

1 Defining Effective Curriculum Leadership

Curriculum leadership in schools is pretty much what the individual leader makes it. There are many tasks associated with the curriculum development process and the leader is professionally responsible for sorting out and prioritizing this work. I strongly believe that curriculum leadership must be more than the management of existing programs. A curriculum manager would focus on reviewing materials, control issues, daily problem-solving, and encouraging a predictable routine from year to year. Such an orientation to the job is static. Effective curriculum leadership does all of those things plus establish new direction, align people and resources, motivate participants, and produce meaningful change for school improvement. In short, effective curriculum leadership is more than maintenance, it is dynamic in nature.

This distinction between just “running smoothly” and “responding to change” is very important on the job and reflects the general orientation (or philosophy) of the curriculum leader. The reader must ask, “Are we operating in a static world where schools are unchanging, or are we living in a dynamic world in which significant change is ever present?” The worldview of the school curriculum leader, static or dynamic, will determine what is considered a priority on a daily basis.

WHAT IS CURRICULUM?

Professionals working in the field of curriculum do not fully agree on a definition of the term. Some may see *curriculum* as subject matter or a series of written documents like books and syllabi. This definition is the general understanding of the public.

Over time, many writers in the field have defined curriculum as a set of school experiences. This definition is larger than simply “subjects,” and includes what school people refer to as extracurricular activities. Lunch, play, sports, and other nonacademic activities qualify as a part of the curriculum.

A third, and more modern, definition of curriculum is a plan tied to goals and related objectives. This definition suggests a process of choosing from among the many possible activities those that are preferred and, thus, value-laden. The curriculum is purposeful and defined. Activities shape student behaviors.

Finally, a fourth definition of curriculum is drawn from outcomes or results. This position sees curriculum leadership as targeting specific knowledge, behavior, and attitudes for students and engineering a school program to achieve those ends. This is a highly active definition that accepts change in schools as a normal variable in planning.

These differences in the definition of curriculum are not idle or superfluous, but are important because they focus the responsibility of curriculum leadership. Such focus can be narrow or broad depending on the worldview of the curriculum leader. I favor a dynamic and adaptive definition of curriculum work such as the following:

The curriculum represents a set of desired goals or values that are activated through a development process and culminate in successful learning experiences for students. (Wiles & Bondi, 2007)

CURRICULUM IS THE ESSENTIAL FUNCTION

Curriculum development is the essential function of school leadership. Whether this role is carried out by a principal, an assistant principal for curriculum, a team leader, a department head, or by leading classroom teachers, the curriculum defines all other roles in a school.

In recent years, classroom teachers have taken on much more responsibility for the development of curriculum at the school level. Operating under labels such as “teacher leaders,” these individuals achieve advanced training and return to their schools to work closely with colleagues. This new pattern works well because the new curriculum leaders are also teachers.

Curriculum work is always value-laden; curriculum work is a matter of choosing from among many possibilities the set of values to be promoted in the

classroom. We can think of the curriculum as a design for learning, much like the blueprint for a house. The curriculum is what we intend for students to experience. We hold expectations for the student because they experience the curriculum, and we measure curriculum success by student outcomes.

During the past 40 years, curriculum has focused primarily on results. Going beyond what is intended, curriculum leadership has determined outcomes that should be promoted and achieved by the curriculum. Selecting those things that are best done by the school, as opposed to the family or the church, the curriculum leader targets the learning experience of the student. Because the student experiences the curriculum, he or she can now do new things (read, play an instrument, get along with others, etc.).

Once the global goals for the curriculum are determined, the curriculum leader follows a deductive process to give more and more definition to the program. Analogous to an architect designing a house, the curriculum leader helps the school community and the teachers provide a highly detailed definition of what is intended for students. This definition includes goals, objectives, standards, programs, content, and even lesson plans.

As the curriculum leader defines the vision, his or her tasks transition from analysis to designing a comprehensive plan, implementing the curriculum, and, finally, evaluating the results. This sequence is known as a *curriculum cycle*.

These evolving roles for the curriculum leader include building a team to work together over a period of time. A school curriculum team is composed of individuals chosen for their roles and ability to contribute to such work. A larger school community, made up of teachers, administrators, parents, involved citizens, and local businesses, forms the human element of curriculum work. Curriculum work is always dependent on this human element for its success.

