ENSURING

High-Quality Curriculum

HOW TO

DESIGN

REVISE

OR

ADOPT

CURRICULUM ALIGNED TO
STUDENT SUCCESS

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INTRODUCTION

The "Big Picture" of Curriculum

"The 2nd grade teachers have common planning time once a month where they map out what they will be teaching."

"The curriculum writing team will be meeting on Thursdays after school."

"Please submit a list of recommendations for read-aloud books that support the social studies curriculum."

"The school board has approved the adoption of a new reading program."

These quotes capture the many and diverse ways that schools approach curriculum. Designing, adopting, or revising curriculum can be viewed as an exciting opportunity or a daunting task. An educator's perspective is based on each individual's prior experiences working with curriculum as well as that person's personal view as to what constitutes quality. When individuals are then put into groups to adopt or design a curriculum, as is often the case, it becomes very difficult for them to do so. Often the result is an unwieldy and unmanageable curriculum, the purchase of a program that does not quite match up with what a district needs or values, or some variation in between.

My experiences facilitating professional development programs related to curriculum led me to see a need for a book devoted to curriculum that readers would be able to use to guide the curriculum design process and evaluate curriculum in a meaningful and manageable way. Most books about curriculum are devoted to the design and examination of individual units of study that sit within the curriculum. What makes this book different is that it examines the "big picture" of curriculum—what needs to be considered when all the units are put together. By examining the big picture, educators can determine the curriculum's strengths and weaknesses, and they can decide where to focus attention in its design and revision or where to supplement when adopting a published curriculum. And there *will* be a need for evaluation and revision, because the statement "curriculum is a living document" is amply true. In fact, considering a curriculum "done" is really an indicator that it is time to revisit the curriculum again.

Layers of Curriculum

To begin the process of evaluating and designing curriculum, we first must define what we mean by curriculum. Traditionally, curriculum is thought of as the *what* in teaching—what students learn in school. It sounds simple enough, but what students learn is multilayered and can be interpreted as many things, including content, skills and strategies, processes, books and resources, and dispositions and habits of mind. To clarify the *what,* it is helpful to look at the different layers of curriculum (Martin-Kniep, 1999):

- *Formal curriculum* describes what students need to know, be able to do, and value.
- *Operational curriculum* translates formal curriculum into a plan for instruction.
- *Taught curriculum* is what is delivered in the classroom.
- *Assessed curriculum* is what is evaluated through formal measures.
- *Learned curriculum* is what students walk away understanding as a result of their learning experiences.

Formal Curriculum

When we hear the word *curriculum*, typically what we picture is the formal curriculum. Formal curriculum describes what students need to know, be able to do, and be like through statements in the form of national and local standards, content-specific understandings and practices, district- or teacher-generated outcomes and objectives, and other types of learning targets. Standards have different focuses but generally fall into three categories: process, content, and disposition. Process standards focus on skills and strategies, content standards identify either content-specific skills and practices or subject-specific information, and dispositional standards address ways of thinking or habits of mind.

Although standards have been used to guide classroom practice for many years, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have brought renewed attention to the standards-based design process and cause to revisit curriculum. The CCSS in English language arts (ELA) and literacy are an example of process standards. They lay out what students should be able to do at each grade level and are scaffolded from one grade level to the next, with each grade level building on the skills and processes from the previous grade level. They do not, however, prescribe the content that needs to be taught.

Content information can be gathered from other formal curriculum documents. For example, in New York State, social studies teachers use the CCLS (New York State's version of the CCSS) to guide reading and writing processes but use the state Social Studies Framework (New York State K–12 Social Studies Framework, n.d.) for guidelines regarding social studies content and practices specific to the discipline. The Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS, 2013) are content standards that articulate content, science and engineering practices, and crosscutting concepts.

Cognitive processes, social and work habits, and thinking demands or dispositions can also serve as formal curriculum because they describe what students should be like or express what is valued in learning. Often these cognitive processes or ways of thinking are not articulated through standards but rather through formal descriptions, scales, or progressions

such as Bloom's taxonomy, habits of mind (Costa & Kallick, 2000), and executive function skills. In this book, categorical descriptions such as these are referenced as standards.

Regardless of focus, formal curriculum describes what the learner needs to know, be able to do, and value. The key word here is *learner*. It is the responsibility of the school and teachers to ensure that students have the opportunity to learn and demonstrate the content, skills, processes, and dispositions embedded within the standards, and this responsibility, in turn, generates the need for an operational curriculum.

Operational Curriculum

Standards lay out priorities and serve as the driving force behind the curriculum, answering the question *Why do we have to teach that?* However, by themselves standards cannot be used in the classroom; they must be made operational. The operational curriculum brings together different types of standards, content, texts, and resources. It identifies ways to assess student learning and provides appropriate learning experiences that can be used during instruction.

There has been a great deal of confusion about the formal curriculum and the operational curriculum. Formal curriculum does not dictate specifics such as the texts students will read or the type of animal to be studied when learning about habitats. Those specifics are identified in the operational curriculum, and in a quality curriculum, they should reflect the values and priorities of the community the curriculum serves. Standards are designed to ensure that all students have the same skills and use the same processes, whereas curriculum identifies what content and resources they will be using to do so.

