Instructional Coherence:

A Key to High-Quality Learning Acceleration for All Students

June 2022

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Introduction

Systems are working hard to help students recover a staggering amount of unfinished learning: Tom Kane estimates that students in high-poverty districts that remained remote for most of the 2020-21 school year lost the equivalent of 22 weeks of instruction. At the same time, students are still recovering from the social and emotional effects of the pandemic. The depth of students' needs, combined with a massive one-time infusion of funding from federal and state governments, has created understandable pressure for education leaders to do something—anything—as quickly as possible.

But addressing such unprecedented academic challenges requires more than just urgency, or even a clear learning acceleration strategy. Systems must also emphasize instructional program coherence. This means every component of the student academic experience should be tightly aligned and designed to advance core grade-level instruction. But too often, we see well-intentioned learning acceleration efforts that lack this coherence—keeping students from seeing the full benefit of the extra support educators are working so hard to provide. Consider this example:

> *As an elementary principal plans for the upcoming school year, she looks at summative reading assessment data from the previous year and is disheartened: students, particularly her school's multilingual learners and Latinx students, are struggling in reading even more than she thought. She quickly purchases a supplemental online reading intervention program using federal ESSER funding and reworks her school's bell schedule so that students can use it every day, in addition to their core reading block and tutoring supports in reading.*
>
> *At the school level, this means all students have a core reading block and an intervention reading block every day, in addition to the English Language Development block for multilingual learners. But for students, these feel like completely disconnected periods: in core instruction, students might read and discuss a grade-level text about the Civil War; in intervention time, students read a below-grade-level text about the planets in our solar system; in tutoring, students read a fictional piece about the Holocaust.*
>
> *After this expensive purchase and all the effort to ensure that students have access to a reading intervention program, the principal is surprised to find that her students' reading performance is not improving any faster than it was before.*

If this sounds like what's happening in your schools—or even if you're not sure whether it's happening—this guide is for you. It is designed to help system leaders create coherent instructional programs that accelerate learning for all students. Building on the guidance we shared in Learning Acceleration for All, it includes questions to ask, specific examples from classrooms, and common pitfalls to avoid. By emphasizing instructional coherence, school systems can address the academic effects of COVID-19 and offer more equitable experience for students they've historically underserved.

The Importance of Instructional Coherence

In Learning Acceleration for All, we described the four planning phases that all systems should go through to deliver their learning acceleration strategy, engaging their key stakeholders throughout all of the phases.

Phase 1: Define your vision and goals. → Phase 2: Diagnose your current state. → Phase 3: Create your strategy. → Phase 4: Implement and continuously improve your strategy.

Throughout every phase, authentically engage and partner with students, caregivers, and the community.

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But many systems we've supported that have followed this planning process have still seen inequitable academic experiences and outcomes for students because of a lack of coherence in their instructional programs. Through that work, we realized the importance of tackling instructional program coherence in all phases of planning for learning acceleration—but especially phases 3 and 4 (creating and implementing the strategy).

What is Instructional Program Coherence?

Instructional program coherence means ensuring that every element of an instructional program and its strategies— from core instruction to interventions to extended time—works together to advance the same set of grade-level student experiences. It encourages educators and leaders to align their multitiered systems of support in ways that will accelerate learning for all students. Educators within instructionally coherent systems continually examine the alignment and coherence of their program and recognize that "when faced with incoherent activities, students are more likely to feel that they are targets of apparently random events and that they have less knowledge of what should be done to succeed."[1] Researchers have found that reform and intervention efforts that work to strengthen coherence are more likely to advance student achievement than those that work to improve schools "through the adoption of a wide variety of programs that are often uncoordinated or limited in scope or duration."[2]

Why Does Coherence Matter Right Now?

The COVID-19 pandemic has created fertile ground for incoherence in instructional programs—as well as an urgent need to address it. The need for learning acceleration, combined with an influx of federal and state funding, has led to a rise in well-intentioned efforts to adopt "magic bullet" interventions that may not be strategically coordinated.

Moreover, terms and timelines attached to these new funding sources often encourage educators to do something new or different right away, rather than work on aligning what is already in place. This disincentive to consider "going slow to go fast" can exacerbate many of the education system's worst inclinations and entrench the policies and practices that have led to persistent inequity.

What Does Instructional Program Coherence Look Like in Practice?

At the most basic level, coherent systems align supports in ways that advance core, grade-level instruction for all students. Coherent systems build academic and socioemotional supports that prepare the way for and extend grade- level learning. This means that students engage in instructional experiences that have a palpable link and notable relationship with each other and with core grade-level instruction.

