## Focus on Essential Skills

### A Strategy for Accelerated Learning

### What are Essential Skills?

Essential skills are the core concepts and skills that students need to know deeply so that they are ready for the next grade level. As such, essential skills act as the building blocks for coherent learning trajectories, curricula, and assessments that support Tier 1 instruction for students as they move through their education toward career and college readiness.

### Why Focus on Essential Skills?

### *To ensure access to grade-level learning opportunities*

Given the unprecedented disruption to learning during the recent pandemic it is more important than ever for schools to provide access to grade-level learning opportunities for all students.

- Teaching grade-level content to all students, while identifying students who need additional support, can help students remain on track (Lynch & Hill, 2020).
- In classrooms where students had greater access to grade-appropriate assignments, they gained nearly two months of additional learning compared to their peers (TNTP, 2018).

### *To allow time for students to engage deeply with core ideas and skills*

By focusing on core ideas or concepts, educators allow students to develop a deep understanding of these important concepts and avoid superficial coverage of disconnected topics. In other words, the proverbial "mile-wide, inch-deep" curriculum is changed into a curriculum supporting mastery and understanding of fundamental ideas of the various disciplines. "We know that the longer a student is engaged with content and the more deeply they are invited to think about it, the more likely they will be to retain it for future use" (Boudreau, 2020). Researchers are urging schools to "provide the most personalized and engaging instruction possible" (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2020).

### What is Accelerated Learning?

Too often students with perceived academic gaps are put into remediation classes. Their access to grade-level content is delayed until all their academic gaps are filled. Research has shown again and again that this does not work (Rollins, 2014). Instead, learning should be accelerated. Accelerated learning keeps students moving forward on their intended grade-level trajectories by strategically preparing them for success in current grade-level content.

Acceleration prepares students for new learning combined with "just-in-time" teaching of missing key skills and concepts in the purposeful context of current lessons.

Opportunities to accelerate learning rely on robust Tier 1 instruction that includes grade-appropriate assignments, strong instruction, deep engagement, and teachers who hold high expectations for students. This robust instruction should be enhanced with supports targeted to the skills and services that students need to stay on grade level.

When teachers focus on essential skills, they can use their time and resources more efficiently to support students in developing a deeper understanding of the grade-level core ideas and concepts for each content area. Furthermore, a finite set of agreed-upon essential skills allows districts to target just-in-time supports for students. These essential skills can also serve as the basis for a library of formative, diagnostic, and benchmark/interim assessments to help identify the supports that students need to access grade-level lessons on these essential skills.

# Getting Started with a Focus on Essential Skills

## The Michigan Integrated Continuous Improvement Process (MICIP)

Districts can use MICIP to plan for and implement a curriculum that focuses on the essential skills for each content area and can use the standards and curricular resources as guidance and tools. Some questions to consider include:



> *Does the district have a coherent system that aligns instruction, curriculum, and assessment to essential skills based on the content outlined in the Michigan academic standards?*

> *Does the district use essential skills as a tool for focusing lessons, resources, and supports so that students are provided the opportunity to engage deeply in the important content of the grade level?*

## Resources for Essential Skills

If a district does not have essential skills outlined in their curriculum, the following resources may be helpful.

**Intermediate School Districts (ISDs)/Education Service Agencies (ESAs)**
Many ISDs/ESAs have developed documents that outline essential skills or priority standards that are available to districts in their region. Please contact your ISD/ESA for more information. The General Education Leadership Network (GELN), in collaboration with the Michigan Assessment Consortium (MAC), developed the *Learning Map: Prioritizing and Assessing Standards to Accelerate Student Learning* that also may be helpful.

**The Michigan Department of Education (MDE)**
MDE, in collaboration with English language arts (ELA) and mathematics educators from across the state, has identified model essential skills for each grade level in ELA and mathematics. Distilled from the current Michigan academic standards, these cumulative skills are intended to identify critical content necessary for success in later grades. A district may choose to use these model essential skills as a tool for focusing lessons, resources, and support so that students are provided the opportunity to engage deeply in the critical content of their current grade level.

Model Essential Skills for English Language Arts

Model Essential Skills for Mathematics

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MDE also has developed M-STEP crosswalk documents that show the alignment between Michigan's academic standards and the M-STEP English language arts and mathematics assessment claims and targets. The assessment targets may be used as a starting point for identifying local essential skills and learning trajectories.

[ELA Crosswalks: Claims, Targets, and Standards (Grades 3-8)](#)

[Math Crosswalks: Claims, Targets, and Standards (Grades 3-7)](#)

## References

Boudreau, E. (2020, April 8). *The Applied Science of Learning.* Retrieved from Usable Knowledge: https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/20/04/applied-science-learning

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