Working together, and coordinated by detailed planning, the team and school community translate curriculum intentions into nuts-and-bolts classroom activities that produce outcomes. A series of program sheets defining tasks, activities, responsibilities, timelines, and outcomes comprise a comprehensive curriculum management plan. Such program parts must be webbed together according to their importance and dependence. All members of the school curriculum team, as well as any member of the school community, should have full access to this bird's-eye view of what is happening. Change will occur more smoothly if those affected by the change know what is to happen.

Finally, as the teams implement the curriculum plan, the curriculum leader must monitor and coordinate the work being done. Such supervision is best done using a kind of "review and validation" technique that identifies, in advance, what is being done and what the work product is to be. Using the curriculum objective or outcome as a guide to managing curriculum work

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helps motivate everyone involved. Like a bathtub filling up, everyone involved will know their part and see the fruits of their labor. A successful curriculum development project will instill confidence and a winning attitude.

CURRICULUM MAINTENANCE

Simple curriculum maintenance at the school level is not easy, and can be a full-time job if done correctly. Any number of recurring tasks will determine the readiness of the school to deliver the planned curriculum as intended. Without tip-top maintenance, the curriculum can become distorted and even inefficient. In fact, in some schools, there is no overview of what the curriculum should be and no plan for maintaining the existing program. Figure 1.1 identifies some sample curriculum maintenance functions at the school level.

Among the most important maintenance functions for the school-based curriculum leader is serving as a conduit for information about classroom instruction. School leaders attend numerous meetings at the district level, and may also attend informational conferences at the state level where rules and regulations are promulgated. Getting this information to the teachers in their classrooms is vital for any modern curriculum. Most recently, for example, we are witnessing states changing their math and science standards, and this activity has direct implication for what teachers do with students in their classrooms. The school curriculum leader serves as a bridge for both the upward flow of inquiry and the downward flow of information.

Another very important maintenance task in any school is to ensure compliance with changing laws that govern education. Such laws may address the subjects in school, monitoring student achievement, class size requirements, or even the required resources for specific student populations. Exceptional students, for example, must be placed in classrooms under very specific conditions and this, in turn, can affect related decisions about hiring staff, building use, recordkeeping, and other items on a day-to-day basis.

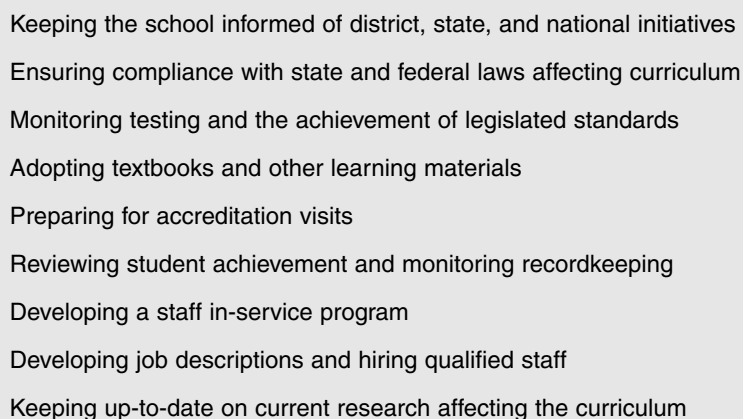
Today, almost every state in the nation has achievement tests to measure the attainment of minimal curriculum standards. These standards, treated in greater detail in Chapter 3, identify in a general way what must be taught and what must be mastered by all students. The curriculum leader has to ensure that what is tested is, in fact, also being taught. Working backwards from test results, the curriculum leader can localize areas of low achievement using curriculum maps of each subject. In curriculum maintenance, where the school is deficient in achievement, corrections will have to be planned and implemented.

Keeping the school supplied with adopted texts and appropriate instructional materials is another task of curriculum maintenance leadership. In

most states, textbooks are first cleared by a state textbook committee that assesses the text by a number of criteria (see Figure 1.2). For example, the committee will want to know whether the content of the text matches the curriculum standards required by law in that state. The committee will also try to determine if the text is relevant, supported by research, developmentally appropriate for that grade level, and so forth. Once adopted by the state committee, each district, and sometimes even each school, can select a text from the approved state list (Virginia Beach City Schools, 2008).