For example, fifth-grade students in an instructionally coherent program would not be asked to read the Phantom Tollbooth[3] in core instruction, about poisonous rainforest frogs in their Tier 2 small group intervention, and about Nikola Tesla's alternating current system during high-dosage tutoring after school. Instead, a coherent program would offer instructional supports that prepare students for or extend core learning.

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[1] See *"Instructional Program Coherence: What It Is and Why It Should Guide School Improvement Policy"* especially, page 301.
[2] See *"Instructional Program Coherence: What It Is and Why It Should Guide School Improvement Policy"* especially, page 297.
[3] The Phantom Tollbooth *is a fantasy novel about a young boy named Milo who was always unsettled and unable to find purpose in life. One day, a mysterious tollbooth appears and transports him to a life of magic, adventure, and wonder.*

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Fifth graders in a coherent program would read the Phantom Tollbooth in core instruction and prepare for or extend that learning in their Tier 2 small group intervention by reading texts that help them investigate topics and questions in the book, such as why people explore or what makes a person a hero. High-dosage tutoring sessions would give students opportunities to improve their fluency by reading or rereading passages from Phantom Tollbooth or the other supplemental texts from that unit or text set, which focus on topics similar to those found in the book and give students the chance to build their knowledge and academic vocabulary.

In short, instructional coherence is about ensuring all the pieces of your academic program reinforce each other and the grade-level experiences you want students to have. Done right, it gives students the best chance to compound their learning gains each day and throughout the entire school year.

How to Prioritize Instructional Coherence in a Learning Acceleration Strategy

We know that systems across the country have begun planning for the coming year by examining the strengths, coherence, and effectiveness of their academic strategies. This examination often leads to additional small group instruction, planned interventions, new materials, summer bridge programs, high-impact tutoring efforts, new partnerships, and new faculty and staff positions.

System leaders and educators engaging in this level of thinking and planning should ensure they are **prioritizing coherence and alignment**. We suggest that you commit to ensuring that each student experiences an aligned, coherent academic program focused on providing the supports to master grade-level content and concepts in their core classes.

Our advice in the rest of this guide focuses on how to do that, in connection with the planning approach described in our Learning Acceleration for All guide. Specifically, we offer additional guidance for diagnosing your current state and planning your learning acceleration strategy (phases 2 and 3 from that guide).

Diagnose Your Current State

If you have followed the planning guidance in Learning Acceleration for All, you and your strategy team have completed Phase 1 and set your high-level vision and goals and are now ready to diagnose your current state.

Gathering and scrutinizing data is key to almost any academic strategy. Without data or a process for making sense of that data, systems develop strategy blindly and are left to merely hope they reach their intended goals. Data highlights strengths and exposes inefficiencies and disadvantages; "it reveals truths about our habits… and opens windows into opportunity."[4]

In Learning Acceleration for All, we shared a reflective tool that is a springboard to the diagnostic process. System and school leaders should start with this tool. Rather than tackling the system or school at large, begin by identifying one subject (literacy, mathematics, social studies, etc.) and one grade band (K-2, 3-5, etc.). As a team, review the reflective tool and consider each lever and where the selected subject and grade band falls on each lever's espoused versus enacted scale. Highlight the behaviors that are true for your system or school. Note the column that has the most highlighted behaviors; this is your system's current state for this lever pertaining to this subject and grade band only.[5]

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[4] See *"Why Data Matters: The Purpose and Values of Analytics-Led Decisions."* (2020)
[5] *Lever assessments or ranking may drastically differ from one content area or grade band/level to the next.*

Throughout the tool, we stress alignment and coherence. If you highlighted the following statements or found yourself between "plan" and "test" for these behaviors, you should prioritize alignment and coherence in creating your strategy (Phase 3).

Lever	Statement
Vision for the student experience	We do not have data systems aligned to our vision(s).
High-Quality Instructional Resources	Our assessment program is not aligned to our instructional materials, so we are unable to use data to effectively support all students.
	Students have incoherent experiences because or core and intervention materials [and instructional practices] are not aligned.
	Our definition of HQIM are narrowly focused on alignment to standards but does not articulate the academic, cultural, or linguistic needs of our students.
Educator Experience, Selection, Support, and Collaboration	Our vision for the educator experience or educator expectations do not align with our vision for the student experience.
	We do not have an educator capacity-building strategy. If we have one, it isn't coherently aligned to our vision for the student experience.

Diagnosing your current state does not end with this reflective exercise. While beneficial, it will not give you a complete picture of your system's or school's current state, it will only give you a sense of where you've made traction and where you need to dig in more.

You should not leave Phase 2 until each member of your leadership or strategic planning team can answer the following questions:

1. **Who are our students?** Know the demographics of our system's students, as well as the social and cultural assets your students bring to school every day.

