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The Instructional Coherence Toolkit

A practical audit, decision filter, and set of role-based checklists for leaders who are done launching and ready to align.

Built for district leaders, principals, board members, and funders serving consistently under-resourced communities and schools.

Companion resource to the article “Our Schools Don’t Have an Initiative Problem. They Have a Coherence Problem.” and the AAG white paper The State of American Education.

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1. Why Coherence, Why Now

Instructional program coherence is the extent to which a school or system's improvement efforts are guided by a common framework for curriculum, instruction, assessment, and adult learning, sustained over time. The term comes from Fred Newmann and colleagues at the Consortium on Chicago School Research, whose 2001 study of more than 200 Chicago elementary schools found that schools with stronger coherence posted higher gains in student achievement than schools running multiple unrelated improvement efforts.

The cost of incoherence is not abstract. TNTP's Opportunity Myth study, which followed nearly 4,000 students, found that students met grade-level standards on only 17 percent of the assignments they completed, and lost more than 500 hours per school year to below-grade work. When students who started the year behind received grade-appropriate assignments and strong instruction, they closed gaps with peers by six to seven months. The students were never the problem. The system's incoherence was.

Coherence is not uniformity, and it is not a product you can purchase. It is a discipline: the sustained, collective focus of every system, resource, and adult on one shared picture of good teaching. This toolkit turns that discipline into concrete practice.

How to Use This Toolkit

The toolkit follows the same four-phase model AAG applies in every engagement: Diagnose, Align, Execute, Sustain. The audit diagnoses. The decision filter and role checklists align. The 90-day plan executes. The drift warning signs sustain.

- Start with the Coherence Audit (Section 2) to establish an honest baseline. Complete it as a leadership team, not alone, and score on evidence rather than aspiration.
- Apply the Initiative Decision Filter (Section 3) to every new program, partnership, or purchase under consideration, and retroactively to everything currently running.
- Use the Role-Based Checklists (Section 4) to assign ownership. Coherence fails when it is everyone's value and no one's job.
- Commit to the 90-Day Coherence Plan (Section 5) to convert findings into visible action before the momentum fades.

2. The Coherence Audit

Rate your school or system on each domain: 1 = Fragmented, 2 = Emerging, 3 = Aligned, 4 = Coherent. Score against evidence a skeptical outsider could verify. A domain is not a 4 because the strategic plan says so; it is a 4 when a new teacher could describe it accurately in their first month.

Domain	What Coherent (4) Looks Like	Score
Instructional Vision	One clearly articulated picture of effective teaching exists. Teachers, principals, central office, and board members describe it in consistent language without prompting.	—
Curriculum & Materials	Core materials are high-quality, adopted system-wide, and actually used. Supplemental resources reinforce the core curriculum rather than compete with it.	—
Professional Learning	All PD in the last 12 months connects directly to the adopted curriculum and instructional vision. No standalone vendor sessions unconnected to daily practice.	—
Assessment & Data	Interim assessments measure the taught curriculum. Data meetings produce instructional decisions, not just reports. The board reviews measures aligned to the same vision.	—
Observation & Feedback	Walkthrough tools and evaluation rubrics reference the same instructional vision and curriculum teachers are asked to use. Feedback names curriculum-specific practice.	—
Leadership & Governance	The board and cabinet apply a formal filter before adopting anything new. Every active initiative has a named owner, a sunset review date, and a documented connection to the vision.	—
Resource Alignment	Budget, staffing, and schedule decisions can each be traced to the instructional vision. Funder-driven programs that do not fit are declined or renegotiated.	—
Continuity Over Time	The instructional direction has survived at least one leadership transition, or explicit succession safeguards exist to ensure it will.	—

Interpreting Your Total (8–32)

- 8–15: Fragmented. Pause all new adoptions. Your first initiative is subtraction, not addition.
- 16–23: Emerging. Pockets of alignment exist. Protect them, name an owner for each domain scoring below 3, and apply the decision filter ruthlessly.
- 24–29: Aligned. The architecture is in place. The risk is now leadership transition and funder drift; invest in continuity safeguards.
- 30–32: Coherent. Sustain and document. Your job is to make the system durable enough to outlast any individual leader, including you.

Not sure how to score honestly? A facilitated coherence audit is exactly what AAG's 30-minute strategy sessions are built for. Book at achievementadvisorsgroup.com.

3. The Initiative Decision Filter

No new program, partnership, pilot, or purchase moves forward until every item below has a written answer. Written matters: verbal assurances in a cabinet meeting are how incoherence gets manufactured. Apply this filter retroactively to every initiative already running; anything that fails it becomes a candidate for sunset.