At the school level, the curriculum leader must help teachers replicate this adoption process by looking at things such as the alignment of the text with school curriculum requirements; the difficulty of the content level; the degree of reading difficulty; the accuracy, relevance, and authenticity of the content; and the multicultural representation as found in the school population. It is worth noting here that research has shown that the most common criterion for text selection at all levels of schooling is the physical appearance of the textbook. Curriculum leaders must work diligently to raise the level of sophistication by the teaching staff in dealing with such important matters.

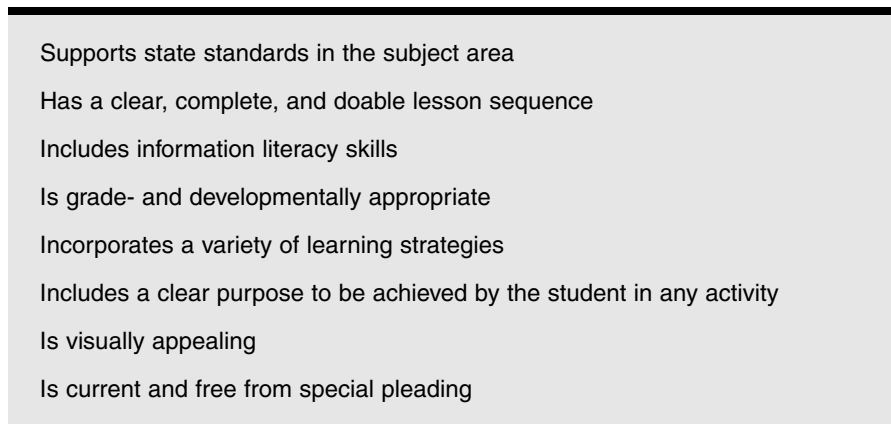
Curriculum leaders providing a “maintenance function” in the school will also be responsible for all accreditation requirements. In most states, the school and the district is re-accredited every 10 years with an interim visit every 5 years. The importance of being and remaining accredited cannot be overstated. Parents and community members recognize accreditation as the single best measure of instructional quality. The workload to prepare for an accreditation visit can be unpleasantly burdensome for a new school curriculum leader unfamiliar with the process.



- Keeping the school informed of district, state, and national initiatives
- Ensuring compliance with state and federal laws affecting curriculum
- Monitoring testing and the achievement of legislated standards
- Adopting textbooks and other learning materials
- Preparing for accreditation visits
- Reviewing student achievement and monitoring recordkeeping
- Developing a staff in-service program
- Developing job descriptions and hiring qualified staff
- Keeping up-to-date on current research affecting the curriculum

Figure 1.1 Sample curriculum maintenance tasks in a school

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Supports state standards in the subject area
Has a clear, complete, and doable lesson sequence
Includes information literacy skills
Is grade- and developmentally appropriate
Incorporates a variety of learning strategies
Includes a clear purpose to be achieved by the student in any activity
Is visually appealing
Is current and free from special pleading

Figure 1.2 Criteria for state-adopted textbooks

Reviewing student achievement and maintaining summary records of such achievement requires the curriculum leader to have strong organization skills. In most schools, such records (state reports, district records, and test results) are kept by an office manager who is guided by the curriculum leader. Setting up a system of recordkeeping, and a schedule of such requirements, is an important maintenance task in every school.

It is equally important for the curriculum leader to develop a way to monitor how students are being assessed in the classroom. In most schools, the grading patterns vary widely from teacher to teacher. In-service sessions on this topic, and the expectations for student achievement, will contribute to a more manageable procedure in this area. Parents, in particular, will appreciate a fair system of assessment.

In all schools, staff development programs can help connect curriculum plans with classroom instruction. Assessing student achievement gains, for example, may identify some learning skills that are not being taught well. Once the weak areas of the curriculum are identified, the curriculum leader can schedule training sessions to improve faculty knowledge in those areas. It is inappropriate, and wasteful, for the curriculum leader to schedule regular in-service sessions without connecting them to school needs. Teachers and parents can be used to help identify areas of greatest need for additional training.

