



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



Educational Quality Improvement Program
Classrooms • Schools • Communities



***HONDURAS EDUCATION
FOR ALL- FAST TRACK
INITIATIVE (EFA-FTI)***

MIDEH II CASE STUDY

December 2011



*HONDURAS EDUCATION
FOR ALL- FAST TRACK
INITIATIVE (EFA-FTI)
MIDEH II CASE STUDY*



Contents

I. Introduction	1
II. Methods.....	2
III. Background	2
A. Standards Based Reform	2
B. MIDEH	3
IV. Distinctive Features.....	5
V. Strategic Decisions	6
A. Working at the Central Level.....	6
B. Working at the Local Level	7
VI. Moving Forward	9
VII. Conclusion	11
VIII. Text Box 1: Summary of Lessons Learned.....	12
IX. Bibliography	13
X. Figure 1. DCNB and Aligned Educational Materials.....	14
XI. Acknowledgements.....	15



I. Introduction

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has played a vital role in supporting the development of a successful standards based education system in Honduras. This case study of the Honduras Education for All – Fast Track Initiative (EFA-FTI) Honduras Improving Student Achievement (*Mejorando el Impacto al Desempeño Estudiantil de Honduras*, or MIDEH) project provides an overview, programmatic detail, and strategic guidance for educators and policymakers interested in promoting and supporting standards based education systems. It asks, “What lessons can be drawn from the MIDEH ‘experience’¹ to serve as guidance for the design and implementation of standards based education systems in developing countries?” It is clear that the design of a system of standards, curriculum, and assessment; the engagement of key stakeholders; the capacity of institutions; and the political economy influence the outcomes of standards based reform (SBR); and that aligning these elements is essential for achieving real reform and real impact.

Following a description of the methods employed in the case study, we review standards based reform (SBR) and provide an overview of MIDEH. With this foundation, we then highlight key lessons, discussing unforeseen circumstances and events and the strategic decisions that were made in response. We analyze stakeholder engagement at the central level; this includes the role of key figures, technical foundations, and national ownership. Then we focus on teacher ownership, changes in paradigms, and school leadership at the regional and local level. (In Honduras this includes departments, which are similar to provinces or states; municipalities, which are similar to cities or towns; school districts; and schools.) We also review the institutional capacities and political and economic conditions that (1) supported or hindered MIDEH initially, and (2) have long-term implications for its future. The conclusion summarizes findings and provides reflections for future endeavors.

¹ The MIDEH experience refers mainly to activities under the EQUIP1 MIDEH/AIR project but also to earlier activities under Component 1 of the EQUIP2 MIDEH/AED project. However, using the term “experience” allows MIDEH to be viewed more broadly than just as a project, and encompasses a wide array of stakeholders and products that do not pertain exclusively to the project but rather to the Secretariat of Education and Honduran citizenry as a whole.

II. Methods

Questions about the lessons learned from an experience require methods that allow actors involved in the process to share their lived experiences. For this reason, the case study relies predominantly on interviews with MIDEH stakeholders. Participants include officers from USAID, technical staff from the MIDEH II project, members of the Secretariat of Education (SE), NGO staff, and school directors and teachers. A series of 24 interviews were conducted over a week-long period in Honduras (July 25 through July 29, 2011).² Interviews were recorded and coded into themes. The study also included a review of project documents and literature on SBR.

² One interview was conducted via Skype on August 3, 2011.

III. Background

A. Standards Based Reform

Although there is no universally accepted definition of standards based reform (SBR), the concept hinges on content standards or academic expectations for students (what students should know and be able to do). Other attributes often cited are alignment of the key elements of the educational system, the use of assessments (both formative and summative) to monitor performance, performance standards that specify the level of achievement required, decentralization of responsibilities for decision making related to curriculum and instruction, support and technical assistance to foster improvement of education services, and accountability provisions that reward or sanction schools based on performance (Hamilton, Stecher, & Yuan, 2008; EQUIP1, 2010).

