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Introduction

The No Child Left Behind Act presents a unique challenge for educators. It requires that all schools deliver what public education promised when it was founded more than a century ago: education for all. But is it truly possible for schools to ensure that all students learn, and learn well, those things they are expected to master? For years, educators have struggled to design such a system; and yet, no matter how hard we tried, there were always students we were not able to reach, students who slipped through the cracks. Much to our dismay, many of these students continued to be passed through the system year after year, falling farther and farther behind.

Because of this intractable failure, a law now requires us to not only teach, but also to reach every student and ensure that he or she learns. With so many unsuccessful reform efforts coming and going in our schools, many principals and teachers have become disillusioned. It can be painful to consider making yet another change. Despite all the programs and innovations designed to fix our schools and improve student achievement, there is one basic question that has often gone unasked: Are students actually being *taught* those things we expect them to learn?

According to one study, more than 58% of the teachers surveyed indicated they did not feel they received much guidance about what to teach from state standards, and more than half of the teachers surveyed said that state and school district guidelines have not led them to expect more from their students (“New Standards,” 2000).

TOTAL INSTRUCTIONAL ALIGNMENT

By design, standards are often stated in vague or broad terms, leaving them open to a wide range of individual interpretations. Although many states have taken further steps to define specific learning expectations through the development of benchmarks and specific grade-level or course content, these too are often ambiguous, repetitious, and up to the individual interpretation of teachers. As a result, each year millions of students sit down to grueling high-stakes tests that can determine their fate in school—and their school's fate as well—with no real assurance that they have been taught the material on which they are being assessed.

It is helpful to see this problem from a student's perspective. Let us pretend I am the teacher and you are the student. I have chosen a short lesson to teach you some important information about dogs. I have decided to focus on a specific breed of dog, the Labrador retriever, because I have some knowledge and experience from having owned one for many years.

The Dog Lesson

Now, I realize some of you may already have had some experience with Labrador retrievers; they are a very popular breed of dog. However, if you have never owned one and you are considering keeping a Labrador retriever as a pet, there are some important things to keep in mind before you make your final decision.

1. Labrador Retrievers come in three basic colors: black, yellow, and chocolate. These colors are always solid. Therefore, if you encounter a big black dog that closely resembles a Labrador retriever, but has a white spot on his chest, you will know it is not a purebred dog.
2. Labrador retrievers may start out as cute little puppies, but they quickly grow up into great big dogs. Females can weigh between 65 and 75 pounds, and males can weigh 75 to 85 pounds. Some Labrador retrievers have been known to

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weigh more than 100 pounds! Owning a dog this size is much like owning a small horse. There are many things to consider if you are interested in owning a large dog. Do you have the space? Do you have the time? Do you have a lot of valuable items on low coffee tables?

3. At dog shows, Labrador retrievers are in the sporting class division. They have all the characteristics of active hunting dogs: They are excellent swimmers, retrieve effortlessly, have keen senses and great strength, and are very intelligent. They are also obedient. They are very aware of their surroundings, and their keen senses make them an excellent choice as guide dogs and detectors of illegal drugs. Because they are so obedient, you will see as many Labrador retrievers in the obedience ring at dog shows as you will in the conformation ring.
4. Most Labrador retrievers have very sweet dispositions. Their nature is to please people, and they do not discriminate. They love everyone! So, if you want a guard dog for protection, a Labrador retriever might not be your first choice. At best, a Labrador retriever might lick an intruder to death!

The Dog Test

Now that you have experienced the dog lesson, it is time to take the dog test. How well will you do based on what you have learned?

(continued)

TOTAL INSTRUCTIONAL ALIGNMENT

Given these three things, it is unreasonable for us to expect all students to be successful in a traditional educational system designed after the factory model. The Total Instructional Alignment process first requires a close examination of the system—specifically, current classroom and team structures and the role of leadership in supporting change at the school and district levels.

Classroom Structures

The factory model of education spawned numerous classroom structures that are not compatible with the goal of learning for all: time as a constant, placement by age, and traditional grading procedures. These must be addressed if we are to truly align the system.

Time Versus Learning as a Constant

If we are to successfully teach all students, time must be viewed as a variable and learning as a constant. Figure 2.1 helps to visualize this idea.

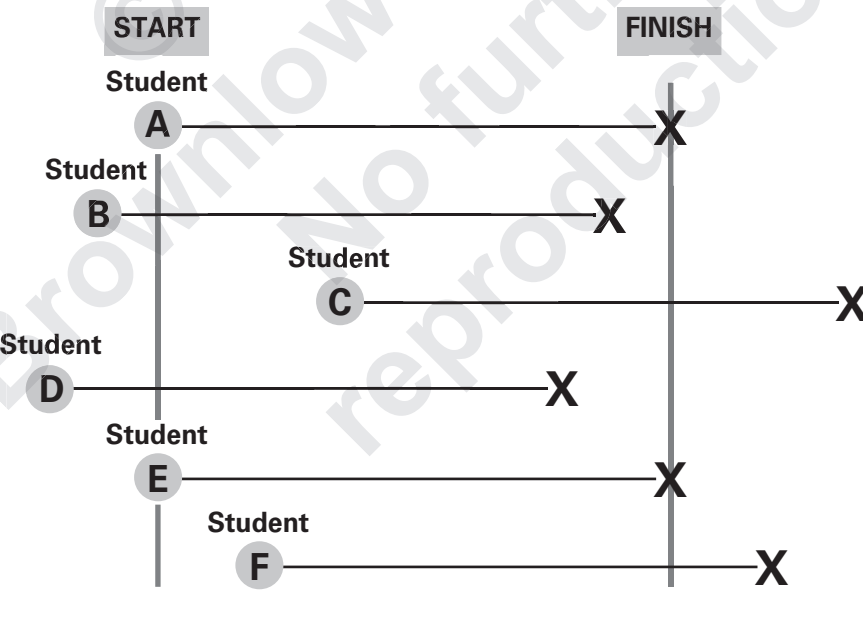


Figure 2.1: The Academic Race