2. **Which students in our school or system are being served?** Know which students have achieved strong outcomes and which we have underserved.

3. **What signals do our current vision, strategies, academic and developmental practices, policies, and results send** to our community, our students, their families, and their caregivers about our expectations for ourselves and the children we serve? Know how your system is perceived and experienced by your stakeholders. Know the implicit and explicit messages that your instructional program's design and execution sends to observers of and participants in your system.

4. **Which students, student families, and stakeholders in our system are valued?** Know who is listened to, learned from, and acknowledged in our system. Know who we see as assets and for whom our system has been designed.

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5. **How do students, student families, and stakeholders experience our instructional program?** Know the perceptions and perspectives of our community and community partners.

6. **What are our system's assets and deficits?** Know our strengths, barriers to success, and opportunities.

Create Your Strategy

Once you've diagnosed your current state, you're ready to create your strategy. This section discusses key steps you can take in building your learning acceleration strategy to ensure instructional program coherence.

Specify your content-specific visions for effectively supporting all students

A coherent instructional strategy begins with refining your vision for the student experience in the grade level and content area in which you're focused.

We have found that effective systems design multi-layered visions. Coherent programs start with a broad vision (co- created with stakeholders, as we describe in *Learning Acceleration for All*) that inspires and hangs on bulletin boards and banners in hallways. These visions often succinctly name who a system is or what the system will accomplish.

Many educators stop there, believing that that is enough. But to achieve instructional program coherence, you need to go a step further by articulating content- and grade band-specific visions that outline the system's expectations within each instructional content area. The vision at this level is not brief; it is detailed and is the system's opportunity to plainly define content-specific, high-quality instruction to its stakeholders responsible for providing or supporting instruction. Content-specific visions serve a dual purpose. The vision describes what must be true for students each day and the educator practices or enabling conditions that must be in place to materialize the desired student experience. The table below includes a brief example of this kind of vision.

K-2 Literacy Vision Mapping		
What	Vision Statement Part 1a: We support our students to build their curiosity about language through explicit and systematic foundational skills instruction that helps students secure necessary foundational reading skills (phonological awareness, print concepts, phonics, word recognition, and fluency).	
How	K-2 literacy students will experience…	Essential Practices and Enabling Conditions
	At least forty-five minutes of high-quality, evidence- based foundational skills instruction each day.	• Educators see foundational skills instructional time as sacred. • Educators know high-quality foundational skills instruction when they see it. • Educators cultivate inquisitiveness by attending to the social, emotional, and developmental building blocks of all students in their classroom and see student milestones in these areas as critical to developing student choice, voice, and agency. • Educators identify within lessons and for individual students the social, emotional, and relational skills needed for students to effectively navigate and have success in classroom instruction. • Educators build purposeful relationships with students to gain a holistic understanding of their strengths and needs and the factors that most contribute to how these characteristics manifest within the classroom. • Educators create classrooms and learning environments that foster physical, emotional, psychological and identity safety. • Educators (teachers and leaders) are knowledgeable about our vision for high-quality foundational skills instruction and recognize how our materials and resources support and reinforce that vision. • Educators know how to navigate and utilize our foundational skills resources to provide meaningful, accelerated learning experiences for all students. • Educators know how to gather and evaluate student data and articulate how close or how far students are away from our vision.

		• Educators collaboratively own our students' foundational literacy experience and outcomes and coordinate and align our work across our instructional and developmental supports to ensure that all students experience high-quality foundational skills instruction. • Educators know how to utilize a multilingual students' home • language to support English acquisition. • Educators know how to interpret data and identify if foundational skills interventions are necessary. • Educators know the purpose of interventions and how to effectively design and deploy foundational interventions when necessary. • We have high-quality systematic foundational skills materials that support effective explicit foundational skills instruction.
Why		Vision Statement Part 1b: Because we see foundational reading skills as a steppingstone that allows students to interact with and learn about the world through reading rich, knowledge-building texts on their grade level.

This table represents one segment of a system's content-specific vision, but it shows how having this level of specificity clarifies the work and your path forward.

This content-specific excerpt is relatively generic, but we know context matters. In diagnosing and understanding your own system, you may encounter data that forces you to rethink the student experience or the essential practices or enabling conditions. For example, a system might find that your multilingual student population has tripled in the last sixteen months. In this case, language acquisition supports and educator learning experiences supporting successful academic and cultural experiences for multilingual learners becomes more essential. Purposely monitoring student data to ensure that multilingual learners experience high-quality foundational skills instruction that is responsive and aligns to their language proficiency level, background knowledge, language, culture, and learning preferences becomes vital to the system's success.

