



HOW CURRICULUM AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING INTERSECT

Research has found that high-quality curricula have a significant impact on student achievement (Steiner, 2017; Chingos & Whitehurst, 2012). But a curriculum is not effective on its own. It requires teachers who understand it and use it with intentionality and professional judgment.

This means teachers who know the curriculum and their students well. It also means teachers who have the time and support to hone their practice collaboratively in a way that brings the curriculum alive and advances student learning (Wiener & Pimentel, 2017).

Learning Forward will explore this critical topic deeply throughout our publications and at our institutes and Annual Conference. The two articles that follow are a key starting point.

In the first, p. 57, Learning Forward Executive Director Stephanie Hirsh takes a close look at the work school-based learning teams do in studying their

curriculum materials to improve capacity and refine teaching. The second, p. 58, by Learning Forward Deputy Executive Director Frederick Brown, examines the role of leadership in implementing high-quality curriculum in Wake County Public School System in North Carolina.

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Focus professional learning communities on curriculum

BY STEPHANIE HIRSH

Grade-level, subject-specific professional learning communities are the vehicle for achieving the promise of high-quality curriculum. Surveys have found that teachers regularly supplement and modify district curricula or use materials that they or their colleagues developed (Kane, Owens, Marinell, Thal, & Staiger, 2016; Opfer, Kaufman, & Thompson, 2016). Professional learning communities have the potential to ensure that those decisions are made carefully and in ways that increase coherence and learning across classrooms within a school.

At the same time, they also have the potential to ensure that the best ideas are shared across community members' classrooms rather than confined to a single classroom. In this way, well-structured professional learning communities can help advance equity for all students in a school and, when implemented consistently across all schools, within a school district.

GREEN DOT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Instruction Partners, a nonprofit that works with teachers and leaders to strengthen instruction and unlock student potential, recently published a white paper examining the experiences of schools implementing rigorous curricula.

One of the sites it works with is Green Dot Public Schools in Memphis, Tennessee. At Green Dot, teachers use an alternating structure for their work.

One week a month, teachers work in grade-level teams using a protocol to unpack an upcoming lesson together. During this time, teachers focus on preparing a lesson, such as solving the math problems they will present to students, anticipating where students might get stuck and how to support them without watering down rigor, and how to guide text-based discussions.

In the other weeks, teachers review student work from the lesson they had planned together and analyze the work to refine their instructional practice. They might look at exit ticket data, examine common assessment data for trends, and pinpoint opportunities for reteaching or things to keep in mind as they move forward to the next unit.

Green Dot is doing this in grade-specific learning teams across its network of five schools, and it has selected curriculum leads — expert teachers from each grade — to facilitate.

Teachers work closely with the curriculum lead to determine which lessons are must-do versus may-do, pacing, and which questions to make anchor questions across classrooms. Green Dot continues to make adjustments to its approach in response to teacher feedback, such as shifting



from virtual to in-person meetings.

“I think teachers definitely learn best when they learn from one another,” says Chrystie Edwards, director of academics for Green Dot in Memphis. “One of the best outcomes that we didn’t anticipate was the productive struggle for adults ... for one teacher to see another teacher struggle and persist, and to see the corresponding increase in achievement data is a motivator beyond no other. We’re starting to see pockets of that.”

Instead of spending their time writing lessons from scratch or searching for materials online, teachers can now go deeper into content and understanding how to meet each student’s needs. They then are positioned to modify and supplement the lessons in ways that increase coherence and learning. And by reviewing student work and assessing what is working together, they can advance equity.

Continued on p. 58, Hirsh

How systems can support high-quality curricula

BY FREDERICK BROWN

Learning Forward Executive Director Stephanie Hirsh argues that the impact of high-quality curricula will be fully realized when grade-level, subject-specific professional learning communities place deep study and planning for how to use these instructional materials at the core of their work. (See article on p. 57.)

