

PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE CHANGE:

Curriculum Revision That Works

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Abstract - As school districts across the nation address societal demands and legislative mandates to prepare a workforce for the 21st century, school leaders find themselves working to change curriculum within their schools. To achieve this challenging, sometimes controversial task of curriculum alignment and revision, school leaders must work with diverse constituencies to achieve the best balance of needs, desires, appropriate assessment, and instruction. Achieving effective curriculum revision, therefore, requires a thorough understanding of the processes and principles of the changing paradigms affecting curriculum development.

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School districts across the nation have begun revising instructional programs in an effort to meet society's demands for a 21st century workforce. Determining what these needs are, how to address them, and how to revise established curriculum often rests in the laps of many building level administrators. Often these building principals find themselves at the center of a controversy they did not want, do not deserve, and cannot fix. Yet, they are charged with full responsibility for the often mandated "curriculum revision" process. Many times these same educational leaders have not had adequate preparation for, nor do they have a full understanding of, what is expected, with regard to the curriculum revision project. This demand for change to meet the needs of a 21st century educational program is challenging even the best educational leaders.

This study and the subsequent recommendations had their origin in the frustration of two building administrators who were given the responsibility of "designing a curriculum revision project which would upgrade the established instructional program and improve classroom instruction" (the quote of their superintendent assigning the task). In other words, the 'taught' curriculum was to be revised in order to match the newly integrated assessment model mandated by the state. Teachers, community leaders, and students were not necessarily ready for a curriculum revision project, and the need for such a process was certainly not a priority in the minds of many. As a small rural district without a curriculum coordinator, the building principals were given the responsibility for achieving the goal of developing an effective curriculum revision program which would meet the needs of a 21st century workforce. As in so many cases of effective educational change, need born of necessity created this study, the results, and the subsequent recommendations for effective curriculum revision

Summary: Review of Literature

Within the literature on curricular revision, three major premises were identified. First, the society and culture served by an educational community dictate the needs, obligations, and responsibilities expected of the educational program. Second, society perpetuates itself with educational programming, i.e. the content and methodology of instruction referenced as *educational curriculum*. Third, systemic change, as in the form of transitioning educational curriculum, is often difficult at best and controversial at worst. These three elements combine to offer a strong foundation from which educators can begin to address what is taught at all levels, the needs of a respondent society, and the changing roles of classroom practitioners.

As noted above, the society and culture served by an educational community dictate the needs, obligations, and responsibilities expected of the educational program. A traditionally accepted view of educational curriculum states that it (curriculum) is the information which should be taught with the underlying purpose of “standardizing” the behaviors of the society by educating the young in the traditions and rituals of that culture (Beyer & Liston, 1996; Borrowman, 1989; Glatthorn, 1987; Tanner & Tanner, 1995). Likewise, Glatthorn (1987) offered that beliefs and behaviors of each ethnic group or geographical area were developed in order to foster and teach children specific skills necessary for the transition from childhood to adulthood, thereby sustaining or advancing the convictions of that culture. In the same vein, but addressing the need for change, Purpel (1972) proposed that the primary responsibility for the child’s learning was historically determined by the parent, but as society became more complex, the needs for specialized training grew, necessitating more formal training. It is obvious, therefore, that the curriculum must meet the needs and current demands of the culture, the society, and the expectations of the population being served. To this end, the educational reform process is still undergoing review, revision, and constant change.

Also noted above, society perpetuates itself with educational programming, i.e. the content and methodology of instruction referenced as *educational curriculum*. Borrowman (1989) stated that education is the process by which individuals gain knowledge, skills, values, habits, and attitudes. Societal mores, cultural norms, and practical needs compel the incorporation of various components of learning and information. Hence, the educational curriculum is vitally important to a society's success and may become extremely controversial when conflicting views emerge.