SBR may include a mix of these features, but content and performance standards are the foundation. *Content* standards establish clear and succinct expectations for student learning; they are “the glue for aligning curriculum, materials, teacher professional development, and student assessment.” *Performance* standards, on the other hand, are established in tandem with student assessments and include both written descriptions and numeric cut scores on assessments; they “allow educators to set the bar for student achievement” (p.1, EQUIP1, 2010). The standards based education system is designed to promote instruction that is academically challenging and targeted toward high expectations for all students, no matter their economic, social, or cultural backgrounds. The crux is to use information to guide instructional decisions, and ultimately

for policy and practice to be driven by the measurement of academic outcomes (Hamilton, Stecher, & Yuan, 2008).

There is a vast body of literature on standards and assessment. Various authors have documented challenges to education reforms that are focused on standards and assessment, and others have provided guiding principles (see for example Linn & Herman, 1997).³ This case study contributes to the literature by providing an example of a standards based education system in the developing world and provides an opportunity to those most intimately involved in the reform to pass on lessons learned from the field. In some instances, it rejects conventional views of SBR—for example, the notion that the construction of standards must precede curriculum design or that national consensus is required before moving forward with SBR. Before delving into these issues, the following section provides background on the MIDEH experience.

B. MIDEH – *Mejorando el Impacto al Desempeño Estudiantil de Honduras*

USAID has made a long-term investment in improving student achievement in Honduras through standards and assessment; this investment includes the Honduras Improving Student Achievement project, otherwise known as MIDEH (its acronym in Spanish). MIDEH has evolved through two phases, referred to here as MIDEH I and MIDEH II. MIDEH I, also known

³ One interview was conducted via Skype on August 3, 2011.

as Component 1 of the MIDEH/EQUIP2 project, began in November 2004. This first phase is associated with the following achievements: the development of content standards and competencies in Spanish and mathematics;⁴ standardized tests and a testing system for Spanish and mathematics;⁵ low-cost, reliable test administration, scoring, and reporting strategies;⁶ software for developing, banking, and retrieving test items, processing test data, and reporting results; implementation of a program of training activities;⁷ and strategies for testing students in non-traditional forms (AIR, 2007). See Annex A for a figure depicting educational materials.

The second phase, MIDEH II, responded to a change in emphasis from systems design and development to field-based implementation of systems based on the relationship between

⁴ Content standards and competencies in Spanish and mathematics for K–12, aligned to DCNB and international standards and expressed in terms of skills/competencies for kindergarten through grade 9, aligned with textbooks for Spanish and mathematics in grades 1–6 and mathematics in grades 7–9, standards to meet teacher, student, and parent needs.

⁵ Pacing guides for K–9 linking standards by month and the DCNB, formative tests aligned to monthly standards grades 1–6 in mathematics and Spanish in the hands of all teachers since 2007, and for grades 7–9 designed, summative (end of the year) tests piloted in grades 1, 3, and 6 and field tests November 2007.

⁶ Carried out with support from researchers at the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional (UPN), teachers from the Centro de Investigación para el Desarrollo de la Educación en Honduras (CIDEH), and coordinators from the Asociación Nacional de Exbecarios para el Desarrollo de Honduras (ANEDH).

⁷ Carried out with the Unidad Externa de la Medición de Calidad de la Educación (UMCE) until 2005 and with the SE.

IV. Distinctive Features

content standards, instructional practices, and learning outcomes. This phase began in May 2007 and concluded in July 2011. Achievements during the period included the following:

- Completing and validating national standards, curriculum calendars, and monthly formative tests for natural sciences and social studies for grades 1–6;
- A two-year field study (CIDEH, 2006–2008) that showed that more than 80 percent of teachers had standards, curriculum calendars, or monthly formative assessments, and that in classrooms where these materials were employed as designed there was a positive significant correlation with 2007 summative test results;
- Production of 2,000 copies of the national report on student achievement (2008) and hosting of three regional events to present the results;
- Eighteen departmental events in which department-level summative test results were presented;
- Reports on summative tests in relation to standards for the Ministry of Education’s national training and research institute (INICE); and
- Provision of diagnostic tests for grades 2–11 in mathematics and Spanish nationally (AIR, 2009, 2010).

