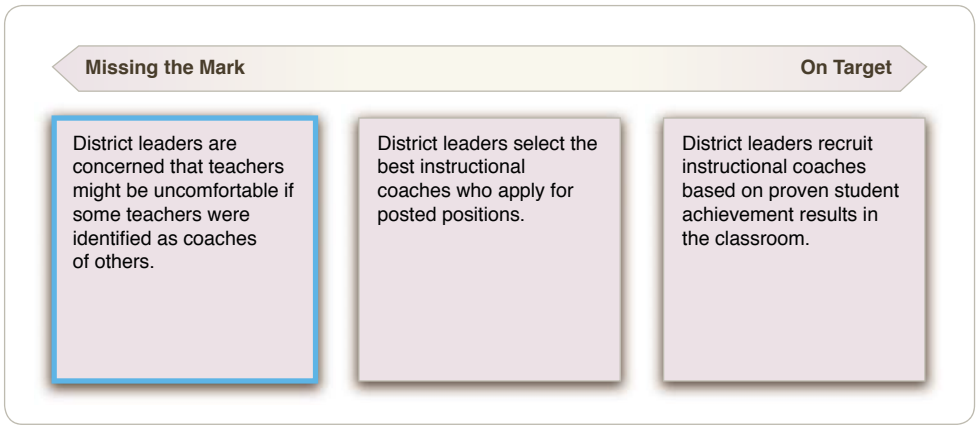


Findings: Winnisquam Regional Middle School has a math/data coach, who also teaches one class. Four district-provided new-teacher mentors serve as informal instructional coaches for new teachers in the district, but there does not seem to be a coherent effort underway to provide that type of professional support to other teachers in the district. When asked about instructional supports for teachers in the district, most interviewees spoke of

staff who primarily provided direct service to *students* rather than *teachers*, such as reading specialists or *Read 180* teachers.

Rubric #2

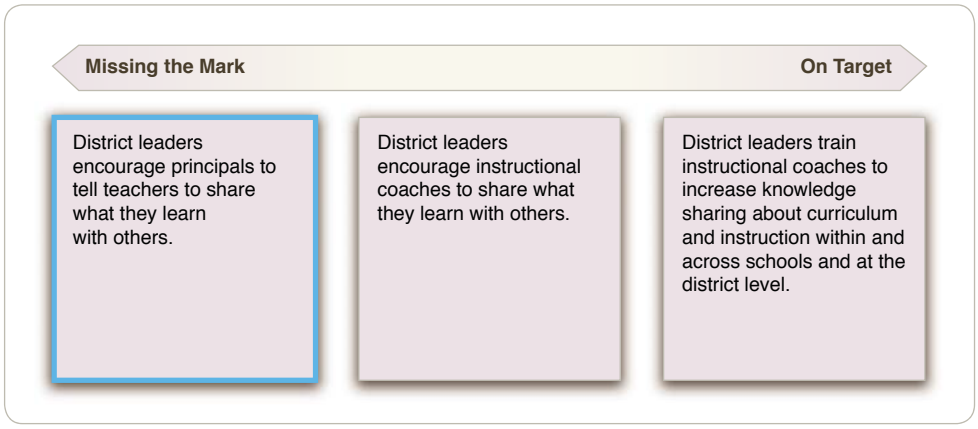
Instructional Coach Selection



Findings: Both the size of the district and the nature of the budgeting process likely impact the decision to not have more instructional coaches in the district. If that is the case, finding ways to accomplish the *role* of instructional coach without formal positions will be important for WRSD.

Rubric #3

Instructional Coach Selection



Findings: The emphasis on establishing professional learning communities throughout the district is a clear effort to embed professional development and establish a knowledge-sharing infrastructure within schools. Instructional coaches could help facilitate this sharing across schools.

Recommendation #5

Critical Action

District leaders allocate resources to ensure that proven instructional coaches are available to all schools.

Given the budgetary concerns facing all school systems at this time, it is with great caution that reviewers make any recommendation that requires the allocation of resources. The review of higher performing schools, however, consistently demonstrates that schools facing even extreme budget challenges still make the availability of instructional coaches a priority.

- **Allocate the resources to provide all schools access to instructional coaches in core content areas.** Understanding that teachers often learn best from other teachers, leaders in higher performing systems carefully craft the position of instructional coach to ensure maximum impact. District leaders must ensure high-quality coaching across all schools. Have instructional coaches from all buildings meet centrally to develop the position. Clarify that instructional coaches will work directly with teachers – modeling and monitoring lessons, clarifying the curriculum, analyzing data and studying instructional strategies. It is very important to communicate through this position that every teacher in the district is to be a learner – coaches are not focusing only on teachers who are experiencing difficulty in the classroom. It will be important to explore all possibilities for creatively providing this type of support to teachers in WRSD.

- **Select instructional coaches with proven track records in student achievement gains.** As you begin to develop the role of the instructional coach, it is critical that the coaches have demonstrated success in their own classrooms. Make "a proven track record of student achievement gains" part of the job description. Establishing the position is important. Ensuring credibility with teachers relative to your selection of coaches is even more important.