One of the most important curriculum maintenance tasks is to assess the deployment of staff positions. Faculty salaries and the physical facility account for 80 percent of any school budget. Vacated faculty lines are often simply replaced without thought about the changing needs of the curriculum. A long-range plan for any future vacancies is useful to develop as time allows. Part of this overall task is to develop clear and realistic job descriptions for the instructional positions at the school.

Finally, an important curriculum maintenance function is to try to keep abreast of existing research in the district and beyond (see Figure 1.3) Knowledge of current research will help the curriculum leader make instructional materials decisions, help identify new ways of doing things, and help answer instructional questions from faculty and parents in an authoritative way.

Together, these maintenance tasks keep the school curriculum rolling along and out of trouble. Obviously, the completion of such tasks will make the school curriculum more efficient and a great deal more effective. But the premise of such a maintenance orientation in curriculum leadership is that schools just don't change much year to year. I believe that in today's schools, maintenance will never be enough. A more dynamic role is required for successful school curriculum leadership.

DYNAMIC CURRICULUM LEADERSHIP

All schools are not equal in their ability to promote desired improvements. Although I recognize that basic curriculum maintenance is vital, I feel that curriculum leadership must try to do more than manage the status quo. If there is some kind of balance between maintaining the curriculum and upgrading school programs, the curriculum leader must always seek a greater and more visionary kind of role. The fact is, our world is not static and the curriculum in school represents our nation's program for preparing students to live in the future.

Although 90 percent of all schools use some form of ability grouping, research does not support this practice. The common argument for ability grouping is that it allows students to progress at a pace appropriate to their level of skill. Arguments against ability grouping include the self-fulfilling prophecy, teacher biases, segregation of ethnic or socioeconomic groups, and the stigmatizing effect on students. Conclusion: Too many negatives are attached to this practice and outweigh any gains.

Alternatives to static grouping would include (a) multiple placement criteria, (b) cooperative learning, (c) mastery learning models, and (d) greater use of computer-assisted instruction.

Best References

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Figure 1.3 Summarizing research for faculty (example: ability grouping)

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If we consider the changes occurring in our everyday lives, it is clear that the future will not be the same as the past or present. Communication technology and the changing nature of work, for example, call for major changes in the way we school children. The curriculum leader must be both visionary and skilled at translating such projected changes into school preparation programs. In this sense, the field of curriculum is like the “brain” of the school body; it is forever monitoring the environment and seeking a better way to serve the students. The curriculum leader is first an engineer (maintenance), but he or she must also be an architect of new school programs. Curriculum work is about programming and enhancing the lives of children.

Any number of tasks can illustrate the dynamic side of curriculum leadership (see Figure 1.4). What is common to each of these more dynamic tasks is the emphasis on planned change. The dynamic curriculum leader continually seeks to move from where we are in the present to an improved condition for our students in the future.

The dynamic view of curriculum work is that it is an active process involving the continual construction and improvement of school programs. Improvement most often means change. For such a view to exist and be accepted in the minds of faculty, parents, and school community members, the curriculum leader must facilitate a process of *visioning*. Advancing perceptions from the present to the future includes assessing common beliefs, tangible goals, and value priorities in school programs.

For almost 20 years, achievement standards set by national and state politicians have defined public and private education in the United States. Such standards are reinforced by serious testing procedures that focus on how the taught curriculum meets expected outcomes. Almost one-half of