The test design system itself includes workshops with teachers to design items, item review by Honduran content experts, item storage in a test bank, and development of tests in grades 1–11 in Spanish and mathematics, with 8–10 sub-forms of each test, each composed of 55 items. End-of-grade summative tests were administered to a national sample of approximately 400 schools (grades 1–6) in 2007. In 2008 the end-of-grade tests were administered to a national and departmental sample of 882 schools, reaching 100,000 students in grades 1–9, with representative samples at the departmental level as well as a sample of students enrolled in alternative education programs. End-of-grade tests were not administered in 2009 (see discussion below). The most recent administration of end-of grade summative tests was in 2010.

MIDEH II ended in July, 2011. The June 28, 2009 coup d’état had a devastating impact on the education sector during the 2009 and 2010 school years. The period was marked by teacher strikes, extended periods of missed classes, automatic student promotion, and donors suspending assistance. It is important to note that despite these challenges the MIDEH II project had marked success. In 2011 the Minister made a public decree formalizing the standards as the basic text aligned to the DCNB (Diseño del Currículo Nacional Básico; the new national curriculum), and at the school level, teachers nationwide demanded the materials. The following section provides context for this success and draws out the lessons learned from the MIDEH experience.

This case study seeks to provide lessons learned in the development and implementation of standards based education systems. Some features leading to the success of the MIDEH experience were not contemplated in the original design, but rather evolved and were adapted to the political and economic context of Honduras and specifically the Honduran education sector. Therefore, to begin, this document looks at these unplanned factors and then discusses the decisions made in response to these factors.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch (1998), the Honduran government, civil society, and donors focused on restoring and improving several areas, including education. In 2000 the education sector began working on a new curriculum. The DCNB curriculum (three telephone-book-sized documents) was completed in 2003, and MIDEH I began in 2004. With the curriculum complete, the SE was faced with the challenge of implementing it in classrooms. The SE was also concerned with how to assess and evaluate the new curriculum—standards were needed. On one hand, the opportunity to develop materials tied to a new curriculum was a result of happy coincidence. On the other hand, **by being flexible, the project was able to take advantage of the timing to respond to the needs of the SE and align materials to the new curriculum.**

Best practices start from the supposition that standards should be the critical foundation for an entire education system, upon which curriculum, classroom instruction, including teaching and learning materials and activities, and assessments are built. Setting learning standards would ideally be the first step in an education improvement initiative. However, in Honduras, as described above, this was not the case. Although versed in the traditional approach to SBR, USAID leadership and MIDEH I leadership⁸ also understood the situation in Honduras and sought to take advantage of the opportunity before them; waiting for ideal conditions might have resulted in no reform taking place. They had the new curriculum, the SE’s interest in evaluating and implementing the curriculum, and support from other donors (for example, the Japanese had provided mathematics texts aligned to the new curriculum). **SBR may still be successful even when ideal preconditions are not in place, as in Honduras, where the new curriculum was developed before the standards.**

⁸ Under MIDEHI, this specifically refers to Component 1 led by the American Institutes for Research (AIR).

V. Strategic Decisions

While the MIDEH project (both I and II) was flexible and responsive to the needs of the SE, it also never lost sight of the original vision. The first half of this section examines strategic decisions and actions focused on the central level, including the establishment of leadership mechanisms and technical foundations, and the building of national ownership. The following half looks at strategic decisions aimed at the local level, especially with regard to teacher empowerment, changing paradigms, and local leadership.

A. Working at the Central Level

A relentless challenge in working with the SE in Honduras during the MIDEH project was the turnover of SE personnel. In seven years there were seven different ministers of education. Changes in ministers were accompanied by changes in vice ministers, directors of evaluation, and other key personnel. Despite these changes, MIDEH leadership, including USAID officers and project technical staff, maintained close contact and ongoing communication with ministry officials to garner their continued support for ongoing efforts. At the same time, credit is due to the SE for maintaining the DCNB despite a change in the political parties in power; this ensured that the standards and related materials were still applicable to the curriculum. This emphasizes that **committed central figures (both within the project and within the SE) who understand the dimensions of SBR are essential.**

However, it is unrealistic to assume that ministers of education would support the MIDEH project⁹ simply because their predecessors had or because a project leader convinced them. They could stand behind MIDEH products because the standards, curriculum guides, formative assessments, and end-of-grade assessments were of high technical quality and because they reflected the context of Honduras and the realities faced by the country's students and teachers. **When standards, curriculum, and assessment tools are of high technical quality they stand on their own, despite political changes.** The consistent vision and technical strength of the project is due in large part to key USAID and AIR team members.