But, as Learning Forward’s Standards for Professional Learning make clear, those teams should be part of a more comprehensive, multifaceted approach to educator learning. System leaders and the system itself play a critical role in providing support and context for this important work.

One example of that is how the Wake County Public School System in North Carolina has approached the first



adoption of new curricula in a decade. The district, which serves 160,000 students, was part of the Learning Forward Academy Class of 2017. The Academy experience helped inform the district’s approach: To ensure equitable

access to powerful learning every day, school systems must ensure that teachers engage in ongoing professional learning grounded in the materials they use daily with students.

THE CURRICULUM GAP

“We had a really slow and strategic curriculum strategy process,” says Brian Kingsley, assistant superintendent for academics. It began in the 2015-16 school year, when the district worked with TNTP to use a walk-through tool in 250 classrooms to see how instruction was shifting to align with the state’s new learning standards. The district also held focus groups with teachers and students about the instructional materials they were using.

“It was pretty glaring how big of a

Continued from p. 57, Hirsh

BECOMING A LEARNING TEAM

I’ve written about this (with Tracy Crow) in the book *Becoming a Learning Team* (2017), which outlines a learning cycle for teachers in teams.

In our five-stage cycle, teachers examine data to identify areas for their learning focus, set student and educator learning goals, create a learning agenda for themselves, implement their learning with support from colleagues, and assess outcomes and modify their actions to improve results.

Teachers’ collaboration throughout the cycle is focused on what students are learning — or not — in the classroom. And that is grounded in the curriculum in place in the school.

These types of structured learning teams are at the heart of Learning Forward’s Standards for Professional Learning. And they are the connective tissue between having curriculum as a resource and using a curriculum well.

Strong learning communities must be part of a coherent instructional improvement infrastructure that must also include:

- **Skillful leaders**, who develop capacity and advocate for and create support systems for professional learning;
- **Resources** that are prioritized, monitored, and coordinated for educator learning;
- A variety of sources and types of **student, educator, and system data** to plan, assess, and evaluate professional learning;
- Effective **learning designs** that integrate theories, research, and models of human learning to achieve its desired outcomes;

gap there was between what teachers were using, what they had access to, and what was truly standards-aligned and rigorous,” says Kingsley. “Our standards across the country really elevated with the Common Core, but, at the same time, we had a recession. So, unfortunately, curriculum budgets bottomed out just as we were raising expectations for teachers and kids.”

As a result, many Wake County teachers were developing their own units independently, with a heavy reliance on Pinterest, Teachers Pay Teachers, and other open educational resources that were not necessarily standards-aligned or comprehensive in nature.

Wake County sent out a request for proposals to identify standards-aligned curricula that also met several other district criteria: cultural responsiveness, compatibility with its existing learning management and student information systems, cost, and alignment with the district’s strategic plan.

The district then rated all of the potential winners for standards alignment by using the Instructional Materials Evaluation Tool developed by Student Achievement Partners and by reviewing ratings on EdReports, an independent, third-party arbiter.

In the end, Wake County selected

two sets of comprehensive open educational resource materials that had received high ratings on EdReports: EL Education’s English language arts curriculum for grades 3-8 and the Mathematics Vision Project curriculum for grades 9-12.

One of the biggest values of using the two comprehensive sets of open educational resources, says Kingsley, was that it enabled the district to free up dollars that would have been spent on textbooks for professional learning. The district has invested more than \$1.5 million in professional learning this year tied to the new curriculum materials.

GOING SLOW TO GO FAST

The district chose to go slow to go fast. In the 2017-18 school year, it implemented the EL Education curriculum with teachers in grades 3 and 6 and the Mathematics Vision Project curriculum in Math 1 only. All teachers in those grades are engaging in four days of in-person professional learning over the course of the year to unpack the curriculum, led by the curriculum developers. The district also created online Google communities for teachers by grade and subject to share ideas.

“That’s been instrumental to making them realize that they’re not

doing this in isolation,” says Kingsley. “It also helps with coherence because teachers across all of our schools are now using the same content. I’m excited about what that means from the lens of equity in our school system.”

