

Standards Mastery Framework (SMF)

June 2021

Background

Fulton County Schools takes a school-focused, decentralized approach to instruction. The curriculum is not standardized across the district, and schools and teachers have a fair amount of choice in delivering instruction. The development of the Standards Mastery Framework (SMF) began in 2015 to increase mastery for teachers, enhancing teacher learning which, in turn, impacts student learning.

In AY2018-19, schools were able to choose a content area to begin the implementation of the SMF. Then, in 2019-20, FCS implemented the SMF districtwide, which provided a unified structure around these decisions. The Framework includes curriculum maps and provides instructional order, duration, assessment of mastery, and prescribed remediation for teachers' instruction. It is also used as a Professional Learning Community (PLC) planning guide.

This evaluation examined the implementation of the SMF, determining whether the Framework was adopted as intended. This evaluation was conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago.

Evaluation Questions

1. Are schools adopting the Standards Mastery Framework as the district intended?
2. How are teachers incorporating the Standards Mastery Framework in their work?

Methodology and Data

This evaluation took a qualitative approach to answer research questions 1 and 2.

Sampling & Interviews

NORC used a stratified random sampling technique that organized schools into areas (i.e., north/south) and within grade-level bands (i.e., elementary, middle, and high school). Twenty percent of FCS non-charter schools were selected for the SMF interview sample.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with principals and coaches and lasted about 20 minutes each.

Table 1. Standards Mastery Framework School Sample

Zone	Elementary Schools	Middle Schools	High Schools
1	1	1	0
2	2	0	2
3	2	1	0
4	1	1	1
5	2	0	0
6	3	0	0
7	1	1	1
Total	12	4	4

Table 2. Number of Interviews Completed by NORC

Elementary School	Middle School	High School	Total
19	6	5	30

Methodology

Once data collection was complete, NORC developed codes for the interview analysis. These codes aligned with the overarching research and interview questions. NORC compared responses across several key dimensions including school type (elementary/middle/high), respondent type (coach/administrator), and geography (north/south). NORC also compared and contrasted across codes, surfacing common themes, tensions, and questions in the data.

Results

Benefits

School leaders recognized the importance of the SMF for guiding classroom instruction and student learning. Respondents spoke about how the SMF “unpacks” the Georgia Standards of Excellence and provided concrete examples for understanding student learning. Those interviewed about the SMF knew what the Framework was and used it in their practice, particularly in the planning and execution of the teacher PLCs.

Overall, respondents suggested the SMF is used as intended. It was implemented widely within schools, with some schools considering it integral to their operations. It is used for planning, teaching, assessments, and observations.

Uniformly, respondents believed that the purpose of the SMF was to maintain instructional consistency across the district. Specifically, they said that the SMF aimed to align schools instructionally both vertically—across grade levels—and horizontally—across FCS schools. Many felt this was an important goal given the transience of the FCS student population. That is, instructional consistency across schools could prevent gaps in learning for those students who moved.

In terms of instruction, the SMF clarified which standards to focus on and how to focus on them so that they aligned, rather than overlapped, between grade levels. Many felt this distinction was important because the same standards crossed consecutive grade levels, and the SMF ensured specific topics were taught in specific grades. Therefore, the SMF helped delineate what specific areas and what cognitive level teachers should focus on at each grade level so that students’ learning can build from year to year.

According to respondents, the SMF provided guidance and description of student learning at grade levels. School leaders described how the SMF explained the differences in learning outcomes for

students who were at different proficiency levels and how knowing what understanding looked like for students who were at a 1.0, 2.0, 3.0, or 4.0 (with 3.0 being the proficiency goal for most schools) was useful for both the administrators and the teachers. This understanding also helped teachers know what additional supports or background information they may have to provide to ensure students learned what they needed to know. For administrators, they talked about how the SMF guided their in-classroom observations. Some administrators used the SMF to guide their “look-fors” during classroom visits. Because the SMF laid out what learning should look like at each level of the standard, one administrator noted, “[The SMF] is helpful to use as a tool to identify whether strategies were or were not implemented, or if things were or were not taught correctly.” Leaders then used this information in coaching conversations with teachers.

A benefit of the SMF was that it kept teacher conversations about the data—what they were seeing from their students in the classroom and what teaching strategies they needed to employ to obtain standards mastery. Teachers used the standards in their PLCs to “drive” their conversations about what to teach and how. One learning coordinator noted that this standards-driven approach prevented teachers from simply using activities pulled from the internet in their classroom and instead kept the focus on teaching practices that emphasized student learning. Respondents also recognized that the SMF and planning using backward design went hand-in-hand. The SMF helped teachers focus on what they wanted students to learn and by planning with the end in mind.

Challenges

While overall respondents appreciated the SMF and spoke about it in positive terms, they did suggest improvements. The main suggestion was increased training, both in terms of duration and consistency over time. Many felt that additional training could be a helpful step in improving the fidelity of implementation. For example, some respondents wondered how to obtain new or new teachers’

training because most of the district training had occurred during the initial Framework rollout. They were concerned that there was no formal process to train these new teachers. Respondents expressed frustration with the train the trainer model, pointing out that consistency in district messaging across time would help maintain the fidelity of the SMF.

When speaking about what was missing, respondents articulated ways that the SMF may not have been used with fidelity. One respondent questioned whether the SMF was really creating the cross-school consistency it claimed to because each school and grade has its “own targets.” Another teacher felt that district-level accountability for implementing the SMF was lacking.

Prioritized standards were the other point of tension for respondents. On the one hand, they thought the prioritized standards were useful for narrowing the scope of instructional focus. On the other hand, they felt that all standards were important for students to learn and were concerned that solely focusing on the prioritized standards may leave their students with gaps. This tension was partly about the amount of documentation, including the curriculum maps that came with the prioritized standards; they wished the other standards also had such tools.

Limitations and Considerations

This analysis uses interview data collected by a sample of schools in the district capturing about 20% of school leaders. Original methods proposed included a document review to assess how PLCs and teachers used the SMF for planning. The district started mandating the submissions of lesson plans to school administrators during the 2020-21 school year; therefore, there was insufficient documentation to conduct a document analysis. Further analysis through surveys on implementation would have also been helpful to cross-reference interviews and understand implementation at the classroom level.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted a quick transition to online learning in Spring 2020,

adding an additional layer of complication in the implementation of the Standards Mastery Framework and availability of staff for interviews. As a result, our sample is biased towards schools with the capacity to respond.

Conclusion

School leaders appreciate SMF, and they believe teachers do as well. SMF is implemented widely across schools, and teachers indicated that SMF is the “driving” factor behind PLCs. Leaders believe SMF helps teachers “unpack” and interpret the standards, and it is a very useful tool for leaders to track teaching practices and student learning.

Deepen Use of SMF in Schools

Given the benefits and positive feedback we heard from respondents, our suggestions focus on ways to deepen the use of the SMF in schools. For example, it may be helpful to maintain the prioritized standards since respondents appreciated having fewer items to focus on, yet, it may be useful to develop more communication as to their purpose. Additionally, the district may wish to develop resources for the non-prioritized standards.

Reassess Professional Development

The district may want to think through a way to maintain ongoing district-led professional development, particularly for those new to FCS.

Aligned Common Assessments

The district may want to revisit their aligned, common assessments. Discussion of assessments was mixed, with some respondents appreciating them, others finding they took up a significant amount of class time, while others were unclear on whether common assessments existed.

SMF & Professional Learning Communities

Lastly, we found that the SMF was a very useful tool for school staff, but the district may benefit from thinking through what SMF use really looks like in PLCs and classrooms.