Develop a Common Instructional Framework
A common instructional framework is where coherence truly begins. In this phase of the work, systems develop a framework that guides curricular and sociocultural decisions, teaching, assessments, leadership, policies, staffing, and the learning climate. Like the vision, the instructional framework combines specific expectations for student learning with content-specific, evidence-based strategies and materials to guide instruction and assessment.

Instructional frameworks are sometimes referred to as curriculum frameworks, lesson planning frameworks, or programs, but all of these are different:[6]

- Curriculum frameworks specify the content to be learned by describing what to teach, but not how instruction should be delivered.

- Lesson planning frameworks help educators prepare for the lesson. Teachers use these tools to organize their thinking or reflect on their instruction. While helpful, these frameworks do not rise to the level of an Instructional Framework because they usually help teachers fully engage with and explore the content. Still, they do not specify how teachers accomplish the critical components within the content.

- Programs provide educators with what to teach and how to teach. But the focus remains on implementing the program, not necessarily adapting instruction to meet the needs of all learners.

- Coherent instructional frameworks include the what and how of teaching and focus explicitly on meeting all learners' needs. It outlines how a system teaches and supports all learners. It is a unifying tool that describes the methods and expectations for how educators reach and teach students. It outlines systems of support, data management principles, instructional expectations, professional learning scopes and sequences, a system's instructional design approach, and educator collaboration assumptions. At its core is the recognition that each of these elements is influenced by the others.

More specifically, an instructional framework answers these questions:

- **Data Usage**: How do we use data to understand our system, what students experience, what they know, what they've yet to learn, and what they need?

- **Vision**: What must be true for students every day? What are our instructional and cultural expectations?

- **Learning**: How do we partner with educators (leaders and teachers) to grow their effectiveness?

- **Collaboration**: How do we work together as a system to ensure all students succeed?

- **Planning**: How do we design and implement our instructional program at the lesson, school, and system levels?

- **Support**: How do we support students, educators, and stakeholders in our system?

- **Coherence**: How do our strategies, methods, and expectations fit together and govern how we manage and monitor our vision?

These questions have guided instructional program and coherence research for more than twenty years, and they acted as a springboard for our learning acceleration guidance and the six essential levers we identified as part of that work.

Like the vision, an instructional framework has dual purposes. It provides a broad and narrow illustration of a system's structures and resources and highlights its instructional expectations. Answering each question is critical and requires thoughtful planning and execution. But having a clear vision for the student experience is an essential prerequisite because it fuels responses to the remaining questions.It's

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[6] *Adapted from Learning-Focused*

especially important for systems not to stop at their high- level vision, and instead take the time to lay out what that vision looks like in reality. The examples below illustrate how systems can approach this work.

Systems with coherent instructional programs often begin this stage by articulating their broad expectations for educator practice and the student experience. As an example, we have outlined a system's Tier 1, 2, and 3 expectations in the table below and described how each tier relates to the other:
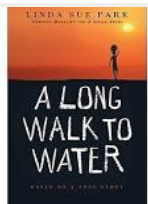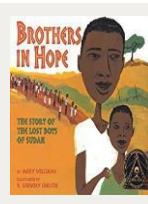
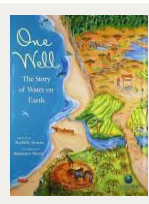| Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3
Educators create classrooms and learning environments that foster physical, emotional, psychological and identity safety.	Educators create learning environments that foster physical, emotional, psychological, and identity safety.	Educators create learning environments that foster physical, emotional, psychological, and identity safety.
Classrooms, lessons, and learning experiences include norms, routines, representations, and relationship building that are essential to success in core instruction	Lessons and learning experiences include norms, routines, representations, and relationship building that are essential to success in core instruction.	Lessons and learning experiences include norms, routines, representations, and relationship building that are essential to success in core instruction.
Lessons consistently anchor to grade-level content and college- and career-ready standards.	Lessons consistently anchor to critical prerequisite knowledge and skills for upcoming or current grade-level content standards.	Lessons consistently anchor to critical prerequisite knowledge, skills, or standards of upcoming or current grade-level content.
All students receive strong instruction rooted in evidence-based practices and supported by high-quality instructional materials.	All students receive core, Tier 1 instruction.	All students receive core, Tier 1 instruction.
All students receive "just-in-time" instruction along with needed scaffolds and differentiation to counteract unfinished learning and access grade-level concepts and materials.	Students in groups of 5-8 receive supplemental, "just-in-time" instruction that focuses on providing increased opportunities to practice and learn skills that support current or upcoming core instruction.	Students in groups of 1-3 receive supplemental, "just-in-time" instruction that is more explicitly focused on the recovery of high-priority, unfinished instructional concepts and skills and is provided for a longer duration of time.
Includes, when needed, appropriate, evidence-based English language development strategies for multilingual learners as well as effective scaffolds and accommodations for students with learning and thinking differences.	Instructors should rely heavily on evidence-based Tier 1 materials to guide Tier 2 instructional focus and support.	Instruction should support current or upcoming core instruction, and instructors should maintain strict fidelity to the evidence-based curriculum used to support Tier 3 instruction.
Led by the classroom instructor.	Increased intensity either through instructional practice, frequency, duration, group size, or instructor expertise.	Increased intensity either through instructional practice, frequency, duration, group size, or instructor expertise.
	Includes a time-bound treatment protocol (e.g., 8 to 15 weeks).	Includes a time-bound treatment protocol (e.g., 8 to 15 weeks).
	Led by an educator, paraprofessional, or supplemental staff.	Led by a highly specialized educator.