From inception, to avoid being viewed as a project developed in isolation and to give credibility to its work, the MIDEH leadership came together with the SE to create a technical coordinating committee. The SE played an active role in calling technical meetings and determining who would participate in the committee. Members included ministry staff, university researchers, teacher union representatives, donors, and private organizations. By having key actors engaged in decisions about standards and assessment at the central level, these actors took ownership of MIDEH products. When political changes did occur, the backing of this group ensured the likelihood of maintaining previous efforts. **Having a broad base of key actors involved at the central level creates foundations for sustained national ownership even during political changes.** This leads to another related

⁹ This refers to MIDEH I Component 1 and MIDEH II.

decision; the MIDEH project did not wait for national consensus before moving forward. The project's success contradicts the conventional view that consensus on SBR is an essential prerequisite prior to moving forward. **MIDEH showed that it is possible to move forward while still building consensus;** waiting for local and national consensus around SBR requires a great deal of time, and may never happen.

B. Working at the Local Level

Echoing the way in which the project created ownership at the central level through the technical coordinating committee, at the local level ownership was developed through teacher participation in an iterative process of designing and validating the materials. The standards were designed and validated with teachers, directors, and other actors in the field. The assessments were also designed with teachers who had expertise in specific content areas. **Teachers are motivated to use materials if the teachers have been included in the design process.** The likelihood that materials will be accepted and used in classrooms is higher when the materials reflect the realities that teachers live. Coupling this local knowledge with strong technical expertise created standardized curricular materials and assessments worth sustaining.

The MIDEH project acted in response to the SE's desire to bring the new curriculum to the classroom and to evaluate it. MIDEH's success is reflected in the fact that the curriculum is operational and in the hands of teachers on a

national scale. **The lesson is that aligning the materials and providing support ensures that teachers are able to implement the curriculum.** Support to teachers came in the form of capacity-building activities via MIDEH/AED, the SE/ INICE, departments, districts and schools. While the cascade method has known tradeoffs with quality, given the timeline and limited resources it was the only option. The MIDEH team and partners, such as MIDEH/AED support staff and NGOs, worked to maintain quality during the process. In addition, as described below, directors and teacher leaders reinforced capacities at the school level.

The literature suggests that SBR does not typically produce fundamental changes in pedagogy (Hamilton, Stecher, & Yuan, 2008). As one school director noted, "The Honduran students have great potential and respond to opportunities, but it is harder to change adult teachers." One teacher explained that when teachers attempted to use the new curriculum, they faced "criticism from other teachers [and] parents" and also "their own self doubt." (The criticisms often focused on the learning method, which emphasizes understanding rather than rote memorization for reading.) To address this challenge, this teacher invited other teachers to his classroom and also helped them in their own classrooms; he reported that when they witnessed results in their own students' learning outcomes they were convinced. **Teachers change when they observe models at the classroom level, receive mentoring from peer teachers, and see results.**

VI. Moving Forward

Related to this lesson is the concept that **the positive impacts of an endeavor like MIDEH are sustained when underlying attitudes change.** Interviewees consistently cited the change in paradigm and attitude as a fundamental achievement that guarantees the sustainability of the MIDEH experience. During implementation, when there were shortages and delays in receiving materials, school directors, teachers, and parents united to ensure that the implementation of the curriculum and standards continued. They raised funds to make photocopies of materials for student work groups and erased filled-out materials for re-use. **Teacher leaders and school directors are the crux of sustainability at the local level.** As one teacher noted, “For me, the school director is more important than the minister of education because the director is in the classroom.” MIDEH capitalized on teacher leaders from the start of the project (building on previous USAID-funded scholarship programs in the 1990s such as CAPS and HOPS¹⁰); these leaders had the technical knowledge of the standards and assessment and the commitment to improving teaching and learning. While there was turnover of key figures at the central level, leadership at the school level remained more stable.