	Before we say yes, we can answer this in writing
☐	Vision fit: We can state, in one sentence, which element of our instructional vision this initiative reinforces.
☐	Displacement: We have named, in writing, what we will stop doing or scale back to make room for this.
☐	Ownership: One named person is accountable for implementation quality, not a committee.
☐	Adult learning: The professional development this requires connects to training teachers have already received, and we have budgeted for it.
☐	Curriculum connection: This works with our adopted core materials rather than alongside or against them.
☐	Measurement: We have defined what evidence, reviewed on what date, will tell us whether to continue, adjust, or end it.
☐	Sunset date: A formal review date is on the calendar before launch, not after.
☐	Teacher load: We have calculated the hours this asks of teachers and identified where those hours come from.
☐	Funder alignment: If externally funded, the funder has agreed in writing to our implementation timeline and our right to adapt or decline renewal.
☐	Transition durability: This initiative is documented well enough to survive the departure of its champion.

The rule of three: if your system cannot list its active improvement initiatives on one hand, you do not have a strategy. You have a pile. Fewer than four major initiatives, each fully resourced and connected to the vision, will outperform a dozen partially implemented ones.

4. Role-Based Checklists

For District and System Leaders

	District leader actions
☐	Audit and count every active improvement initiative; publish the honest number to your cabinet.
☐	Sunset or consolidate anything that fails the decision filter; announce the subtraction as deliberately as you would a launch.
☐	Align the PD calendar for the coming year to the adopted curriculum before approving any outside sessions.
☐	Verify that observation tools, evaluation rubrics, and interim assessments all reference the same instructional vision.
☐	Build coherence review into cabinet agendas quarterly, not just at strategic planning time.
☐	Document the instructional direction thoroughly enough to survive your own departure.

For Principals and School Leaders

	Principal actions
☐	Ask five teachers, separately, to describe the school's instructional vision; treat divergent answers as your coherence baseline.
☐	Inventory every program, platform, and intervention running in your building; flag anything no one can connect to the core curriculum.
☐	Protect teacher planning time from initiative creep; every new demand must displace an old one.
☐	Ensure walkthrough feedback names practices from the adopted curriculum, not generic teaching moves.
☐	Push back, formally and in writing, on district or funder additions that fragment your building's focus.

For Board Members

	Board actions
☐	Require the written decision filter (Section 3) as a board attachment for any new initiative, partnership, or major purchase.
☐	Ask the displacement question aloud at every relevant vote: what will we stop doing to make room for this?
☐	Review a coherence dashboard, not just achievement data: initiative count, sunset reviews completed, PD alignment.
☐	Evaluate the superintendent partly on follow-through and consolidation, not on the volume of new

	Board actions
	programs announced.
☐	Protect instructional continuity explicitly during leadership transitions; make it a stated criterion in the next search.

For Funders and Philanthropic Partners

	Funder actions
☐	Fund depth: multi-year support for implementation of existing commitments outperforms one-year grants for new programs.
☐	Ask grantees what your grant would displace before awarding it; treat a candid answer as a positive signal.
☐	Accept “no” or “not yet” from district leaders as evidence of discipline, not resistance.
☐	Report on sustained implementation and student outcomes, not program counts or launch events.
☐	Coordinate with other funders in your region to avoid collectively fragmenting the systems you all intend to help.

5. The 90-Day Coherence Plan

Coherence work stalls when it stays diagnostic. Convert your audit into three 30-day commitments with named owners and visible outputs.

Window	Commitment	Owner	Evidence Due
Days 1–30	Complete the Coherence Audit as a leadership team. Inventory and count all active initiatives. Identify the top two sources of fragmentation.		
Days 31–60	Apply the decision filter retroactively. Sunset, consolidate, or renegotiate at least one initiative. Communicate the rationale to staff in plain language.		
Days 61–90	Align next year's PD calendar and observation tools to the instructional vision. Present the coherence dashboard to the board or governing body.		

Warning Signs of Coherence Drift

- A new initiative is announced without a corresponding subtraction.
- PD sessions appear on the calendar that no one can connect to the adopted curriculum.
- Teachers describe the instructional vision in materially different language across grade levels.
- A funder opportunity, rather than the strategic plan, is driving the next adoption conversation.
- A leadership transition is underway and no one has documented what must continue.

Sources and Further Reading

- Newmann, F. M., Smith, B., Allensworth, E., & Bryk, A. S. (2001). Instructional Program Coherence: What It Is and Why It Should Guide School Improvement Policy. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 23(4).
- TNTP (2018). *The Opportunity Myth: What Students Can Show Us About How School Is Letting Them Down—and How to Fix It*.

Go Deeper with AAG

Most strategies fail at execution. Achievement Advisors Group closes that gap, partnering with school districts, nonprofits, government agencies, and funders on strategy, coherence, and execution across the Mid-South and nationally.

- Book a 30-minute strategy session (\$150): walk in with your audit results, walk out with a concrete framework and next steps. achievementadvisorsgroup.com
- Download the AAG white paper, *The State of American Education: Crisis, Complexity, and the Path Forward*, free at achievementadvisorsgroup.com/aag-whitepaper
- Explore project engagements and advisory retainers, from facilitated coherence audits to full strategic planning, at achievementadvisorsgroup.com

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