These broad instructional expectations represent what must always be true across the system, no matter the content area or grade level. Still, leaders and educators must clearly understand these expectations within the context of each subject area or grade level.

Now, imagine that you are a leader or educator in a system that chose EL Education Curriculum as its K-8 literacy curriculum. To create a coherent instructional program, you need to translate your broad instructional expectations (from above) into tangible literacy-specific examples for its faculty and staff, using your chosen curriculum. In this case, system leaders clarify their expected instructional, socioemotional, and developmental practices and showcase how the curricular materials support those practices.

For example, EL Education recognizes that academic and social-emotional development are intertwined and mutually reinforcing; its curriculum "encourages students to develop as effective learners and ethical people. Opportunities are integrated for students to contribute to a better world, putting their learning to use as active citizens, working for social justice, environmental stewardship, and healthy, equitable communities."[7] Likewise, system leaders know that EL Education, like other high-quality materials, has an anchor text and supplemental texts within each module or unit.

The example below, taken from EL Education's 7th Grade Module 1 Unit 1, includes the anchor text is *A Long Walk to Water*[8] and supplementary texts—a range of texts that cover the complex topics found in the book. These supplementary texts often have less complex quantitative measures or qualitative features than the anchor text,[9] offering students the opportunity to build knowledge about topics found in the anchor text and increase their academic vocabulary across multiple texts focused on the same topics. Leaders must describe how teachers can use this text set and other EL Education materials to support all learners and meet the expectation set forth in their instructional program.

Anchor Text	Supplemental Texts			
A Long Walk to Water	Nasreen's Secret School	Brothers in Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan	Lost Boy, Lost Girl	One Well: The Story of Water on Earth
Lexile: 720L	Lexile: 630L	Lexile: 610L	Lexile: 900	Lexile: 960

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[7] See EL Education What Sets the Curriculum Apart?
[8] A Long Walk to Water *weaves together the stories of two young people, Nya and Salva, both of whom are from southern Sudan.*
[9] See *"What is text complexity and why does it matter"* (2016) *to learn more about what the term "complex" really means in relation to reading materials.*

In this case, the system explains that Tier 1 instructors—anyone supporting the core instructional space—must:

Tier 1 Educators

- Read the anchor texts and any required supplemental texts for the module or unit.

- Review the Module-at-a-Glance or Unit and Module Overview(s)

- Identify the knowledge required to deeply understand the anchor text and its ideas.

- Identify (or determine) the norms, routines, representations, and relationships students may need to successfully navigate the lessons within this module and unit.

- Review the student reading data and identify which students may require additional tiered support(s) due to their current reading levels or abilities.

- Match students to either Tier 1, Tier 2, or Tier 3 systems of support based on their current reading ability and their knowledge of the topics covered in these texts (Sudan, water scarcity, civil war, migration, etc.).

- Engage students in a quick, informal curriculum-aligned diagnostic to determine their current understanding of key topics covered in the text.

  - For example, *A Long Walk to Water* follows the lives of two children, Nya and Salva, immediately following the end of the Second Sudanese Civil War. Educators might ask students what they know about some of the topics covered in the text [Africa, Sudan, civil war, water scarcity, refuge].

- Consider the language demands of the texts, the lesson objectives, and the daily or unit tasks.

- Adjust Tier 1 lesson(s) based on student understanding and learning needs.

- Study the embedded language supports[10] and strategies to identify appropriate language development practices for multilingual learners in your classroom.

- Read the module overview to appreciate the module's purpose and its connection to other content. The module overview can give educators insights into the prerequisite skills or knowledge students might need to tackle the unit content, tasks, or texts.

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[10] *See "Supporting English Language Learners"*

Similarly, system leaders must outline a similar set of expectations for Tier 2 and Tier 3 educators as well as those educators providing additional instructional or developmental supports.