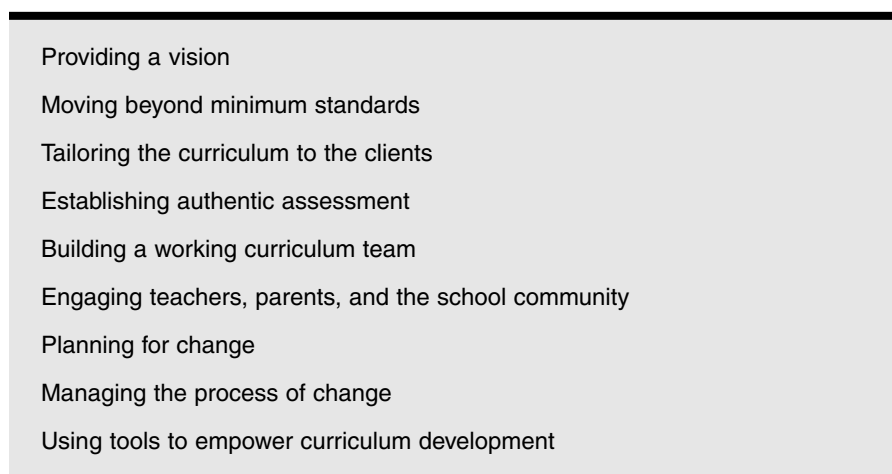


Figure 1.4 Dynamic curriculum leadership tasks

all classroom teachers now in service have entered education during this 20-year period and accept testing and curriculum subject standards as “the curriculum.” In reality, most such standards are a product of traditional school subjects, special legislative pleading, and low funding (the basics) for education. Certainly, such standards do not fully address any clear expectation of what students might need for their lives in the future. The task for the dynamic curriculum leader is to move the faculty and the community beyond the minimum standards and toward clear and larger goals for the students. Any number of techniques can be used to accomplish this intellectual transition, a topic addressed in Chapter 3.

For more half a century educators have spoken of “meeting the needs of students” and “individualizing instruction.” More than 50 years of controlled research exists to document that individual students in school are not alike and that they have different strengths and intelligences. Knowing this, the curriculum leader must focus attention on how to best organize the content of curriculum to meet the needs of the client (i.e., the student). The planned instructional delivery of lessons is also a part of the curriculum (Goodlad, 2004).

As the curriculum leader redesigns the curriculum, he or she must draw attention to the expectations for the program design (the outcomes): What do we want the student to be able to do? It is simply unsatisfactory to state such expectations in terms of passing a test or being physically present for the 15,000 hours of instruction that each student will experience in school over 12 years. We need to know what the student will be able to do because they have experienced this learning design, and we need to be able to “see” this outcome in terms of tangible student behaviors. Our assessment of the curriculum must be observable, authentic, and real-world.

The curriculum leader who performs only maintenance functions may be able to meet requirements (reports, reviews, and standards expectations) without much assistance. But the curriculum leader who intends to define leadership as planning for regular change and school improvement will certainly need help. Teachers will be the primary source of assistance, but parents and community members may also play a valued role. Engaging these groups will mean forming a working team and honing their skills. Such social engagement cannot be avoided.

The actual recruitment of teachers, parents, and community members to participate in curriculum activities will call for a degree of “psychology” on the part of the curriculum leader. He or she will need to better understand motivation and the effect of work climates on teacher behavior. He or she will have to give thought as to the best or most effective communication mediums. The curriculum leader will have to construct teams using our best knowledge of small groups and informal leadership. Unlike business or military leaders, curriculum leaders will have to use persuasion

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and “power with” techniques to be successful. The curriculum leader does not have the authority to order change.

The curriculum leader will have to be skilled at developing plans for changing. The difference between successful and unsuccessful change in schools, from my experience, is found in the details of planning. Ways must be found to illuminate the problems and provide paths to solutions.

The dynamic curriculum leader will need to examine the whole notion of planned change. What must be done to get others to contribute to school improvement? How can the exchange of information be facilitated? How will any change effort fit into the larger organization of district or state education systems? These and many other questions must be addressed and strategies formulated. Dynamic curriculum leadership will require planning.

Finally, the curriculum leader who is dynamic will need to understand the many tools that exist to boost change efforts and empower the curriculum development process in schools. The skillful use of committees, technologies, assessments, and other tools will contribute to establishing a winning effort. Comprehensive planning will bring logic and order to even an emerging curriculum design. A “can do” attitude will emerge.

Both minimum (maintenance) and maximum (dynamic) curriculum leadership will be addressed throughout the remaining chapters of this book. The reader should note that the two styles of leading are not competing, but rather are reinforcing and interdependent. The basic structures of traditional curriculum work, maintenance, serves as a platform for the curriculum leader to address more challenging and complex activities.