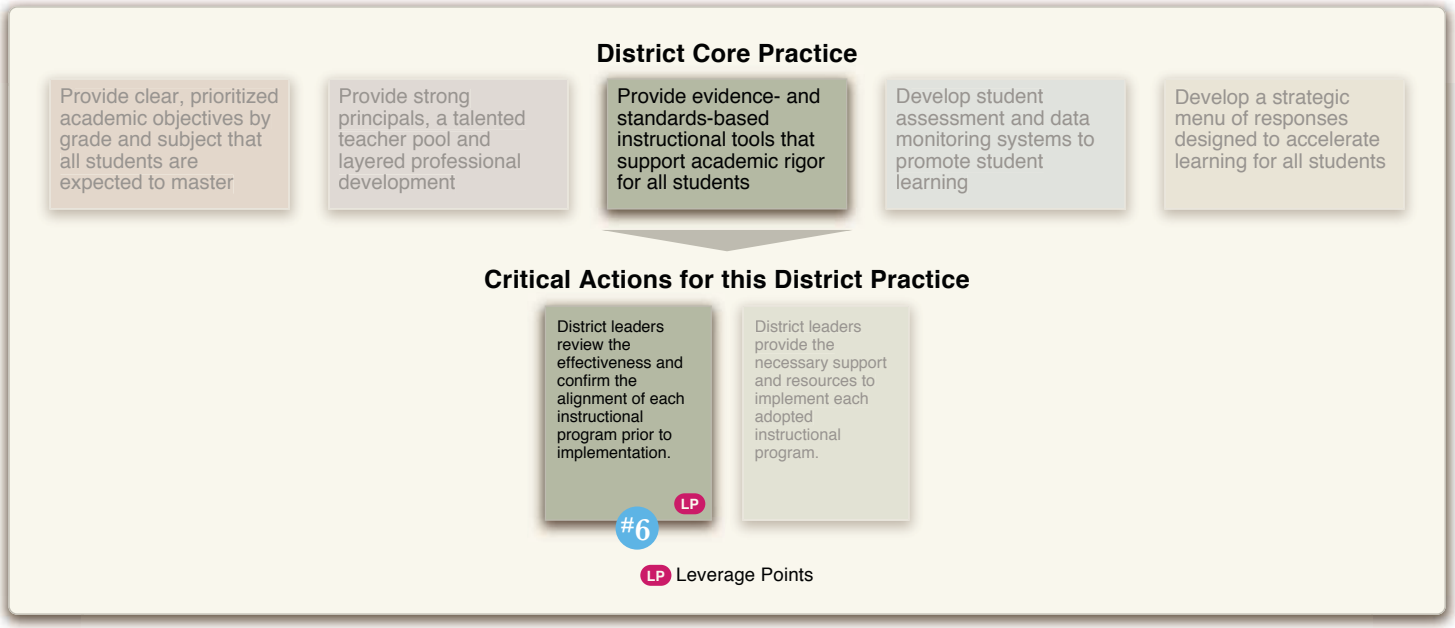
- **Develop a culture of adult learning in your district.** To begin, set the expectation that knowledge sharing is at the heart and soul of a learning community – and one of the primary tasks of the instructional coach. For a number of reasons (e.g., don't want to appear as if they are bragging, don't trust colleagues, feel their lessons are their own personal property), some leaders and teachers are reluctant to openly share lessons, strategies, etc. Any reluctance must be viewed and dealt with as an impediment to school improvement efforts. It may take time and concentrated effort, but eventually teachers will be energized by sharing openly and honestly in a collaborative team. Instructional coaches can be instrumental in building both skills and trust among teachers. They can also serve as important agents in transferring best practice across schools in your district.

Theme 3

Instructional Tools: Programs & Strategies

District Practice

Provide evidence- and standards-based instructional tools that support academic rigor for all students.



The next recommendation—*Recommendation 6*—deals with district practices relative to instructional programs and strategies. One of the two Critical Actions related to this practice at the district level have been categorized as *Leverage Points*.