Finally, teacher leaders and school directors contributed to the design of the MIDEH project and products. Not only were they active in the development of standards and assessments, but they also advocated for materials not included in the original design of the project. These

recommendations led to guides for teachers (*programaciones*) and the development of software tools for analyzing formative assessment results. To ensure successful implementation, the **MIDEH project had to listen and be receptive to the needs expressed at the classroom and school levels**—not just those of the SE. Through having school-level assessment data, school directors are able to detect content areas that require more attention, and able to design activities to reinforce them. As one director noted, “If we just take the results and send them to the department, they do not do anything; we need to take action ourselves.” This segues into the following section, which discusses the institutional capacities at the district and departmental levels and then turns toward the national level with regard to donors, a national institute, and implementation at the secondary level.

The above sections have highlighted lessons learned. This section addresses areas that will require additional emphasis in order to fully institutionalize the project’s positive contributions to the implementation of the curriculum on a national level through the use of content standards, pacing guides, formative assessments, diagnostic tests and end-of-grade assessments. As noted above, there is institutional capacity at the school level. However, more emphasis is required at the district and departmental levels of the education system. These levels perform administrative tasks but frequently provide little pedagogical guidance. At the municipal level there are opportunities to use resources for educational purposes (as articulated in the municipal law, 1990). In some cases municipal governments have invested in curriculum support materials and assessments. Examples such as these serve as models for the future direction of work at the municipal level. Recently a community participation in quality education law passed (2011). This law encourages working with parents, NGOs, private entities, and other stakeholders at the municipal level via COMDEs (municipal committees for education development) to design strategic plans for action targeted at indicators for measurable results. This provides the opportunity to build on the MIDEH experience incorporating and expanding the use of previously developed MIDEH products which are user-friendly and designed specifically for working with parents and community members. These products can serve to facilitate participation of these actors and potentially inform decisions they make at the local level.

At the central level, challenges and opportunities remain. With regard to the donors, in general there is good coordination through MERECE (the international donor education sector working group) and an appreciation for MIDEH functions and products. Donors consider assessment data from the MIDEH project a rich source of information on school performance. As one interviewee stated, “MIDEH is an information provider to the EFA pool fund.” Donors have also supported an aligned system of standards, curriculum, and assessment through the provision of textbooks and financing formative tests. It will continue to be important to consider donor support for activities that contribute to the consolidation of a standards based education system in Honduras. Ultimately, it is the role of the SE to design operational plans articulating its needs and to propose actions to the donor community.

Lack of institutional capacity to carry out MIDEH’s work continues to be a challenge; there is little or no institutional capacity to carry out some of the most specialized functions. The capacity building, training, and technical assistance efforts of the project have narrowed, but not closed, this capacity gap. Content standards are in place, and the support materials, test item bank, and best practices manuals were delivered to the SE at the conclusion of the MIDEH II project; there is basic installed capacity and a basic core cadre of Hondurans who could potentially carry on the MIDEH functions (with international technical support for some specific areas). In other words, there is capacity to carry out basic core MIDEH

¹⁰ Central American Peace Scholarships, Honduran Peace Scholarships.

VII. Conclusion

functions; at the same time the most technically specialized functions are difficult to carry out. In addition, various proposals have been developed for creating an independent institute or relying on an existing Honduran institute, such as the UMCE/UPN, for national assessment and measurement.

The ideal solution may be a separate institute that would be responsible for national education assessment and measurement. While the SE could potentially take on the formative assessments and implementation of standards in classrooms, an external institute could be responsible for the end-of-grade assessments to ensure the integrity and security of each stage of test development, data collection, and analysis. Ideally, this institute would work together with INICE to provide findings to inform policy and practice. However, as was demonstrated throughout MIDEH, less-than-ideal political and economic situations require continuous review and revision of plans and decisions. There is optimism that the current context will allow opportunities for coordination and ultimately the institutionalization of the MIDEH project's test design capabilities within a Honduran institution.

In general, primary school teachers are working with the new curriculum and there is a strong demand for the DCNB supporting materials from primary school teachers. However, the implementation of the new curriculum at the secondary level continues to meet higher levels of resistance from teachers—though in a few cases, in which strong school director leaders are present, there is greater disposition toward

working with the new curriculum and standards. Moving forward, some of the lessons learned at the primary level could be applied at the secondary level: the importance of moving forward while building consensus, relying on strong principals and school-leaders, soliciting teacher feedback at the secondary level, and modeling behavior and mentoring, among others.