SCHOOL LEADERS MUST ALSO BE CURRICULUM LEADERS

As odd as it may seem, all school leaders must be curriculum leaders in order to maintain their role. In many schools, the “status leader” (principal, assistant principal) is the leader in name only. The true leader in any school building will be that person who can mediate between organizational tasks and individual needs. Said another way, followers in schools get satisfaction from participating in curriculum activities to the degree their needs are met. School teachers, working with children in classrooms each day, either follow the planned curriculum or don’t follow the planned curriculum, according to whether it is satisfying to them. If the teaching staff has not been involved in developing the curriculum they are to teach, or if it violates their values concerning teaching, the teacher may just shut the classroom door and follow his or her own dictates. For this reason, classroom teachers are the key to all curriculum work and must be fully and openly involved in the development of school programs.

Most curriculum leaders today are selected from the ranks of the best teachers in a school. In many ways, curriculum leadership is a lot like classroom teaching. It is the job of the curriculum leader to determine how to best involve all teachers in curriculum work and, in order to gain commitment, determine the needs of teachers. A new curriculum leader will rarely be successful if they try to “be the boss.” Instead, using his or her knowledge from the classroom, the new curriculum leader will try to mediate between the “system” (the district or school) and the needs of classroom teachers. In other words, he or she will individualize the experience for the teacher. Curriculum leadership is almost always a problem-solving process.

It is important to recognize that leading must go beyond the school curriculum team and the building teachers. Community members, particularly those with children in school, are very interested in what goes on in a school. Remember, curriculum development reflects values, and a successful curriculum effort must occur within the general value structure of a community or resistance will soon be in place.

THE LEADER AS HELPER AND GUIDE

Throughout this book the author will emphasize that curriculum leaders must operate in an open, involving, and facilitating way to be successful. Unlike an army general or a policeman, or even a principal of a school building, curriculum leaders don’t have traditional lines of authority. Curriculum leaders are staff members, with authority borrowed from those in the chain of command. Curriculum leaders must use persuasion and demonstrate competence to gain support and participation from others; they must help and they must guide.

In the long run, supportive or persuasive leadership (power with) is much more effective and natural than authoritative (power over) leadership. As the curriculum leader demonstrates the ability to organize, serve, and meet the needs of those in the school and the community, future leadership will be simple. The curriculum leader is helping those in the school and community to develop the program they want for children. This is a win-win situation for the leader, the teachers, parents, and members of the community.

What the followers in the school will demand from the curriculum leader is competence. Competence in the role of curriculum leadership would include working effectively with others, evidencing planning skills, being able to encourage effective communication among all parties, and delivering the results that have been projected through curriculum development activities.

ACCEPTING THE CHALLENGE OF CURRICULUM LEADERSHIP

I would encourage the reader to accept the challenge of curriculum leadership in his or her school. The reader may feel a reluctance to step up and lead, to be the organizer, and this is natural. Many times I have heard new curriculum leaders say, “But, I’m really only a classroom teacher,” or “I really don’t know too much about curriculum work.”

In fact, former teachers make the very best curriculum leaders because they rarely forget that the entire curriculum activity is ultimately about what happens to students in the classroom. Curriculum leaders aren’t just making fancy plans; they are designing real learning experiences for students. Designing learning experiences, ultimately, is the job.

Embedded in the reluctance of some new curriculum persons to assume leadership is a faulty perception that because they have gained the title, they are the leader. In reality, the individual will only be the real leader in curriculum as long as he or she can serve the needs of those who follow his or her lead. In this sense, leadership and follower-ship are interchangeable roles.

SUMMARY

Leadership in the field of curriculum can take two basic forms. Leaders can focus solely on maintaining the existing program through scheduled reviews, controlled activities, and limited problem solving; or the leader can broaden the work by providing vision, organization, and motivation so that others may participate in school design. The author believes that curriculum leadership in today’s schools must move beyond the maintenance or management function to address school reform for now, and for the future.

The tasks in both maintenance leadership and dynamic leadership overlap, and the minimal role of maintaining serves to support a more dynamic and future-oriented curriculum leadership role. In every community, and every school, local conditions will determine the ratio of these two forms of curriculum leadership.

END NOTES

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