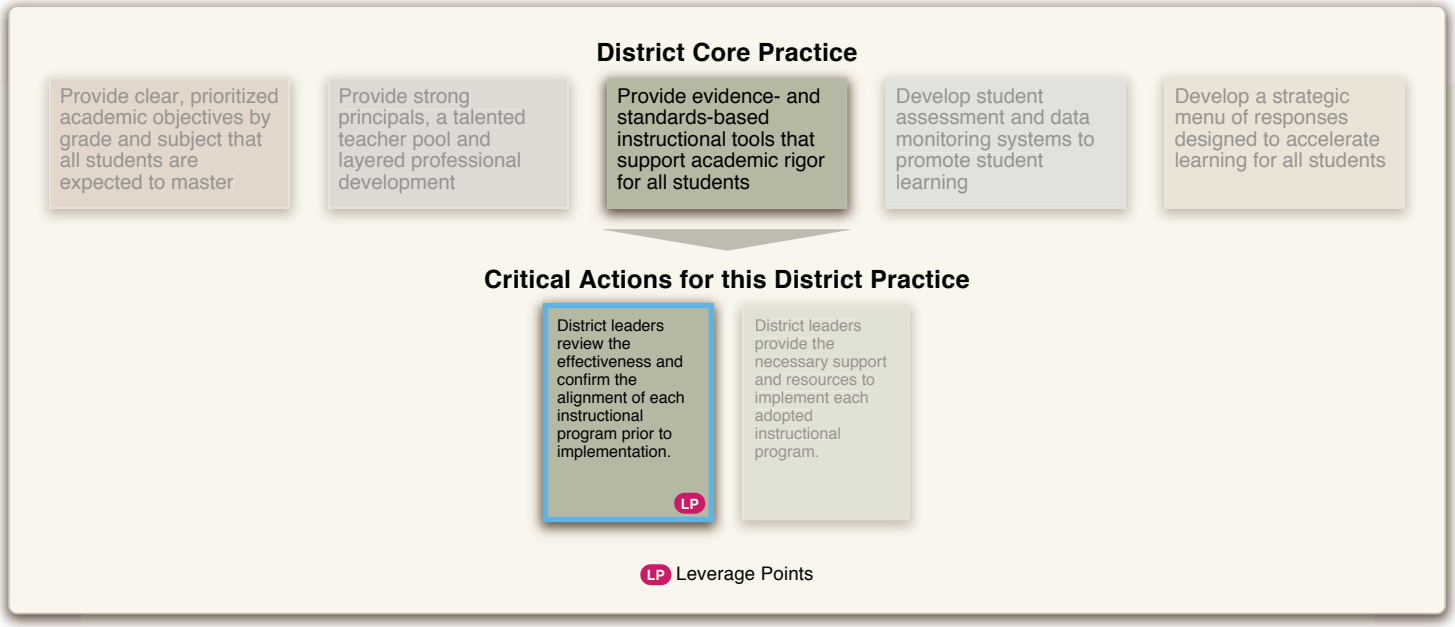
LP Leverage Points: Critical Action #6

Theme 3

Instructional Tools: Programs & Strategies

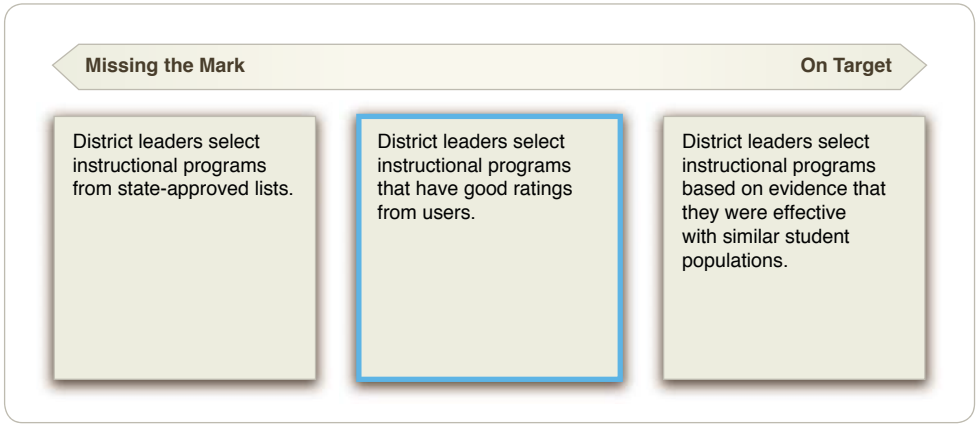
Critical Action

District leaders review the effectiveness and confirm the alignment of each instructional program prior to implementation.



Rubric #1

Review of Effectiveness

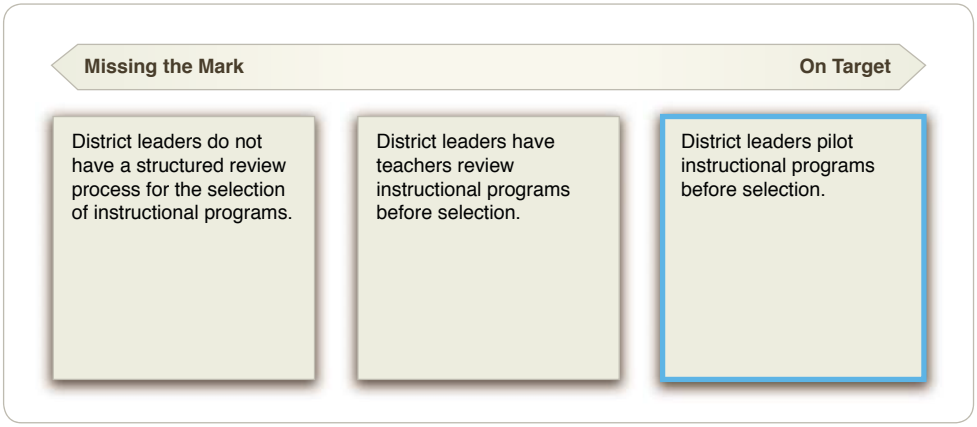


Findings: Leaders begin the textbook acquisition process by soliciting recommendations from the textbook committee for series that members would like to review. Publishing representatives give presentations of the series. The selection process also includes visits to schools using the potential programs. A sample visitation questionnaire submitted by district leaders included questions for teachers about different aspects of the program (e.g.,

ease of use, professional development support, vocabulary development, ease of lesson differentiation).

Rubric #2

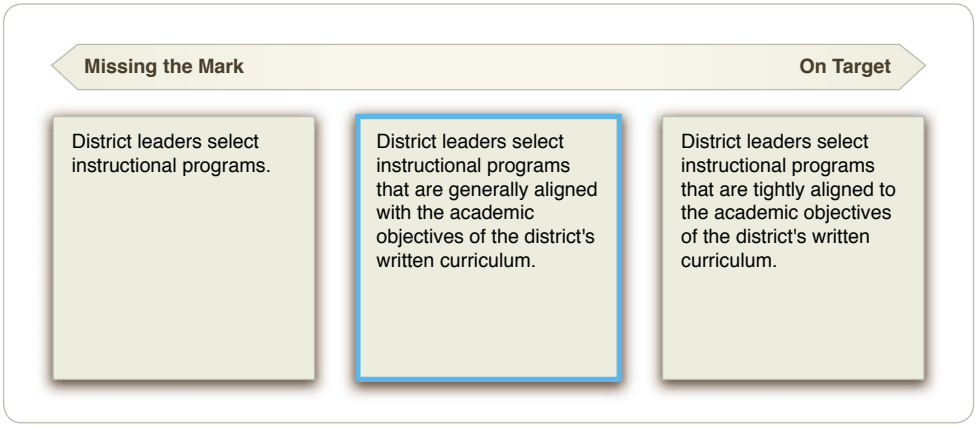
Review of Effectiveness



Findings: According to submitted documents, the top one or two textbook series under consideration are piloted by various grade level teachers for a period of no less than three months. After the pilot period, participating teachers complete a textbook adoption checklist that asks them to rate the series on its alignment to state standards and its alignment to various district standards and instructional expectations (e.g., supporting differentiation, being bias free, including a variety of assessment tools). However, educators indicated that, in some cases, the pilot period (while the program was used most of the year) actually occurred *after* its selection. Any piloting should occur *prior* to a purchase as significant as a textbook adoption, as indicated in the documented textbook adoption process.

Rubric #3

Confirmation of Alignment

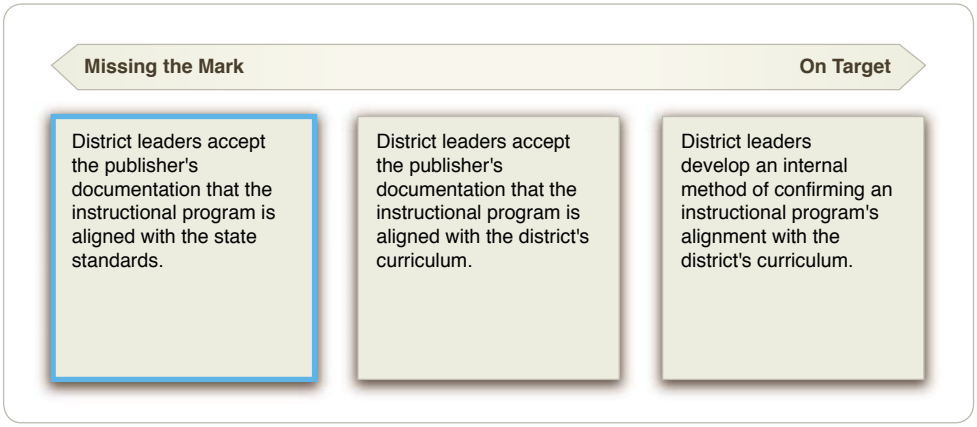


Findings: Following the pilot of a new textbook series, teachers complete a textbook adoption checklist which asks teachers to rate the degree to which the series is aligned with the district curriculum and standards. However, as noted in the *Leverage Points* Critical Actions 1-3, reviewers were unclear exactly what teachers would be considering the district curriculum and standards as they rated the programs. Also, the alignment to district

curriculum should be confirmed *before* the selection and piloting of a program, rather than as part of the pilot evaluation.