Tier 2 & 3 Educators

- Review the data of students that would benefit from additional support(s). Since this is the beginning of the year, students receiving Tier 2 or Tier 3 support are most likely identified by using universal screening assessments at the beginning of the year, looking at the performance of all students on the previous year's high-stakes test, or reviewing the unit's diagnostic data. However, as the year progresses, Tier 2 and 3 educators must review unit unit-level diagnostic and progress monitoring data along with the Tier 1 educator to determine who would best benefit from additional support. Reviewing data at this frequency ensures that the same students do not remain in the same intervention groups, doing the same intervention work, for the duration of the year.

- Discuss student module- or unit-level diagnostic information with the Tier 1 teacher to understand what students already know and can do and where their additional supports should focus.

- Review module and unit materials with the Tier 1 teacher and other educators across all student support systems to determine each educator's role within the module or unit. Answer the question, "How will I support this student's acquisition of and success with this grade level content?"

- Identify (or determine) the norms, routines, representations, and relationships students may need to successfully navigate the lessons within this module and unit.

- Examine the supplemental materials within the core curriculum.

  o Select appropriate supplemental materials and tasks that cover the same topics or concepts as the core, Tier 1 instructional materials such that students get more practice or at-bats with grade-level concepts, topics, and prerequisites.

  o Use the suggested scaffolds and supports embedded within high-quality curricular materials to design Tier 2 and Tier 3 lessons anchored around accessing grade-level content and concepts.

English Language Development (ELD) Educators
• Review language proficiency data of all multilingual learners that have not attained advanced English language ability.   • Carefully group students by their language proficiency for the anticipated ELD instruction.   • Review current or future core instructional unit materials and determine the forms of English (e.g., vocabulary, syntax, morphology, functions, and conventions) that students will need to be explicitly taught to improve their access to and success with grade level instruction.   • Identify how and when using a student's home language will support the acquisition of prioritized   • academic and conversational English language terms, phrases, or terminology.   • Alongside core teachers, craft specific language objectives that support current or impending core instruction.   • Prepare instructional experiences that align to your prioritized language objectives and provide explicit, reductive and inductive instruction that emphasizes academic language as well as conversational language and incorporates opportunities to read, write, listen, and speak in ways that increase students' language proficiency and range of literacy skills.   • Incorporate interactive activities into your ELD plan and instruction that attend to: how students engage, how students with varying English proficiencies and skills will interact and engage with each other, and the language proficiencies and skills of the students themselves.

Tools like these are critically important to a system's success. But they are a means to the ends of alignment and coherence—ensuring that everyone in your system is rowing in the same direction so that every student has a coherent, effective experience throughout their school day and year.

A system's instructional framework must bring together the elements of a system's instructional program. It should illuminate the system's vision for the student experience by highlighting the practices and behaviors that matter most. And it should showcase how educators use assessments, curriculum, and the academic culture to advance student outcomes.

Developing a strong instructional framework and program is a deeply academic exercise. But systems with strongly coherent instructional programs bring the same level of focus to sociocultural supports. They recognize the relationship between learning and socioemotional development. They also know that learning and progress is limited when students (and adults) do not feel a sense of trust in, safety around, and belonging with those tasked with supporting them.

As part of your planning, it's crucial to reflect on and design socioemotional supports, policies, and practices that aid student development. It's just as important to acknowledge that adults must model the behaviors expected of students—and spend extensive time building, monitoring, and supporting the adult or staff culture within your system.

Assess alignment and coherence from the student perspective

Once you've developed an instructional framework, you can use it to determine the alignment and coherence of your instructional program.

Quite often, when systems and schools design their instructional program, they think about one component of their program at a time. They spend time thinking through core instruction, then move on to Tier 2 and 3 instruction and its programs, and then focus on English Language development, and so on. This siloed approach leads to discrete programs, isolated departments and division heads, and illogical instructional experiences for students. Systems might look for alignment within one component—core instruction aligns and makes sense as a unit, for example—without examining the vertical or horizontal alignment within their system. They do not consider whether core instruction logically connects to and is academically and developmentally supported by Tier 2 instruction and vice versa.

Beyond vertical and horizontal alignment and coherence within grades, systems seldom consider alignment and coherence across grades. We frequently see eighth-grade students rereading texts covered in sixth grade or educators modifying high-quality instructional materials without thinking about the impact of those modifications on future grades. We often see individual students who need additional support to engage in grade-level math moving from grade-level content in core instruction to completely disconnected content in their intervention or tutoring blocks—which creates confusion for them about how individual math skills and concepts make up a larger mathematics story.

Along with siloed design, previous instructional program work did not center students in alignment and coherence conversations. Systems might ask if programmatic coherence makes sense to educators or leaders (the adults in the room) without giving student perspectives, experiences, and outcomes equal weight. Actual coherence demands placing student experiences at the center of the work.