Finally, as noted earlier, systemic change, as in the form of transitioning educational curriculum, is often a challenge to all concerned and in some cases, may even create a negative, divisive environment. It is an accepted fact that without acceptance and *buy-in* by all major constituencies, long-lasting systemic change cannot occur. Cited by Beyer and Liston (1996), James B. MacDonald (1975) suggested that “. . . in many ways, all curriculum design and development is political in nature. . . .” Continuing in that line of reasoning, Olson and Rothman (1993) offered that while the last decade has been one of challenge and excitement for American education, the fragmented and isolationist manner in which many of the reform efforts have been implemented brought about no lasting change. Substantiating this view that change was necessary despite overt resistance, various authors (Henderson & Hawthorne, 1995; Jelinek, 1978; Kallen, 1996; Patterson, 1997; Toch & Daniel, 1996, Wagner, 1998) presented strong arguments that outdated strategies (the implementation of curriculum) had to be discarded and ineffectual methodology eliminated. Concurring with these views that change was not only necessary but imminent, Scott (1994) declared that curriculum revision projects of the past twenty years had in reality been dismal failures with a high cost to taxpayers, students, and educators.

Monson and Monson (1993) presented the need for collaborative, sanctioned revision by all stakeholders with an emphasis on the performance of teacher leaders. It has been suggested that the educational community must include those not usually considered to be at the leading edge of

school reform initiatives. Hargreaves (1995) and Kyriakides (1997) both emphasized the importance of creating coordinated efforts that supported a modification of teachers' roles in policy revision as it related to curriculum review and revision. Despite the fact that the emergent view of teachers' roles are often in conflict with the traditional view of teachers' performance (Monson & Monson, 1993; Hargreaves, 1995; Scott, 1994), the leadership roles of teachers are becoming more prevalent, more dominant, and more demanding. Questions facing the educational community, therefore, revolve around what reforms will be implemented, what process will be used, and how to make the revisions effective and sustaining.

Accepting that changing an educational curriculum can be a challenge, the involvement of all stakeholders, especially individuals who are directly involved in student instruction, is an especially vital piece in successful curriculum revision. The review of literature substantiated the concern that until the parameters of curriculum revision are defined and understood, the process will suffer from confusion and failure for decades to come.

Background of the Investigation

As in many states during the 1990s, educational reform efforts in Missouri addressed educational curriculum revision which had become closely tied to school districts' accreditation, assessment procedures, and staff evaluation. Pleasing the constituencies, parents, business, and communities, while simultaneously addressing test scores, community values, and student needs, found principals and teachers torn between understanding what to present, how to teach, and when to test. The overall expectation, however, was to "jump in" and revise the instructional curriculum, thereby "improving" existing instructional programs. Excellent materials were available; good resources were developed; professional development opportunities were heavily emphasized. Why then were so many curriculum revision projects considered a "bust" when evaluated by the administrative teams or community steering committees? Test scores did not indicate strong

improvement; in fact, in many cases they were considered inadequate or even worse, disastrous.

Teacher morale went down. Communities were in uproars about “changing what their kids were taught.” While some districts were experiencing tremendous success in the curriculum revision projects and the subsequent assessment procedures, others were experiencing total lack of improvement. There did not appear to be a correlation between the amount of money spent and success of the curriculum revision projects; nor did there appear to be a relationship to the geographic or economic status of the districts experiencing success. The reasons for the lack of improvement were as varied as the school districts or community members with whom one spoke. What was the difference?

Based on the anecdotal review, questions began to arise. While several primary research questions were developed, an overview of noteworthy areas included the following:

1. What determined the “success” of curriculum revision processes?
2. Were there specific factors that had a significant impact on whether or not the revision project was successful?
3. Did teachers have strong views on the process of curriculum revision processes?
4. Did teacher attitudes and/or backgrounds have an impact on the success or failure of curriculum revision procedures?
5. Did the revision procedures have an influence?
6. What effect, if any, did pre-service training have on the revision process?
7. Could these factors be identified and generalized to other programs?