Rubric #4

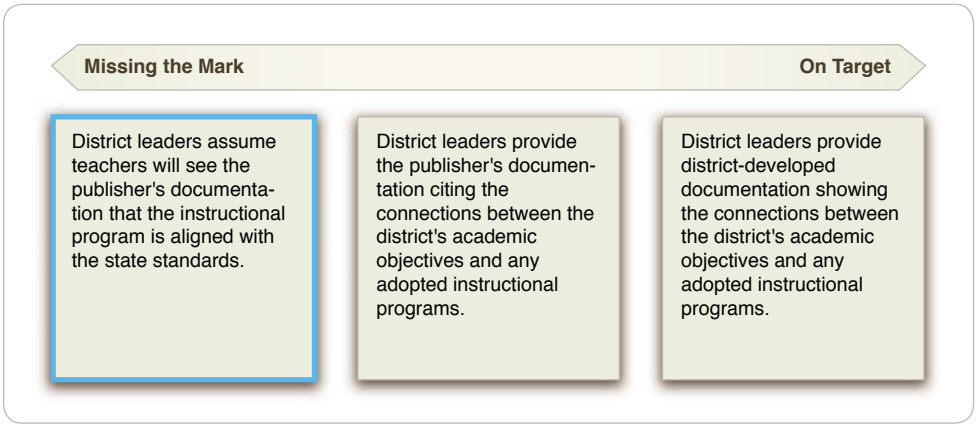
Confirmation of Alignment



Findings: The site visit questionnaire for teachers using a potential program includes a question about the connection of the potential program with the GLEs/GSEs. Site visitors ask teachers whether the program has any "missing pieces or holes." After an instructional program or textbooks are adopted in WRSD, a gap analysis specifically comparing the program to the state standards is completed during the second year of implementation. If gaps are identified, the district has a process in place to identify supplemental resources needed to fill the gaps.

Rubric #5

Confirmation of Alignment



Findings: As mentioned above, the gap analysis is completed *after* rather than *prior* to implementation, according to interviews and submitted documents. So, initially, teachers must assume the program's alignment based on the perceptions of the educators visited as part of the adoption process or the publisher's claims. Eventually, the gap analysis does accomplish this purpose, but it is occurring at an inappropriate point in the adoption process.

Recommendation #6

Critical Action

District leaders review the effectiveness and confirm the alignment of each instructional program prior to implementation.

- **Select textbooks or instructional programs based on evidence that they were effective with similar student populations.** Identify the highest performing schools in the grade/subject for which you are selecting new materials. You may choose to select schools serving students with similar demographic profiles to your schools. The site visits currently included in the process serve this purpose, only without necessarily having an anchor in demonstrated student achievement.

- **Continue to pilot instructional programs prior to selection.** Higher performing school leaders indicate that they may pilot one or two programs for a particular unit of study. After your standards and curriculum are set for the unit, ask representatives for any programs you are considering to indicate exactly which of their materials are aligned to that curriculum. This provides both a test of alignment and the pilot experience. Have several teachers use each of the proposed materials and give a common assessment at the end of the unit. The performance data can be one component of your evaluation of the programs. Actual use of the materials by teachers within your own district can provide powerful, informed feedback on the potential programs.

- **Select instructional programs that are tightly aligned with the academic objectives of the district's written curriculum.** It is imperative to establish a deep understanding on the part of all district leaders that instructional programs or materials are NOT the curriculum, but simply a means by which your written curriculum will be taught. This difference is critical. School leaders and teachers are often easily confused when district leaders use the term curriculum inaccurately. Make sure that your district leadership team communicates clearly and consistently on this important teaching-learning variable.

- **Study the publisher's documentation relative to the alignment of any new instructional programs or materials with your district's written curriculum.** At best, the publisher will typically document a program's alignment to the state standards. The clarity that you add to the state standards in your written curriculum in terms of specific academic objectives must also be reviewed. It is your responsibility to study this alignment to ensure that you are selecting resources that will help each teacher present the academic objectives at the level to which they are to be taught and learned. The current gap analysis process at WRSD occurs after adoption and implementation. This analysis must be completed before the materials are adopted in the district. As teachers use the program more extensively, they may suggest tweaks and revisions, but these adjustments should be relatively minor since the primary alignment work has already occurred.