In sum, the USAID MIDEH project was an ambitious undertaking with numerous activities that were achieved within a limited framework. The project has supported a standards-based school reform program by developing content standards in mathematics, Spanish, science, and social studies; pacing guides to organize standards to be mastered month by month; formative monthly tests aligned to the standards to inform teacher practice; diagnostic tests to help teachers at the beginning of a grade assess which standards have been reached; and end-of-grade assessments to guide policy makers. MIDEH was responsible for these state-of-the-art, contextualized materials that facilitated the alignment and implementation of the standards and curriculum on a national level. MIDEH also used student learning outcomes to track implementation and serve as a basis to modify implementation during the course of the project and expand promising practices. There is ownership of MIDEH-developed tools among policy makers at the central level and among teachers and directors in Honduran schools. This document has highlighted key lessons learned from the MIDEH experience, consolidated in the text box that follows. These findings are important to keep in mind through the next phase of the MIDEH “experience”. These findings can also inform similar standards-based school reform initiatives in other settings, whether it is a holistic reform of the system or upgrading existing sub-components of a standards-based system, such as curriculum, assessment, or teacher training.

VIII. Text Box 1. Summary of Lessons Learned

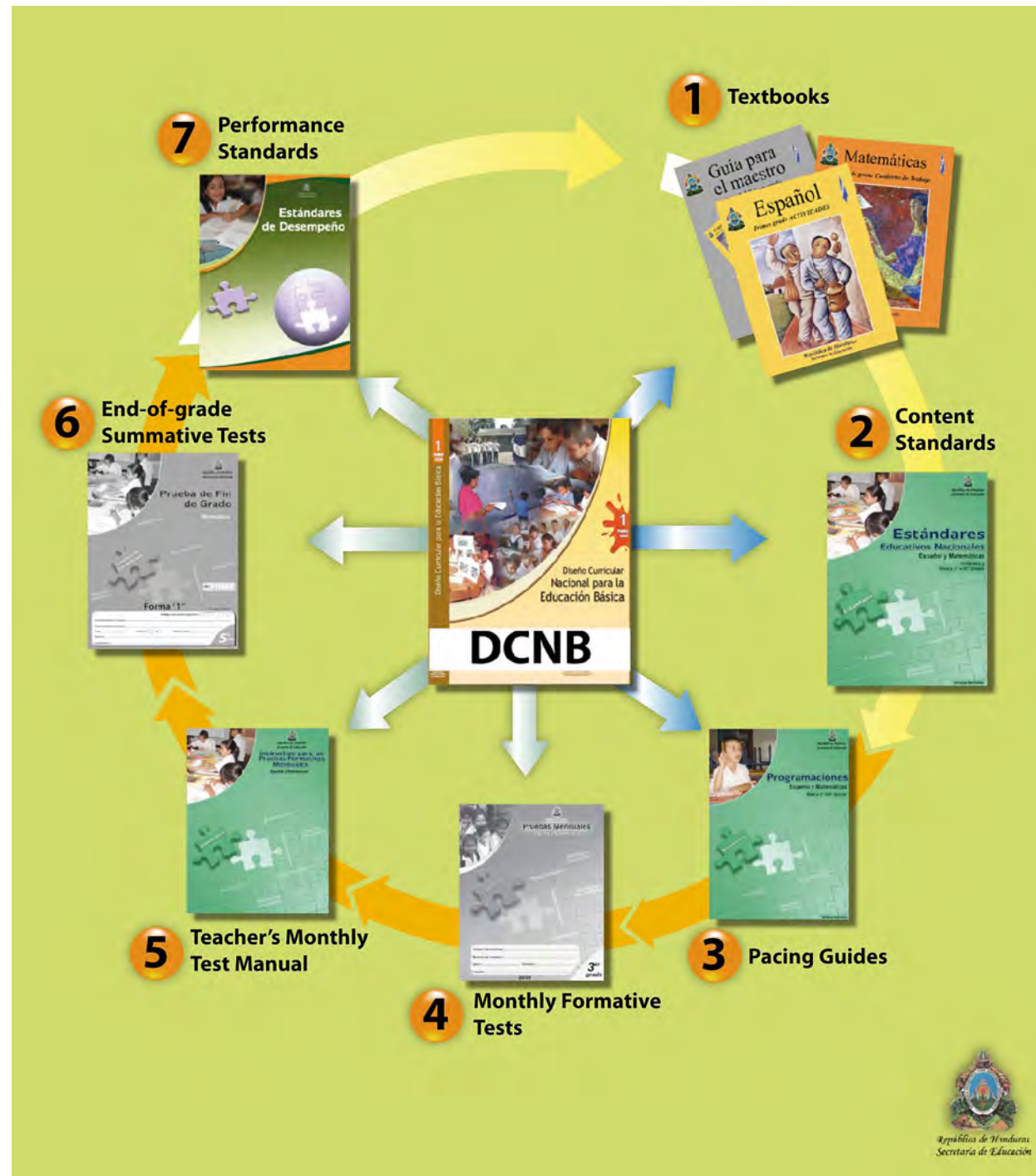
1. Given the opportune timing, flexibility allowed MIDEH to capitalize on the newly designed curriculum to align teacher's instructional materials and students' assessments with the curriculum.
2. Aligning support materials, i.e., content standards, pacing guides, formative assessments, diagnostic tests and end-of-grade assessments, among each other as well as with the curriculum, enables teachers to implement the new curriculum with more confidence and effectiveness
3. SBR may still be achieved even when ideal preconditions are not in place, such as in Honduras, where the new curriculum was developed before standards.
4. Committed central figures (both on the side of the project and the SE) who understand the dimensions of SBR are essential to its successful implementation.
5. When standards and assessment tools are of high technical quality they can stand on their own, despite political changes.
6. Having a broad base of key actors involved in SBR at the central level is the foundation for national ownership, which helps sustain the system during political change.
7. It is important to keep moving forward while building consensus.
8. Teachers are motivated to use materials in their classroom instruction if they have been involved in the design process.
9. Teachers demonstrate changes in teaching practice when they observe models at the classroom level and are provided mentoring from peers.
10. The change in teaching paradigms and attitudes toward teaching by teachers and directors helps sustain SBR.
11. Teacher leaders and school directors are at the core of sustained initiatives at the local level.
12. For effective SBR, it is important to listen and be responsive to needs expressed at the classroom and school levels.