Based on this initial examination of the topic, the research study was developed. The purpose of the study was to determine what, if any, key elements would affect successful curriculum revision projects. The goal of the study was to determine correlates of successful programs that would enable teachers and principals to progress through the revision process and to

culminate the project with a strong instructional program and a useable curriculum. The study was conducted in a two-year research project concluding in the Spring of 1999. The findings offered significant opportunity for further study, information for practicing administrators and teachers, and knowledge for teacher and principal preparation programs. Conclusions offer methods and means of improving the effectiveness of curriculum revision programs. Since it is obvious that education will continue to change and curriculum will perpetually be altered, this information is of vital importance regarding principles for principals and effective curriculum revision.

Procedure, Investigation, Limitations

Procedure

The research design focused on perspectives of practitioners. The study design was a quantitative analysis using a Likert scale response checklist. Analyses of the 28 response options were combined with six constructed response opportunities blending a quantitative analyses with a qualitative review. To further substantiate the data, 4 focus groups were interviewed with general patterns and themes evaluated. The focus group participants were selected from school districts not participating in the print survey instrument.

Investigation

The study sample consisted of educational practitioners employed by public school districts within the Southeastern quadrant of Missouri. A total of 147 districts were included in the initial research sample. A total of 49 school districts were randomly selected representing one-third (33.3%) of the total districts located within the identified geographical area. Of the total 49 districts requested to participate, a total of 41 Superintendents responded in the affirmative for participation. This equated to a total of 246 surveys being submitted to practitioners. Of this initial mailing, 190 respondents returned surveys for a 77% response rate. Of these participants, 73% were classroom teachers and 27% were building level and central office leaders. The classroom practitioners

represented the core content areas of math, science, English, and history as well as physical education, vocational education, and all special programs within the traditional educational program.

Limitations

This study addressed an educational issue of national significance, but this project was limited specifically to the state of Missouri. The number of participants and the number/size of school districts were limited and located solely within the Southeastern quadrant of the state of Missouri. While selection of the participants was done by random assignment, final designation of respondents was at the discretion of the building level administrators.

Results of the Study

Based on the research results, several conclusions were derived. First, there was no major difference in teachers' or administrators' responses in the areas of gender, professional assignment, training, or educational tenure. An area that did appear to have strong significance was the in-service training component. Overwhelmingly, districts provided in-service training, and respondents considered this an essential element in the success of a curriculum revision project. Teachers and principals both emphasized the need for specific training. They consistently stated that training in the actual revision process, a clear understanding of the project, and a focused effort toward a cohesive result, were imperatives.

Consistency of review and on-going assistance were two areas additionally emphasized. Teachers and principals both agreed that the traditional "one-shot" in-service program was inadequate. In fact, statistical data were strongly substantiated by the focus groups' responses which portrayed the reason for project success or failure as the periodic (weekly or monthly) meetings (or lack thereof) on the revision processes. A third area of repeated emphasis was the time element of

the in-service training. As stated above, the “one-shot” in-service approach, a one time, in-depth in-service training, did not work. Responses strongly focused on the need for frequent interaction. Time frames of hours, days, weeks, or months did not appear to have an impact. Rather, the ***frequency*** of contact during the time frame underscored the perceived success or failure of the project.

Personal ownership within the curriculum revision process was vital. Initiation of the curriculum revision process did not appear to have significant impact. Within the interim process, however, the actual personal involvement in the revision project was extremely important. If the curriculum were “brought in” by the administrators, outside experts, etc., the effectiveness of the program was considered to be negligible. ***It is important to note the statistical results indicated the effectiveness rate was considerably higher when the curriculum was reviewed, rewritten, and established by practitioners directly using the program.***

One of the most interesting points during the study was a by-product analysis. ***When asked about changes or alteration of instruction, there was no significant statistical difference. Based on respondents’ reactions, there was no significant statistical difference in changes or alteration of direct classroom instruction upon completion of the curriculum revision process.*** A large majority of the respondents indicated that the teaching methods used at the conclusion of the revision projects did not significantly alter, if at all, the processes and information related through classroom instruction.