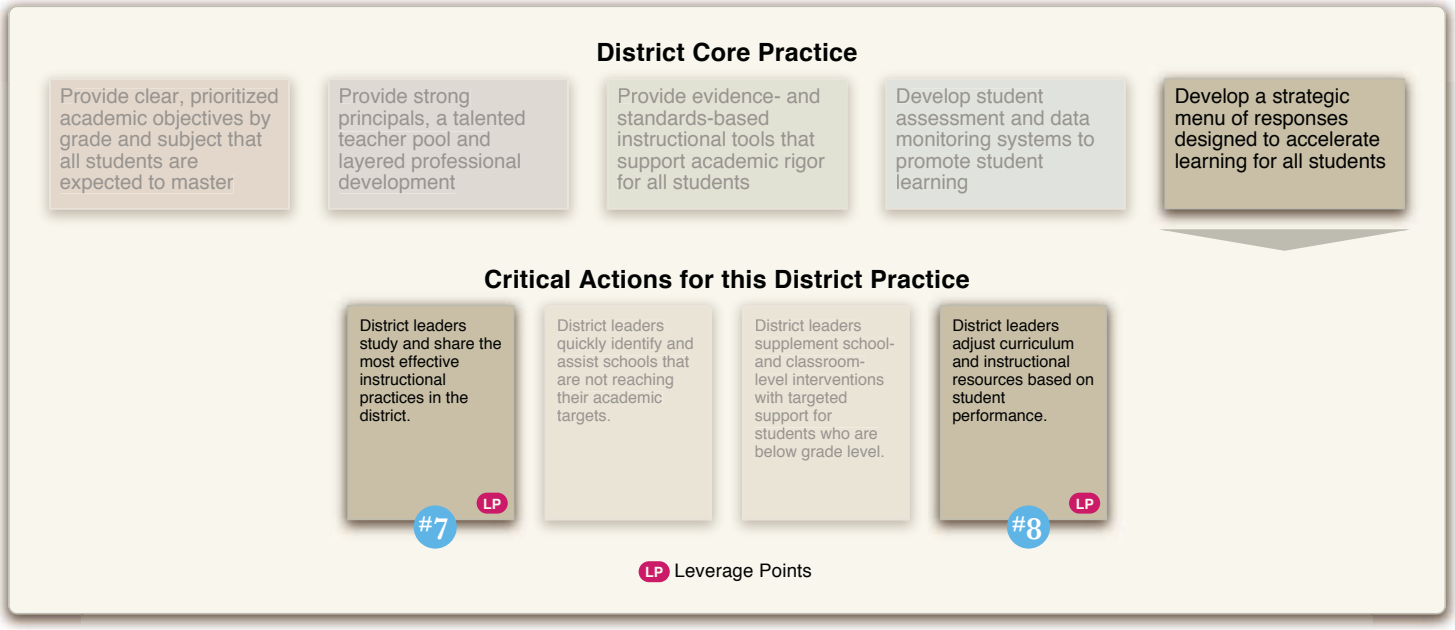
- **Provide teachers with documentation citing the connections between the district's academic objectives (in the written curriculum) and the new instructional materials.** It is absolutely not enough to simply indicate that the new materials are aligned; it is imperative to actually demonstrate and document this alignment. As you develop expertise in this area, it will be important for the associated curricular specialists/committee members in your district to create additional documentation that provides even greater detail for teachers. Exactly what knowledge and skills do students need to master and how can the instructional materials be best used to accomplish this? Sections of the new materials may need to be omitted and the order of presentation adjusted.

Theme 5

Recognition, Intervention, & Adjustment

District Practice

Develop a strategic menu of responses designed to accelerate learning for all students.



The final two recommendations—*Recommendation 7* and *Recommendation 8*—both deal with district practices relative to supplying pyramids of intervention that provide immediate and intense intervention at multiple levels when learning is interrupted. Two of the four Critical Actions related to this practice at the district level have been categorized as *Leverage Points*.

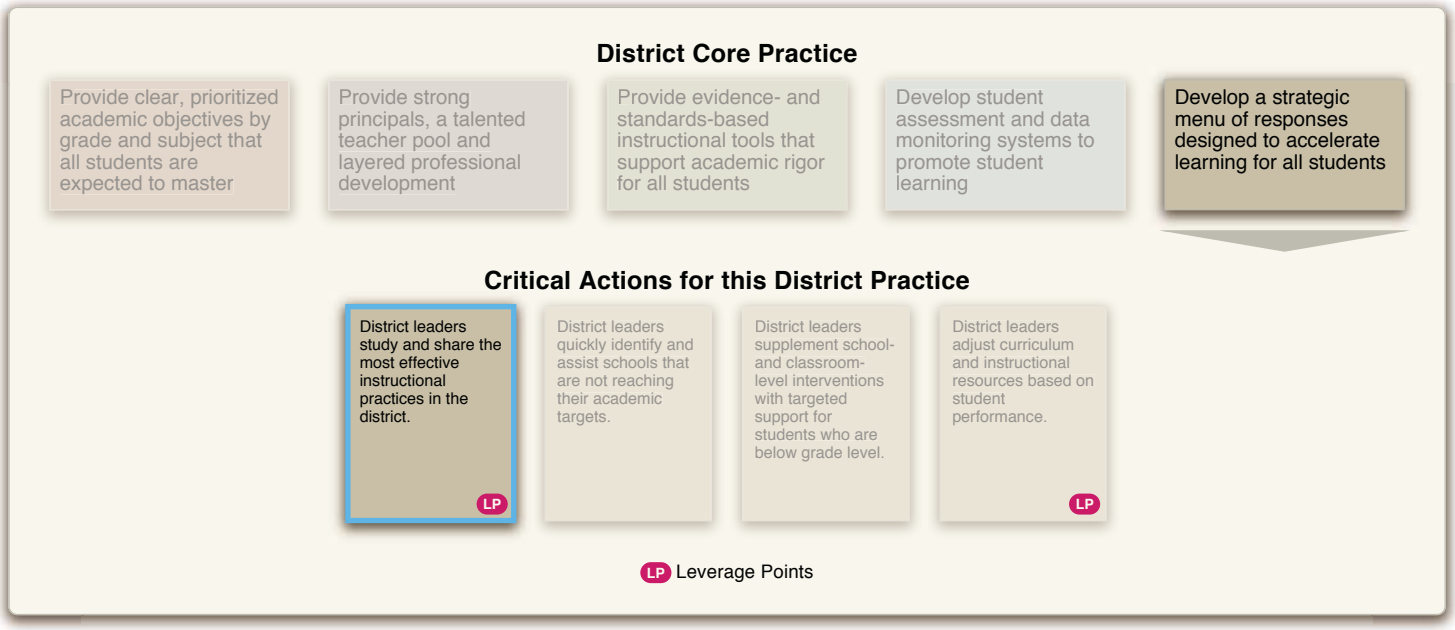
LP Leverage Points: Critical Action #7

Theme 5

Recognition, Intervention, & Adjustment

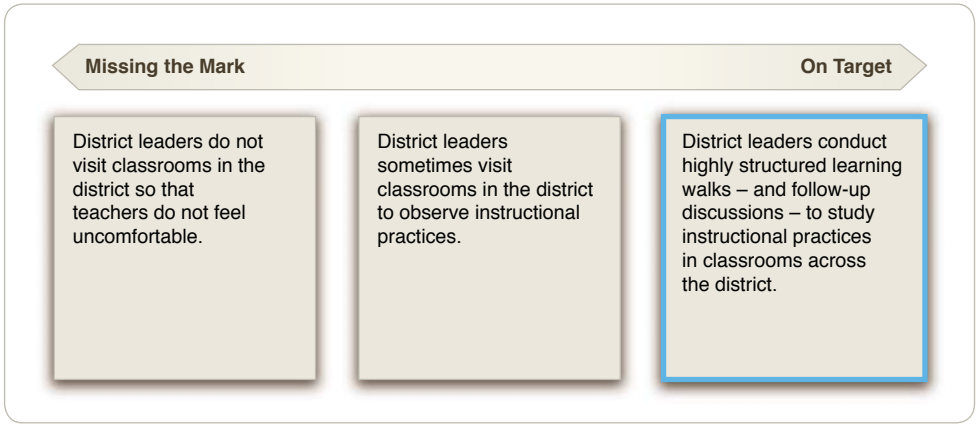
Critical Action

District leaders study and share the most effective instructional practices in the district.



