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Curriculum NOW

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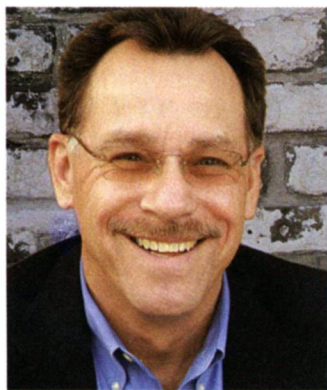
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# Curriculum NOW

Curriculum brings coherence to the whole educational endeavor.

If we knew — really knew — what could have the largest impact on learning and the achievement gap, would we implement it?

Because we do know. Curriculum — what we actually teach — may be the single largest school factor that affects learning, intellectual development, and college and career readiness.

If we're serious about improving schools, this is the place to start. Until we have built a clear, coherent curriculum for every course, we'll only have a superficial impact on learning or achievement. To be clear: A good working curriculum consists of a thoughtfully-selected sequence of common content topics, essential intellectual skills, and — if we're smart — an accompanying set of adequately complex core and optional texts (po-

ems, books, selected textbook readings, etc.). It must also include writing assignments for each course. It need not be a national or even district curriculum, and shouldn't be airtight; it should give teachers some room to teach some of their own favorite topics and readings. And it doesn't have to be perfect; even decent curriculum — if serviceably taught — would have a game-changing impact on outcomes and equity.

A remarkable convergence of research argues for the primacy of a coherent, content-rich curriculum that abounds in opportunities for reading, writing, and discussion in every subject area. Such curriculum would have more effect on reading ability, higher-order comprehension, and test scores than any other factor (Hirsch, 2008; Willingham, 2009). It is the basis for success in college and careers (Conley, 2006). According to Robert Marzano, the curriculum that is taught — vs. the written version — will have more impact on learning than any other in-school factor (2003). Certainly, effective instruction — how we teach — is profoundly important (and the subject of my next column). But even the best pedagogy can't overcome the negative effects of incoherent curriculum, just as the best exercise regimen can't overcome the damage done by a diet of fast food.

It is no surprise, then, that

a coherent, liberal arts curriculum is the common denominator in the success of the highest-achieving countries that take the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) exam (Munson, 2011).

Finally, as Judith Little, Rick DuFour, and others have written for decades, common curriculum is the essential precondition for productive professional learning communities (PLCs) and the common assessments that are the essential engine of continuous improvement. For these conversations to have their intended effect on achievement goals, they must be rooted in common curriculum. I can't tell you how many frustrated PLCs I have seen that still can't see the root cause of their arrested development: the absence of coherent curriculum.

All this makes the current moment immensely propitious: Right now, only a tiny fraction of schools own and operate a clear, coherent, literacy-rich curriculum. Many schools implement a test-prep curriculum that is nothing but a content-poor corruption of real curriculum.

How can this be? We've invested billions in standards documents, curriculum revisions, curriculum maps, and scope-and-sequence guides. But these were, in the end, only paper exercises. The actual taught curriculum continues to depend, more

than anything, on which teacher a student happens to get (Rotherham, Marzano, & Schmidt, in Schmoker, 2011).

Why haven't we addressed this urgent priority? Because we've been too busy "dabbling in pedagogical, management and accountability fads" (*American Educator* 2010/11). It's time that we realized that trying to improve schools in the absence of decent curriculum is like trying to dig the Erie Canal — with spoons.

Even decent curriculum — if serviceably taught — would have a game-changing impact on outcomes and equity.

So, what should we do? Our task is fairly simple: Drop nearly everything, however seductive, and build such curriculum for every course. Recent developments from the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) provide critical support for this effort. Two writers of the standards, on behalf of the CCSS, are now acknowledging that the bewildering lists of standards provided for the English language arts are too numerous and confusing to be useful as guides or as the basis for curriculum. Their advice is to

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“focus on the cornerstones” instead of the overly parsed array of grade-by-grade skills and standards (Gewertz, 2011, p. 1).

Focus on the cornerstones. That is, build curriculum around a coherent selection and sequence of texts within and across each course and grade level. Then, ensure that students have

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abundant opportunities to closely read, discuss, and write about these texts in direct response to high-quality questions about increasingly complex texts: selected textbook pages, essays, speeches, opinion pieces, newspaper and magazine articles. The predominant mode for such close reading, discussion, and writing should be some form of argument, such as having students support claims with evidence as they analyze, explain, and research topics they're studying. Only this will ensure that they're college and career ready (Coleman & Pimentel, 2011, pp. 4 and 5).

But the CCSS writers go an important step further. They have begun to provide specifics about the amount and frequency of such work. They strongly suggest, for example, that at least one week per grading period be devoted to helping students complete a short research paper. Additional specificity now comes from the Partner-

ship for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), which has been charged with creating assessments for the CCSS. PARCC has published clear guidelines for the number of books and other challenging texts to be read in each subject and grade-level. David Conley has recommended this as the only solution to the anemic reading and writing diet so many students receive in our classrooms (2006).

There are real schools that already own and operate just such curricula. Others come close, too (Schmoker, 2011, pp. 121-126). I'll be writing about them in upcoming columns.

Do we really want better schools? Then, it's time we made this our highest, near-exclusive priority. Start this week. Have teams reduce and identify the most essential content standards and topics for each course, and arrange them by grading period. Then, have them begin to collect and assemble interesting, content-rich texts for the content taught in the first grading period. (They can finish this work at subsequent team meetings.) Set deadlines; continuously share the best work and texts with other teams and schools. And don't worry about “perfect” curriculum; there's no such thing. Even rough, conscientious efforts here will result in more coherence and an invaluable selection of quality texts for most courses.

The editors of *American Educator* — the publication produced by and for the American Federation of Teachers — tell us, “we have been pursuing the peripheral,” while the best schools in the world “have been pursuing the fundamental...and that has made all the difference” (2010/11, p. 2). Let's start building curriculum. Now.



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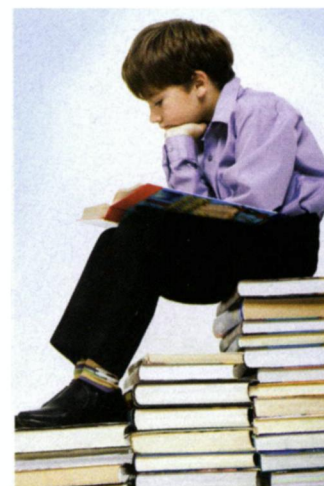
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## A call to arms . . .

If you have done some good curriculum work, I'd love to see it. E-mail me ([schmoker@futureone.com](mailto:schmoker@futureone.com)) an example of a good working curriculum for a single course, one that has a sequentially-arranged set of essential standards, divided by grading period. Be sure to provide:

- The essential, common readings that support the essential curricular content (poems, books, selected textbook pages), and
- The common, required writing assignments for the course (e.g., one three-page paper per semester).

I will share the best of these curricula and make them available online — as models for others who wish to create a simple, coherent curriculum for every course.