This requires more than just looking at system-wide data. Leaders and educators must examine the experiences of individual students or student subgroups to have a complete picture of the student experience. During this phase of the process, systems should create student mental models or case studies, and then engage in exercises where they ask themselves the following questions alongside the sample student profiles they've developed:

Coherence in Action: Louisiana Department of Education

The Louisiana Department of Education applied the integrated thinking we describe here to its learning acceleration efforts and high-impact tutoring. The state connected its tutoring strategy and resources to its Tier 1 or high-quality core instructional materials. Louisiana's Department of Education wrote that their tutoring resources are designed as "proactive supports to upcoming classroom content in order to ensure students' readiness for grade-level instruction." Louisiana's efforts in this space are a textbook example of a system attempting to create instructional program coherence. Louisiana laid out its expectations for tutors and explained how these educators should use Tier 1 materials in the tutoring space. Tutoring materials are connected to the high-quality instructional materials (in this case, Great Minds Eureka Math) that students experience in their core instruction every day. Furthermore, Louisiana provides specific broad and narrow examples to its educators. This level of thoughtful planning, alignment, and clarity fosters coherence for students and collaborative opportunities for educators.

Questions	Consider
Ask	**Examine**
What are we trying to do?	Review program vision and goals.
How will we get there?	Study program strategies, methods, and expectations.
What programs, structures, supports, and materials did this student experience in prior grades or the previous year?	Imagine what this student's transcript might include.
What programs, structures, supports, and materials would this student experience in their current grade?	Think about what programs, structures, and supports this student might receive.
What will this student's day, week, or month include?	Create a sample student plan based on the designed Instructional Framework and the sample student profile.
How did we determine which programs, structures, supports, and materials would best align with this student's academic and sociocultural needs?	Revisit and discuss the data used to make that determination. Was it easy to locate? Was the process for determining supports fair and unbiased? Consider which educators and stakeholders are in the room when decisions are made about the student's support. Examine their proximity to the student and their relationship with the child. Reflect on the identities and points of privilege of your decision-making body. Consider how these characteristics can act as an asset in this group's advocacy for this student and how these same individualities can create blind spots and be a barrier to your support.
What perspectives and perceptions have we gauged or gained about this student?	Look at student, parent, and educator surveys and feedback. Consider which stakeholders would be in the room when decisions are made about this student's support. Think about the air-time that each stakeholder receive and how the data, anecdote, and feedback is considered—the weight it carries.
Who (leader, teachers, etc.) would support and monitor this student's experience?	Review staff lists and school feeder patterns and identify the profile of leader, educator, and school this child would be in each day. Examine the outcomes that these institutions and individuals have produced in the past. Consider what this previous track record of success or failure might mean for this particular child.
Who (leaders, teachers, etc.) acts if/when the student's experience is ineffectual?	Examine the Instructional Framework's planned interventions alongside staff lists and profiles. Identify the decision-making body as well as who will act as the final decision-maker. Again, consider their proximity to the student, their identity, biases, and archetypes for success.

![TNTP logo]

What resources and supports do those individuals have?	Discuss planned intervention supports and resources and their alignments to the student's assets and needs. Review how you plan to prepare and support your stakeholders and educators—the coaching, learning, feedback, and modeling they will receive.
Would discrete success in each program, structure, or support lead to the overall outcomes that this student needs?	Revisit the goals set within the Instructional Framework. Consider whether achieving those goals changes the trajectory of this child's academic and developmental experiences.[11]

Leaders and educators should be sure to prioritize case studies that take into account demographic data and profiles in their system. This means centering students within and outside dominant identity groups related to race, economic status, language, learning and thinking differences, gender, immigration status, and sexuality.

While we've primarily focused on academic programming, instructional program design should focus on the whole child and speak to the instructional and sociocultural needs of all students. Therefore, case studies should attend to the alignment and coherence of the full instructional program—its academic and sociocultural supports.

Once leaders and educators have gone through this process, they should identify, rethink, and redesign the aspects of their instructional program that impede alignment or coherence at the student level.

Align your talent and resources

Before leaving this step, systems should evaluate their instructional program against their current talent and resource capacity. Specifically, systems should consider if they have the staff and means to achieve their programmatic vision. Here, systems might ask:

- Do we have the faculty and staff needed to achieve this vision? Answering this question requires that systems reflect on the number of staff needed and the expertise of that staff.

- Can we hire for, train for, or build partnerships in areas with gaps? In this alignment exercise, systems may identify gaps in their current staff's capacity. Before eliminating a programmatic structure, system leaders might consider whether there is an opportunity to build staff skills (i.e., professional learning experiences), hire new or more staff, or partner with an outside group.