Rubric #1

Study of Instructional Practice

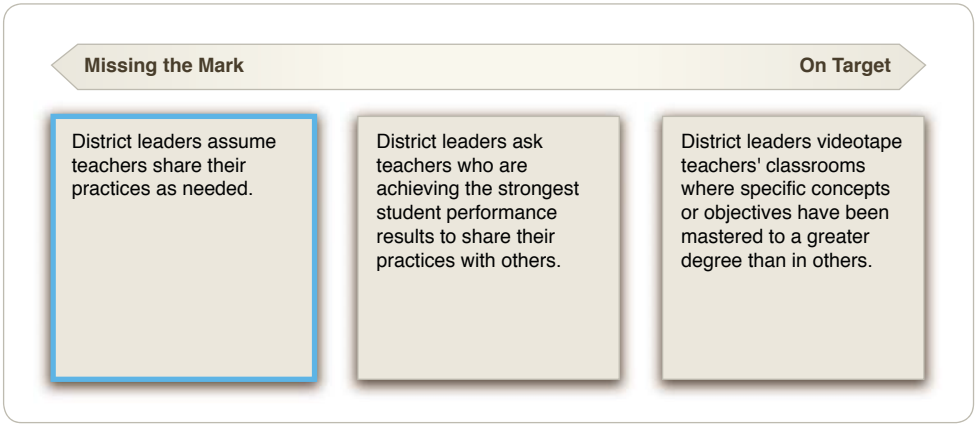


Findings: For three years, the district administrative team has been using the Teachscape® *Classroom Walkthrough* system to conduct structured classroom walkthroughs. The system offers a structured process, observation checklists, and the technology to capture and compile data across multiple classrooms to identify trends in instructional practice. The use of high-yield instructional strategies is a key component of the observation checklist. District leaders, including the superintendent, conduct walkthroughs regularly throughout the school

year, and all school leaders report conducting four to 12 walkthroughs per month. The reports generated through the checklists are used to discuss trends in instructional practice periodically throughout the year.

Rubric #2

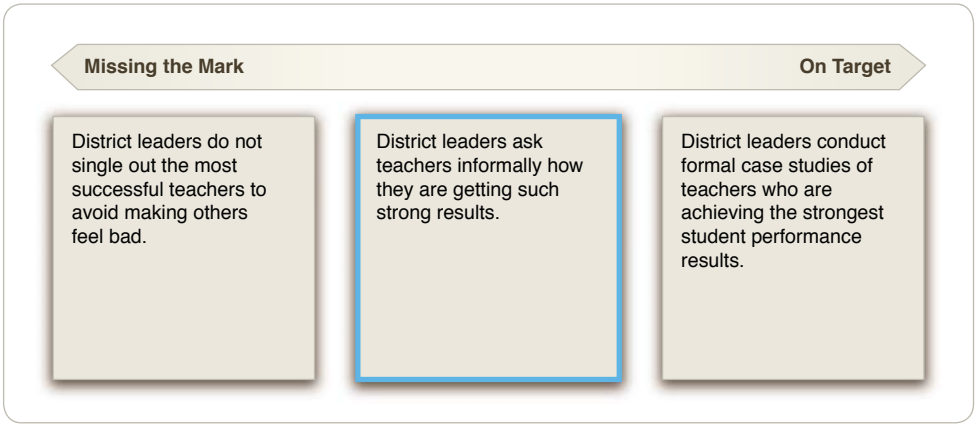
Study of Instructional Practice



Findings: District and school leaders recognize effective practice identified through *Classroom Walkthroughs* both informally through notes or comments to the teacher and formally at board or other district meetings. The new PLC structure provides some opportunity for collaborative teams to share their effective practices, and the proposed use of peer walkthroughs holds some promise. However, no formal process exists to capture effective practices to be shared and disseminated throughout the district. Videotaping teachers' classes to share more broadly (and link to the relevant standards in the eventual online curriculum) can be an effective way to disseminate effective practices across the district. The district's use of Flip® cameras during new teacher orientation suggests that the technology exists within the district to develop such a visual library of effective practice that is already occurring in classrooms throughout the district.

Rubric #3

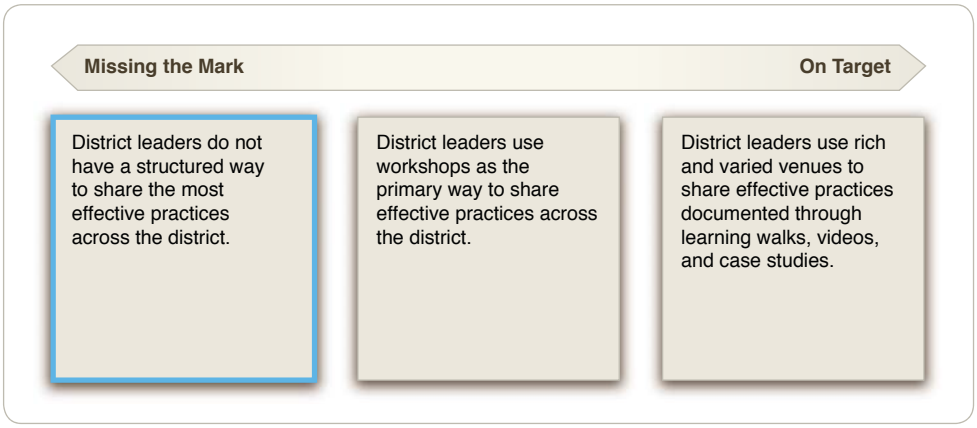
Study of Instructional Practice



Findings: District and school leaders indicate that they confer with teachers following *Classroom Walkthroughs* to discuss their observations, both positive and negative. Winnisquam Regional Middle School staff use a *Success Protocol* as a formal way to share effective practices during faculty meetings, but educators at other schools did not mention having any similar process in place.