Taught, Assessed, and Learned Curriculum

Through the operational curriculum, teachers make decisions about what occurs in the classroom and implement the taught curriculum. Many factors affect this decision-making process, including time, interest, and makeup of the student body. Given that no teacher and group of

students are ever the same from one classroom to the next, the taught curriculum will not be exactly the same in every classroom. It is unreasonable to assume that all teachers of the same grade level will be teaching exactly the same thing, the same way, on the same day. A quality curriculum will provide the information that teachers require to make purposeful decisions to meet student needs and provide the appropriate pathway for meeting the expectations outlined in the operational curriculum without dictating a one-way-suits-all approach.

Through the assessed curriculum, teachers are able to determine what the students have and have not learned, identify areas of strengths and needs, and make decisions about next steps in instruction. Once again, choices are made as to what is assessed. A quality curriculum includes assessments that closely align to the standards and big ideas found in each unit. A quality curriculum will also include different types of assessments so teachers can accurately determine the learned curriculum—what students know and understand as a result of instruction—and how well student understanding aligns with the formal curriculum.

With so many layers in the curriculum, it is easy to see how standards can get "lost in translation." Students do not always leave the classroom understanding the skills, processes, and content that have been identified in the formal curriculum. Although many factors affect learning, one that we do have control over is the use of the formal curriculum to create a purposefully aligned, engaging, and meaningful curriculum for our students.

How This Book Is Organized

This book is organized in five sections similar to the steps in a standards-based design process used to create curriculum: organizational structure, standards, assessment, instruction, and format. The chapters in each section focus on a specific consideration for the creation and examination of curriculum. They provide a detailed look at what you need to consider when you are examining or designing quality curriculum, and they include many examples and illustrations from different schools, content

areas, and grade levels. (In addition, Appendix B walks you through an annotated 6th grade math unit to demonstrate how the attributes of quality curriculum apply to mathematics.) Within each chapter are tools and activities to help you further understand the attributes of a quality curriculum and, more important, to help you evaluate or plan your own curriculum and give you feedback as to what areas warrant further investigation. Each chapter ends with a summary, a brief recap of the tools and activities presented in the chapter, and a checklist that you can use during the evaluation or design process.

Organizational Structure of Curriculum

Consideration 1—Organizing Centers. The first area to consider when designing or evaluating curriculum is the organizing center. A unit's organizing center is communicated through its title, essential question, and big idea. A quality curriculum will organize units of study around centers that are worthy of the time and energy set aside for their pursuit and that reflect the overall intent and purpose of the curriculum. This chapter examines the various components that make up the organizing center for a unit and provides a simple tool and guiding questions that will help you to examine or plan the organizing centers for your curriculum.

Standards

Consideration 2—Alignment to Standards. As many teachers reconsider their curriculum because of the adoption of new standards, it is worthwhile to first examine the curriculum to determine how well the assessments and learning experiences align to the standards. Too often a curriculum lists standards in a way that denotes equal importance, and the curriculum user or writer accepts that tasks align to the standards in equal measure. This chapter focuses on the importance of examining how standards are communicated within a curriculum and provides activities that will help you determine the degree of alignment between tasks and standards.

Consideration 3—Standards Placement and Emphasis. Another consideration when examining standards is how they are placed within the

curriculum; order does matter. When determining placement and emphasis, it is important to consider factors such as the overall intent of the standards, grade-level focus standards, gradual release of responsibility, and developmentally appropriate practice. This chapter explores each of the factors in detail and provides you with a choice of standards-analysis tools that are helpful in evaluating the placement of standards within the curriculum or when planning for design.

Assessment

Consideration 4—Assessment Types and Purposes. Teachers use four types of assessments to determine what students know, are able to do, and value. The types are information recall, demonstration, product assessment, and process assessment. A quality curriculum includes different types of assessments that are congruent with the standards for the unit. Teachers use these various assessments at different moments to ascertain what students know and are able to do. A quality curriculum will therefore include diagnostic assessments as well as assessments used for formative and summative purposes. This chapter explores the role of different types of assessments and the purposes they serve within a curriculum.

Consideration 5—Curriculum-Embedded Performance Assessments. A quality curriculum will include assessments that produce as well as measure learning. This chapter presents criteria for high-quality curriculum-embedded performance assessments that serve this purpose. These assessments measure the most important learning for the unit, are congruent with and strongly align to standards, have an authentic audience and purpose, and include diagnostic and formative assessment moments.

Instruction

Consideration 6—Instruction. Learning experiences and lessons are two ways to communicate what should be taught daily. Either structure should include information about what students will do, why they will do it, and what the teacher will have as evidence of student learning. These lessons and learning experiences should be strongly aligned to the standards for

that unit. A quality curriculum includes learning experiences or lessons that address content, process, and dispositions. This chapter provides strategies for ensuring the use of different types of lessons and learning experiences and includes information to guide instruction.

Consideration 7—Resources That Support Instruction. Resources include texts, technology, and materials that support instruction. The guiding principle behind the selection of these materials is how they will serve the purpose of the learning experience. This chapter offers guiding questions to assist you in the selection of resources to support the curriculum.

Format

Consideration 8—Success with Your Curriculum. This chapter reiterates the information provided throughout the book and offers three final thoughts for successfully implementing and using your curriculum. A quality curriculum is easily accessible to teachers and other educators who use it, is supported by professional development, and is connected to student work. Included in this chapter are examples, guiding questions, and student work protocols to help you successfully implement your curriculum.