- Do we have the resources needed to achieve this vision? As system's develop instructional programs, leaders should consider but not be limited by its current resources. At the end of the design process, the system should revisit its plan and determine whether it has the resources needed to meet its prescribed vision. Here, we define resources as materials, personnel, time, and short- and long-term capital [monetary and political]. As with staff, leaders should call out any resource gaps they find and determine whether these gaps can be effectively filled, in what ways, and on what timeline.

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[11] *Systems often set incremental targets—five to ten percentage points of change in their proficiency and growth targets. Goals like these are fine in a vacuum. But when examined against actual student data they may fall short of making an impactful difference. A child growing by 10% on a standard interim assessment may still fall two grade levels behind. Therefore, goals and metrics must be feasible (what is typically achieved), but they must also be ambitious and match the moment and the need (what metrics best position this student for long-term success).*

This step can help systems identify short- and long-term programmatic strategies. For example, rather than completely removing a component from its instructional program, systems might opt to shift a component to their long-term priorities or strategies and build toward that program goal over time.

After completing this step, return to your original design and identify, rethink, and revise areas where current capacity and resources do not align or remain incoherent.

Narrow your priorities and craft action plan

At this point, you've created the conditions for alignment and coherence. You have a broad vision; you know your system; you've articulated a deeper vision for students at the subject matter level; and you've described what that means for your entire instructional program. Now, you'll need to narrow your focus by identifying the highest impact, most urgent areas that your system will focus on across the year to:

- Increase access to and success with the four resources (strong instruction, grade appropriate assignments, deep engagement, and high expectations)

- Ensure all students experience a highly aligned, coherent instructional program that meets their academic and developmental needs and accelerates their learning

Once you have these priorities, you can build your action plan. Let's return to the vision mapping example we shared above. Suppose the system in that example selected four specific practices and enabling conditions it wants to prioritize in the year ahead:

- Educators see foundational skills instructional time as sacred.

- Educators know high-quality foundational skills instruction when they see it.

- Educators are knowledgeable about our vision for high-quality foundational skills instruction and recognize how our materials and resources support and reinforce that vision.

- Educators know how to navigate and use our foundational skills resources to provide meaningful, accelerated learning experiences for all students.

Crafting a plan of action means outlining critical actions by thinking through the following logic statement:

- If our system needs X (the content specific vision) to be true for student. And we expect educators to engage in X (educator practices and conditions), then what must our X (coaches, instructional leadership teams, principals, and center-office teams) do.

This final list of coach, leadership team, principal, or central office team practices is the foundation of your action plan.

Prepare your people

Before moving to Phase 4 in the Learning Acceleration for All guide, (implement and continuously improve your strategy), systems must ready stakeholders for the work ahead. This means designing coherently aligned learning and support experiences that continue to invest your stakeholders and staff in the vision and goals and prepare them to effectively execute their key roles and responsibilities.

Common Barriers to Coherence

Designing a coherent instructional program is important, complex work that requires much more time than a single long meeting or retreat—not just time for planning, but also time to build staff skill at all levels of your system to work toward the coherence you've envisioned.

And beyond the planning process we describe above, achieving coherence requires eliminating common barriers that make it (and subsequently learning acceleration) nearly impossible. These include:

- **Substandard instructional materials**. Designing a coherent instructional program becomes nearly impossible if systems or schools have low-quality instructional materials.

- **High materials variability across instructional supports and grade levels**. Designing a coherent instructional program becomes increasingly challenging if systems or schools use different vendor- or district-created materials within and across grades. Specifically, when systems select one set of curricular materials for K-3 classrooms and a set of materials from a different vendor for 3-5 classrooms for the same subject, they are severely reducing their ability to achieve coherence. Coherence is similarly hard to achieve when systems select one set of materials for core instruction, a different set of materials for Tier 2 instruction, and yet another set of materials for English Language Development without helping educators connect and bridge the materials.

  - Note: Many of the highest-quality materials on the market today do not do enough to support instructional coherence. Specifically, they do not include enough high-quality materials and guidance to support multiple tiers of instruction, English Language Development, and multilingual learners.

- **Federal, state, and local funding, oversight, and policies that unintentionally encourage incoherence**. Instructional improvement models and expectations often inadvertently cue systems and schools to design and adopt incoherent programs, as systems are asked to prioritize speed over coherence in spending the funds.

Conclusion

We hope the guidance we've shared here is helpful in supporting educators and the broader education community to prioritize instructional program coherence. For much more guidance on designing and implementing a learning acceleration strategy in your schools, read our Learning Acceleration for All guide.

If you have additional questions or need additional support leading this work in your system, get in touch with us by emailing info@tntp.org.

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