But the district realized skillful curriculum use cannot rest solely with teachers. It also has implications for leadership throughout the system. So Wake County created instructional leadership teams at every school in the district that include the principal and eight to 10 other members of the school staff. The goal, says Kingsley, “was so we could all learn together what high-quality instruction looks like rather than doing it in silos.”

Those teams come together as cohorts across the district six times over the course of the year to also learn about the new curricula and about successful pedagogical practices, based on the district’s instructional blueprint.

Each instructional leadership team is responsible for developing the professional learning plan for its school site, based on its existing infrastructure, from professional learning teams, to faculty meetings, to daylong retreats.

The last piece of the district’s three-legged stool is a district instructional

Continued on p. 60, Brown

- **Implementation** that supports long-term change, based on understanding the change management process;
- **Outcomes** aligned with educator performance and state education standards.

Research demonstrates that two of the most powerful levers for improving student learning are effective teachers and high-quality curricula. Bringing them together in structured, professional learning communities has the potential to improve teaching to the benefit of all students.

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TAKEAWAYS

Several lessons to take away from Wake County's experience:

- **Wake County's educators** recognize that an excellent curriculum provides a foundation to quality lessons in all classrooms. At the same time, they understand that implementing new curriculum is challenging. While professional development can support many initiatives, nothing was more important in this case than investing resources for professional learning for the successful implementation of the curriculum.

- **Leaders help to create** cultures where educators share the value that a teacher's time is best spent



contextualizing effective curriculum and lessons rather than searching for them. When teachers have confidence they are working with high-quality materials, they can apply their professional expertise to ensuring every student has a meaningful learning experience.

- **Leaders have the responsibility** to establish a vision and framework for identifying, selecting, and implementing the curricula, and then, through the course of implementation, apply change management principles when introducing new materials and pacing

gradual implementation. In fact, this responsibility is outlined in the *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015*, which state, "Effective educational leaders develop and support intellectually rigorous and coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to promote each student's academic success and well-being" (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, p. 12).

Teams at multiple levels share collective responsibility for supporting this complex work. Principals and central office administrators distribute leadership and spread learning through school and district instructional leadership teams that include educators from various levels.

The Standards for

Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) are embodied throughout this work: **Leadership** as leaders advocate for job-embedded professional learning; **Outcomes** as educators emphasize the importance of equity and rigorous student standards in materials selection; **Learning Communities** as teachers use a learning cycle to ensure effective implementation, to name just three.

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— Frederick Brown

Continued from p. 59, Brown leadership team, comprising all principal supervisors, academic senior directors, assistant superintendents, and the deputy superintendent. "Anybody who is a senior leader in our district who touches instruction is a part of this working group," says Kingsley, "as well as a cohort of five principals to ensure a school-based perspective is front and center."

The district leadership team stays six months ahead of what the school-based leadership teams are experiencing to ensure alignment.

ENCOURAGING RESULTS

So far, the results have been encouraging. Baseline data from teachers show:

- Seven in 10 teachers believe the new curricula to be of high

quality.

- Eight in 10 understand how the new curriculum materials are aligned to the rigor of the standards.
- Eight in 10 believe the new curricula demonstrate opportunities for students to engage in the "4 Cs" of communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking.

At the same time, teachers have expressed a desire for more training around issues like pacing, questioning techniques, and how to continue scaffolding English language learners.

Based on the feedback, the district will implement the English language arts curriculum across grades 3-8 next school year, and the high school math curriculum across the three relevant

math courses. And it is conducting an internal evaluation to continue to monitor the impact of the new instructional materials and professional learning on teachers and students.

"I'm excited about where we're headed," says Kingsley. "We still have a lot of learning to do, but we've made some key decisions about what these processes look like in our schools. Our principals and teachers are reaping the benefits of having a consistent message, but they also realize we've raised the game in terms of expectations."

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