X. Bibliography

- AIR. (2007). EQUIP1 MIDEH Phase 2 Application.
- AIR. (2009). Honduras Education for All-Fast Track Initiative (EFA-FTI) Technical Application.
- AIR. (2010). Honduras Education for All-Fast Track Initiative (EFA-FTI) Technical Application (Revised).
- EQUIP1. (2010). Using Learning Standards to Promote Student Achievement, EQUIP Review, Volume 8, No.1, March 2010. *United States Agency for International Development*, Washington, D.C.
- Linn, R. L., & Herman, J. L. (1997). Standards-Led Assessment: Technical and Policy Issues in Measuring School and Student Progress. *Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards and Student Testing (CRESST)/ University of California*.
- Hamilton, L. S., Stecher, B. M., & Yuan, K. (2008). Standards-Based Reform in the United States: History, Research and Future Directions. Santa Monica, CA: RAND.
- McKinsey & Company. (2007). How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better.
- Rivela, P., et al. (2008). The Education Assessment That Latin America Needs, *PREAL*, Washington, D.C.

X. Figure 1. DCNB and Aligned Educational Materials

XI. Acknowledgments



USAID commissioned this Honduras MIDEH II Case Study, through the Educational Quality Improvement Program 1 (EQUIP 1), with the American Institutes for Research in cooperation with the Academy for Education Development.

Honduras MIDEH II Case Study was researched and written by Megan Gavin, with contributions from Bridget Drury. The authors wish to acknowledge the contributions of the USAID AOTRs Patrick Collins and Yolande Miller-Grandvaux. Additionally they would like to thank Jane Benbow, V.P. American Institutes for Research/International Development Program, Pamela Allen, EQUIP1 Project Director, and all of the interviewees who shared their time and thoughts.





USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



AMERICAN
INSTITUTES
FOR RESEARCH®