Rubric #4

Promotion of Instructional Practice



Findings: Recognition of effective practices observed during the *Classroom Walkthroughs* occurs in a number of settings, including curriculum meetings, board meetings, annual meetings, and opening- and end-of-year school meetings. Also, district and school leaders share praise with teachers following an observation as a matter of course. However, a structured way to *transfer* best practice from one school to another was not described in any interviews or submitted documentation. For instance, fifth-grade teachers at one school effectively pretest students in mathematics in order to establish flexible instructional groups across teachers (a practice supported by NCEA research of higher performing schools), while fifth-grade teachers at the other elementary school reported trying flexible grouping with little success and ultimately abandoning the practice. Pockets of exceptionalism exist throughout the district; finding specific ways to identify and broaden those practices across the district should be a priority for WRSD leaders.

Recommendation #7

Critical Action

District leaders study and share the most effective instructional practices in the district.

- **Use the current structured walkthrough system to study the most effective instructional practices in the district.** It is incredibly important to ensure curricular fidelity prior to identifying any strategy or approach as *effective*. That is, effective instructional practices should only be documented relative to the particular standard that is being taught. Also, the criteria by which a particular lesson is deemed effective should be transparent and credible (e.g., demonstrated the highest student performance achievement on a given objective.) Praising or sharing instructional practices in the absence of either of the above more likely contributes to confusion than coherence. Recognition of effective practices should also be tightly connected to the curriculum and student performance.

- **Ensure that data collection through observations leads to structured follow-up conversations with school leaders and individual and/or teams of teachers.** Follow-up activities related to classroom observations provide a valuable opportunity to model the type of collaboration and professional learning community that leaders want to foster. Learning to have frank discussions about what worked and what didn't work is a hallmark of higher performing systems.

- **Systematize the taping of effective teaching strategies.** Using Flip® video cameras to capture effective teaching examples is an excellent strategy that can be used to promote knowledge sharing across the district. As with other practices noted in the *Leverage Points* category, this practice needs to be very intentionally developed to serve the designated purpose. For example, on what basis do district or school leaders determine that an observation is worthy of taping and sharing? The reason that one teacher or interaction is taped rather than another should be absolutely transparent to teachers, (i.e., outstanding student performance results). Become sophisticated at identifying teachers who are demonstrating outstanding student performance results in different ways. Perhaps one teacher is extremely effective with students who enter the classroom far below grade level. Perhaps another teacher finds effective means and strategies to challenge students who demonstrate early mastery. Using common assessments or district benchmarks, identify teachers who made the greatest gains on particular objectives. Your vehicle for identification must be easy for teachers to understand and highly credible. Many other aspects of this practice also need to be addressed (e.g., will there be a single conduit through which all videotaped segments are vetted, how will clips be posted and described, how long will clips be retained, etc.)

- **Consider conducting formal case studies of teachers who are achieving the strongest student performance results in your district.** This incredibly rich source of information remains vastly untapped in most districts. Begin to forge an annual history of the most effective teaching practices captured in case studies and shared with teachers—and possibly parents—across the district.

- **Structure the ways in which the most effective teaching practices are shared in the district.** Be very intentional about the different venues you will use. How can you provide the best base for knowledge sharing across your district? Have you established the culture that is open to this type of sharing? From forums on their websites to formal case studies, leaders in higher performing districts are skilled at creating the environment and the opportunity for teachers to share best practices.

