

# Are You a Game-Changer on Curriculum Implementation? Principals should have a working knowledge of and be active participants in course content

By David Hammond

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As the principal of a large, comprehensive high school for seven years, one of my frustrations was how my teachers and building staff were supported—or not supported—when we implemented new curriculum. I always found that the district conducted a thorough and exhaustive adoption process to ensure we chose curriculum that would support the needs of our students, but it failed to supply principals with the tools and training to support the ongoing implementation. And, in most cases, it failed to garner principal input during the implementation planning process.



As I moved from my role as the principal at Curtis High School to the assistant superintendent of elementary schools in the Bethel School District in Washington state, I kept at my core the belief that principal leadership was the single most important characteristic for high-performing schools. At the district level, my goal was to ensure that all principals had the skills and attributes to make sound decisions for their building and, most important, to preserve the authority principals needed to excel in their responsibilities. To that end, I set out to create a principal-involved structure within the district to support the implementation of new curriculum.

The support for new curriculum was a timely undertaking in Bethel because, like most districts around the country, we needed to respond to the shift to Common Core State Standards. Our current English-language arts and math curricula were woefully inadequate, so we set out on an ambitious journey to adopt two new curricula in two years. In order for this to be successful, we needed to guarantee that district-level resources were perfectly in line with the needs of the building.

## Curriculum Knowledge

First, we wanted to ensure that principals had a working knowledge of the curriculum and were given training to help them understand the teachers' role in delivering it to their students. Principals need to understand the content and instructional philosophy behind a curriculum because they are the ones designing professional development for their building staff. They must also understand a curriculum's pacing to effectively schedule the school day.

Unfortunately, getting principals the training sessions they needed was problematic because we found that publishing companies did not offer resources for administrators. Their focus was solely on the teachers delivering the content. In an effort to involve principals in the layout of the curriculum, our teaching and learning department identified key teacher trainings for principals to attend. Those

trainings were used to build knowledge of the curriculum to guide principals in their support of teachers. For some districts, principals gaining a working knowledge of the curriculum and learning how teachers delivered the curriculum to their students was enough. In Bethel, this merely served as a starting point for the work our principals would be doing during implementation.

Next, we redesigned an existing structure for principal professional learning communities (PLCs). We felt that principals learn useful instructional leadership and instructional strategies when given the opportunity to converse with their colleagues about instruction. This new model supports supervision and evaluation with a collaborative, constructivist, and decentralized approach in which self-analysis, reflection, peer observation, and feedback are encouraged. The ongoing conversations principals had with relation to the new ELA and math curriculum helped them build content knowledge and instructional practices vital to a successful implementation.

## Teaching and Learning Department

Next, and arguably most important, were the systems of support for teachers developed in concert with the district's Teaching and Learning Department. An ongoing collaboration between Teaching and Learning and the principals helped to focus our efforts. Instead of 17 buildings trying to support new curricula in isolation, we created a mechanism for principals to continually share the results of their efforts so that Teaching and Learning could respond to the needs of the principals in real time. This mechanism brought together a core group of principals to meet with the Teaching and Learning Department monthly throughout the year. Principals on this committee included representatives from each of the four principal PLCs. This design supported a communications structure that involved all principals. The result was principal-supported teacher PLCs with a common focus on lesson design, reverse planning, data to inform instruction, and the instructional needs of students.

During the first few months of our Eureka Math implementation, we saw how principals supported and worked with teacher PLCs. Great Minds, the publisher for Eureka, offered a battery of training designed to help support teachers as they navigated this new Common Core-aligned math curriculum. We committed to sending principals alongside teachers to receive this valuable training. As a result, principals were able to gain valuable information about one of the cornerstones of Eureka Math—lesson preparation and customization.

The information gleaned from teacher PLCs prepared principals to expect and encourage teachers to customize lessons to fit the needs of their students, as well as work with time constraints and other building-specific circumstances. The three-step study process for lesson preparation and customization became a priority support structure for all Bethel principals. This process was instrumental for building knowledge and capacity for Bethel teachers to customize lessons while preserving the focus, coherence, and rigor built into the curriculum. Our ability to understand and offer ongoing organizational support from day one for this important aspect of the curriculum was one of many examples of how the principal can have a lasting positive impact on the implementation of a new curriculum.

## Parents and Other Stakeholders

Finally, another area we often neglect after we formally adopt a new curriculum is the initial and ongoing communication with the school board, parents, and the community. Principals in Bethel communicated with families and stakeholders throughout the district, not only during the first few months of implementation, but throughout the first year and beyond. Parents don't just want to know

what the curriculum is; they wish to have the resources and knowledge to help their children perform well. To that end, principals have waged an ongoing campaign of information and resources for parents to help their children with the new curriculum at home. Great Minds offers a multitude of resources ranging from parent tip sheets to more in-depth homework helpers that provide step-by-step explanations of how to work through problems. Our principals appreciated these resources because the tools were already developed and tightly aligned to what is happening in the classroom. These tools, as well as the Great Minds website, are used when principals meet with parents throughout the school year.

When I travel to districts to discuss curriculum implementation or speak at institutes designed to help administrators support new adoptions, the general theme I hear from principals is the same. The principal's role in the implementation of new curriculum lacks leadership, input, and authority. Decisions are made at the district level and then communicated as a list of "must-dos" at the building level. This lack of principal involvement will ultimately result in a failed implementation or, at best, an implementation that underutilizes a new curriculum specifically designed to increase student achievement.

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## Making It Work

### **Keys to Successful Curriculum Implementation**

Principals should have:

- Working knowledge of the content and instructional design of the new curriculum
- An ability to provide organizational feedback and drive professional development to meet the needs of their teachers and students
- Access to peer collaboration, incorporating feedback and reflection
- The ability to use their knowledge of the content to support families and other stakeholders as the community transitions