Conclusions/Recommendations of the Study

On the basis of this investigation, the review of literature, and the conclusions developed from prescribed data of the study, the following recommendations were made.

- 1. Practicing educators, both administrators and classroom instructors, must be directly involved in successful curriculum revision processes.***

Not only must the “team” approach be fully implemented in the initial revision process, the two elements must be consistently sustained.

First, administrators must maintain an on-going involvement in the revision process. Second, teachers must have strong support, consistent feedback, and continual opportunity for professional discussion.

2. *The time frame for training and revision procedures should be of short duration.*

The “one-shot” approach does not work. The single day, or even two or three day training sessions are not effective. The results of this study indicated that combined with number one above, the revision process, training, conversations, and review, must be long-term and periodic. Teachers indicated that “identify, revise, experience, and review” would be a much more effective method of actually revising the “taught” curriculum than the method commonly used of revising and moving on. While this (typical) method might have “aligned” the curriculum with the new assessment, it did not create an effective change in classroom instruction or teaching strategies.

3. *The review process must be consistent throughout an extended period of revision.*

This is addressed above. Teachers stated, both statistically and anecdotally, that without consistent, frequent, periodic review of the changing curriculum, the process is little more than an exercise in futility.

The practitioners strongly suggested that a willingness to adapt their instruction would occur as soon as the curriculum revision became significant enough to merit continuous discussion and implementation, i.e. evaluation, student involvement, teacher involvement, parental involvement, and administrative support.

4. *Participants in the revision process should have access to continuous assistance, opportunity for frequent discussion, and periodic review throughout the entire process. This will increase the essential “buy-in” noted so often as vital for effective curriculum reform.*

Discussed previously. Teachers consistently emphasized professional discussion, consistent opportunities to review the changes, and evaluation of the effectiveness of the proposed changes.

5. *In-district expertise must be combined with out-of-district authorities to better accommodate demands and the expectations of the curricular revision procedures.*

The often used term “buy-in” cannot be over-emphasized in this study. The results indicated that while information from experts who study curriculum revision extensively is well-received, there must be an internal review process and support system to fully effect the process. Returning to the now familiar refrain, the out-of-district opportunities cannot replace the in-district consistency of review needed to fully implement an effective process.

In both, districts which felt they had attained successful curriculum revision, as well as in districts which felt they had not been successful, similar indicators emerged. First, specific knowledge related to the revision process must be provided. Second, the review process must be in-house, frequent, and supportive.

6. *Better understanding of the curriculum, curricular revision, and curriculum needs are being developed. Further need exists, however, as indicated by the lack of change in classroom instruction.*

As we accept the changing needs of our schools, we accept the changing needs of the curriculum. To effectively implement these changes, however, we must begin to learn more about the process of systemic change, how to implement it effectively, and how to incorporate the ideal of teacher leadership throughout the curriculum revision process.

To effect long-lasting change in classroom instruction, a substantive change must first occur in the curriculum.

The building leader must collaborate even more effectively with his/her staff and constituencies. No one individual can be responsible for the entire curriculum revision process; it is truly a ‘team-approach’

Summary

The area of curriculum is one of controversy, concern, and conflict. Without doubt, however, educational curriculum is one of society’s foundational components. As stated in the recommendations, while improvement is undoubtedly occurring in the taught curriculum via the mandated curriculum revision processes, there seems to be some doubt as to the long-lasting, substantive change in educational programming. Thousands of dollars are obligated throughout school districts across the nation for the purpose of revising curricula, and yet too often, the response from communities, teachers, and students suggests that the actual classroom instruction is not adapting to the needs of a new century. If there is no substantive change in content with direct classroom instruction, what is the purpose of revising the curriculum? Change in society is

occurring. The responsibility to address the needs created by this change lies at the door of educational leaders, classroom teachers, administrators, and community leaders. The results of this study clearly indicate that attention to some relatively easily managed details could offer significant improvement in the successful implementation of effective curriculum revision efforts. It is incumbent upon school leaders to develop a process that will achieve effective curriculum revision.

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