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Instructional Alignment under No Child Left Behind

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The alignment of instruction with the content of standards and assessments is the key mediating variable separating the policy of standards-based reform (SBR) from the outcome of improved student achievement. Few studies have investigated SBR's effects on instructional alignment, and most have serious methodological limitations. This research uses content analyses of state standards and assessments and survey data on more than 27,000 teachers' instruction in mathematics, science, and English/language arts (ELA) to investigate changes in instructional alignment between 2003 and 2009. Fixed-effects models indicate that alignment in grades K–12 mathematics increased by approximately 0.19–0.65 standard deviations, depending on the grade and target. Alignment also increased to grades K–12 standards in ELA and grades 3–8 standards in science, though the magnitudes were smaller. Multiple alternative specifications support the findings of increased alignment. Implications for research and SBR policy are discussed.

Throughout the last 25 years in American kindergarten through grade 12 education, standards-based reform (SBR) has been a guiding policy. The theory of change starts with coherence, beginning with the construction of content standards in core academic subjects to specify what students are to know and be able to do (Smith and O'Day 1991). Coherence is paired with explicit goals—most often student learning targets measured by aligned, standardized assessments. With appropriate supports and accountability measures, the theory proposes that teachers will align their instruction with the standards and assessments, and student learning will improve (e.g., Clune 1993; Smith and

O'Day 1991). Thus, instructional alignment is the mediating variable between the policy of SBR and the outcome of improved student learning. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB; Public Law 107-110) supplements SBR with test-based accountability for schools and districts using the carrot of federal dollars to essentially mandate the basic tenets of standards and

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