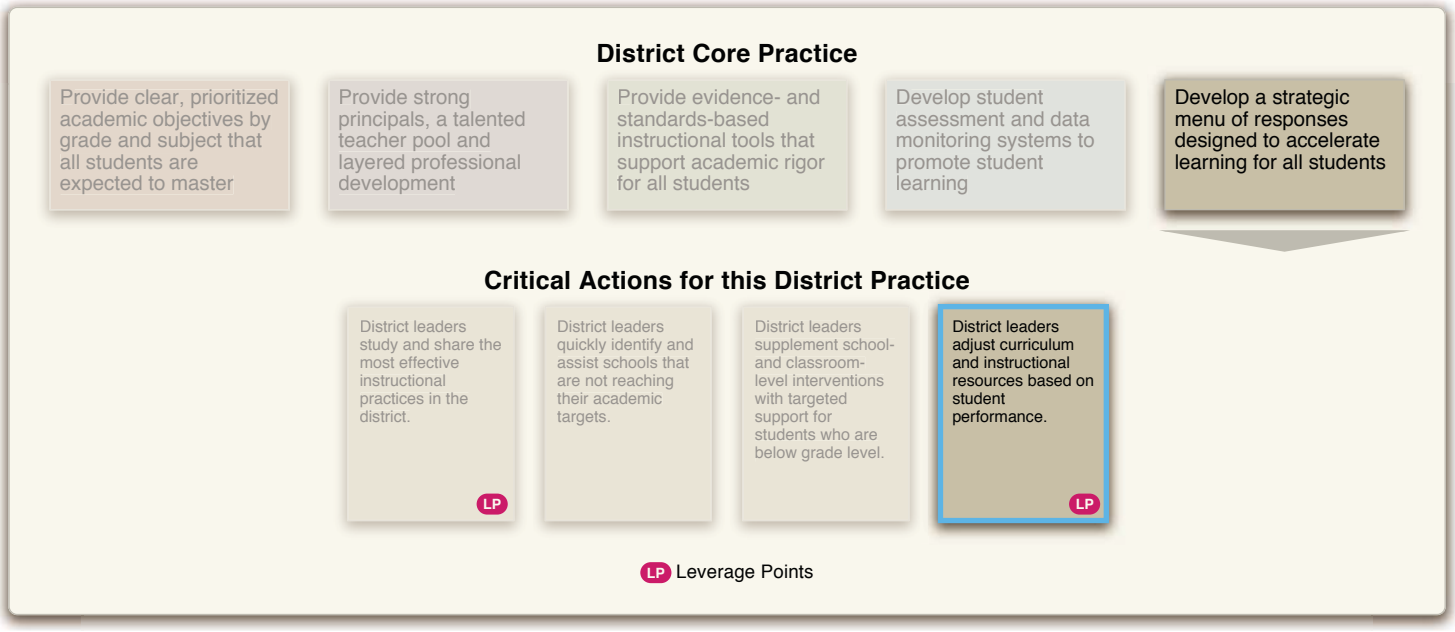
LP Leverage Points: Critical Action #8

Theme 5

Recognition, Intervention, & Adjustment

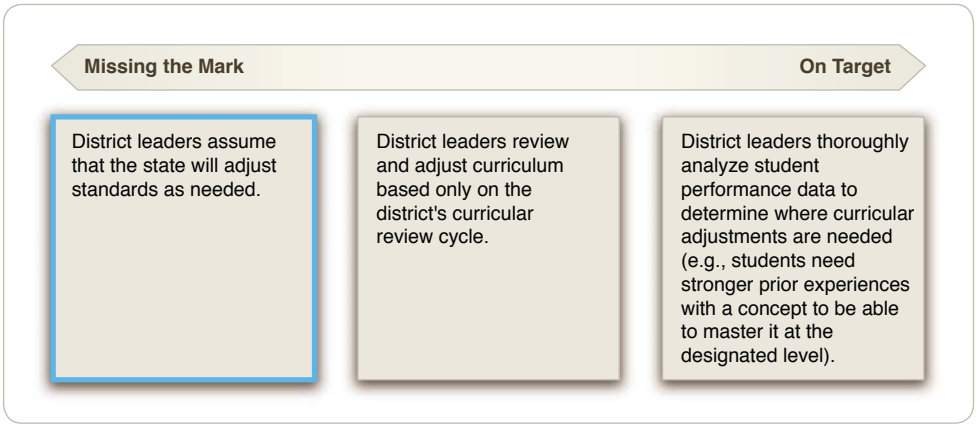
Critical Action

District leaders adjust curriculum and instructional resources based on student performance.



Rubric #1

Adjustments

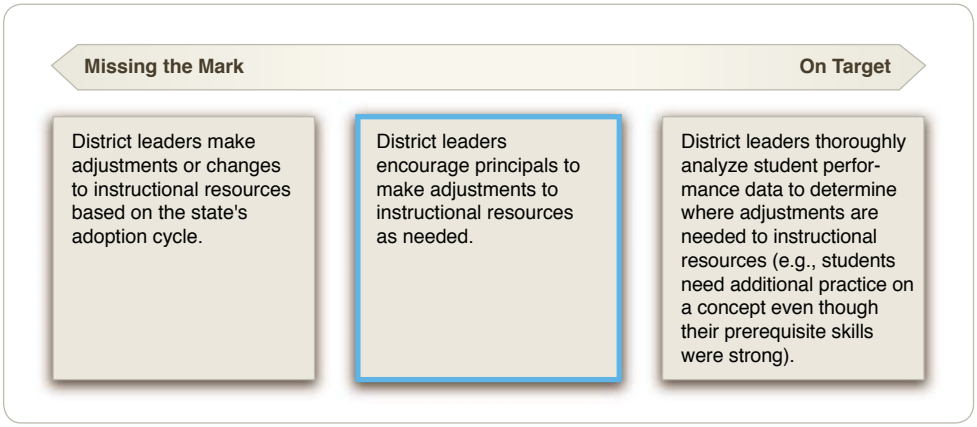


Findings: No documentation was submitted describing a curricular development or review cycle in place in WRSD. A number of shifts in standards are upcoming in New Hampshire, however. In interviews, many educators described that they were beginning to consider the relationship of the national Common Core standards with what they were teaching. School leaders, for instance, indicated that they realized that the national standards would

require greater rigor at earlier grades than the state Grade Level Expectations/Grade Span Expectations. At the high school level, teachers indicated that all the course competencies had been established, but there were questions about how the national standards would impact those course competencies. Reviewers commend WRSD educators for considering how the national standards will affect their teaching; however, without a clear curriculum in place and without a defined development and review cycle, educators do not seem to have any meaningful context to address those concerns.

Rubric #2

Adjustments



Findings: Since the gap analysis of instructional programs to the standards occurs after the adoption of an instructional program or textbook series, principals supplement the adoptions with other programs. For instance, to fill gaps identified in the *Trailblazers* program, one elementary school is supplementing with *Rocket Math* while another supplements with *Singapore Math*. Both programs are listed as supplementary on the list of adopted programs submitted by district leaders for review. As the district curriculum gets more firmly established, district leaders must become more proactive in identifying programmatic gaps and identifying appropriate supplementary materials prior to implementation.

Recommendation #8

Critical Action

District leaders adjust curriculum and instructional resources based on student performance.

- **Develop a clearly defined process—based primarily on student performance data—to make any curricular revisions in the district.** Obviously, the review and revision process cannot precede the establishment of a clearly aligned written curriculum (i.e., one must have an established curriculum before it can be revised). Reviewers had some concerns, however, that teachers were already discussing adaptations to curriculum or course competencies based on the anticipated national Common Core Standards. Until the WRSD's written curriculum clearly states what it is that each student will know and do by grade level, it would be impossible to know how any new national standards would impact the curriculum at any given level.

  Once the WRSD curriculum is clearly defined in each subject area, student performance data should be the primary indicator by which curricular adjustments are made. Leaders in higher performing districts indicate that these curricular reviews are ongoing. The old system of curricular review – cycles rotating subjects across years – is replaced by regular review using each benchmark and assessment to suggest refinements. Typically, designated teachers for each subject area meet in the summer to consider the data and feedback that has been collected throughout the year, and curricular adjustments and refinements are recommended. For example, if students across the district are performing poorly on a given objective, the curricular adjustments that may address the deficiency must be considered. Of course, it is critical to be certain that the written curriculum is anchored to a sufficiently rigorous endpoint (e.g., college and career readiness standards) prior to making any revisions. Without this anchor, curricular revision would be analogous to *rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic.*

- **Thoroughly analyze student performance data to determine when adjustments to instructional resources are needed.** District leaders need to be skilled at discerning whether learning problems should be addressed through curricular adjustments, instructional adjustments, or both. Like curricular review cycles, the adoption of instructional programs for a set number of years is only the very first step in the district's role in reviewing and adjusting instructional resources. In average- and low-performing school systems, it is often the only step that district leaders take. Leaders in higher performing school systems, however, see the selection of instructional materials as the signal for much more detailed work to begin – aligning the materials to the district's written curriculum, documenting this alignment for all teachers, supplementing the materials or programs when data suggest a need, etc.