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Everything You Need to Know About Curriculum Development

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In this student-compiled career guide, you'll find information about the ins and outs of the careers available in curriculum development. Curriculum development is a crucial part of the education field. As Mike Schmoker writes in an article in the journal *Phi Delta Kappan*, research has shown that curriculum has more of an impact on students than any other factor in schools. It is an important job, especially with the struggling state of education in the United States today. According to author of *Waiting for Superman: A Participant Media Guide*, Karl Weber, "Among 30 developed countries the U.S. is ranked 25th in math and 21st in science and when that comparison is restricted to the top 5% the U.S. is ranked last" (4). This guide will give you insight into the nature of the essential work of curriculum developers, the training and other requirements needed, employment in the United States, job outlook, and yearly earnings. It will also cover some of the current issues in the field. You'll also gain personal insight from Jan Wright, former curriculum director of Batavia School District.

The roles of a curriculum specialist are diverse and far-reaching. They can be responsible for affecting the success in a single classroom or the success of an entire school. It is important to note that though the main objective of an instructional coordinator is to improve the quality of education in the classroom, many of their roles are fulfilled outside the classroom. Jan Wright says she spent half of her time doing desk work and the other half of the time working with administrators, teachers, and parents in, "collaborative settings: revising curriculum, designing assessments, or designing professional development for teachers." According to the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, by evaluating "how well a school or training program's curriculum, or plan of study meets students' needs," curriculum developers serve as a sort of watchdog over the education system (BLS 1).

Based on research and observations of instructional practice, meetings with members of educational committees and advisory groups, and questionnaires and interviews with school staff, they recommend improvements to insure that instructors are implementing curriculum successfully and meeting program goals (BLS 1). "In some districts," such as her own, says Jan Wright, "curriculum developers are in charge of managing grants and [their] budgets as well." According to the *OOC*, "instructional coordinators review textbooks, software, and other educational materials" (1). With the development of cutting-edge educational tools, they "find ways to use technology to enhance student learning and monitor the introduction of new technology into a school's curriculum" (BLS 1). In addition to working as policymakers for the classroom, many curriculum directors in smaller districts work in schools to "mentor new teachers and train experienced ones on the most current instructional methods "(BLS 1). In larger districts, this responsibility falls to other administrators.

According to Jan Wright, a typical day for an instructional coordinator begins at 7:30 in the morning and ends at about 5:00 at night. Unlike teachers, because a curriculum job is often at the district level, curriculum coordinators work year-round. A specific number of vacation days are then allotted each year in a contract with the district or school. Jan Wright of Batavia School District had 20 days of vacation that she was able to use any time of the year. Though they work long hours, and some "find the work stressful because they are continually accountable to school administrators," it can also be extremely fulfilling (BLS 2).

Some requirements for becoming an instructional coordinator are: a master's degree in

education, a state teacher or administrator license, training in curriculum development and instruction or in a specific area of study, and some years of teaching are recommended.

In choosing a school for the study of curriculum development, you can call or visit the website of the educational department of the state you intend to teach to familiarize yourself with the state certification requirements and accredited training colleges in the in the area (Fine). According to the *U.S. News and World Report*, the top graduate schools for Curriculum and Instruction in 2012 are University of Wisconsin – Madison, Michigan State, the Teachers College of Columbia University, Stanford University, Vanderbilt University, and University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign. The top graduate schools for Administration and Supervision are Vanderbilt University, University of Wisconsin – Madison, Harvard University, the Teachers College of Columbia University, and Michigan State University. Some schools offer graduate programs in curriculum specialization but unless the degree comes with a full Type 75 certification, a licensure for administrators, your prospects of getting hired as a curriculum specialist are not going to be as good because the vast majority of places want administrators to have a Type 75 certification. It is recommended to have "a good understanding of how to teach specific groups of students and expertise in developing educational materials," and consequently, many instructional coordinators have been in the classroom teaching for many years (Fine). Jan Wright, was a junior high math teacher in Batavia School District for 17 years before becoming a curriculum instructor of math at the district level and then shortly after she took on the position of curriculum director at the district level.

Curriculum specialists can advance to higher administrative positions such as district-level curriculum coordinators, directors of curriculum and instruction, assistant superintendents, and superintendents (Echaore-McDavid 182). Another option is to become a principal or assistant principal of a school (Echaore-McDavid 182). Some other career paths available to curriculum specialists are work in “instructional technology development, software development, textbook editing, or textbook authoring” (Echaore-McDavid 183). Another possibility is to “become curriculum developers for publishers, software companies, businesses, corporations, or state or federal education agencies” (Echaore-McDavid 183). As we’ll discuss later on in the guide, the field of educational technology is a booming growth and there are many private companies out there looking to hire people with passions in both education and technology. Some suggestions for teachers aspiring to break into educational leadership are to “as teachers, participate in curriculum committees and to have “strong instructional technology skills” (Echaore-McDavid 183). Wright suggests being a keen observer of the types of leaders in your school and district. “Analyze leaders,” she says, “And find what made them most successful and not so successful.”

Though getting into the field may take some years of learning and dedication, the projected growth for the field is promising. The job outlook for curriculum specialists supports about 133,900 workers, according to a 2008 census from the Bureau of Labor Statistcs. With the number of openings expected to grow 23 percent, the occupation has a much faster than average growth rate over the 2008-18 decade (BLS 3). The BLS states, “Although budget constraints may limit employment growth to some extent, a continuing emphasis on improving the quality of education should result in an increasing demand for these workers.” The BLS also states that additional growth will come from emphasis on life-long learning, students with special needs, including those with English as a second language.

There are several professional associations available to curriculum developers. Because most of them have already been teachers for a number of years, they are probably apart of the National Education Association. Curriculum specialists can join groups pertinent to the subject they specialize in, such as the International Reading Association, the National Council for the Social Studies, the Council for Exceptional Children, or The National Association for Music Education (Echaore-McDavid 183). They can also join administrator associations, such as the Association for

Supervision and Curriculum Development, and the American Association of School Administrators (Echaore-McDavid 183).

Becoming a successful instructional coordinator goes far beyond the education you will receive in your own classrooms. There is a wide range of topics curriculum specialists are expected to keep up with in order to best understand the field. Because the field is constantly changing, it's up to the professionals themselves to stay informed. This guide will give you a run down on a few of the hottest topics of discussion among curriculum developers: use of educational technology in classrooms, implementation of federal laws, developments in common curriculum standards, the debate on where the responsibility of curriculum development lies, and the changing rhetoric of education reformers.

As a future curriculum director, keeping an eye on the latest technological development can be both exciting and daunting. Since the 1990's, technology has been sweeping the world of education by storm. It's not surprising though that some of the latest techno-crazes are much faster, better and more pervasive than their crude predecessors. The sooner administrators and districts decide to jump on the technology train, the better curriculum will be for their students.

In an article from a journal titled *Digital Directions*, Wesley Fryer, a digital-learning consultant and the executive director of StoryChasers Inc., tells us, "Because of the thousands of curriculum resources on the Internet, the vast array of open education resources (which are created under open licenses, as opposed to copyright, and are shared for free) and the materials created through curriculum publishers, [educators] now have much greater flexibility in finding, modifying, and customizing curricula to fit their needs" (qtd. in Ash 1). As times are changing, so must the means of accumulating and organizing educational materials continue to adapt. According to the same article, Houghton Mifflin keeps with the digital times by offering custom publishing: the ability for schools to choose which and the sequence of lesson they'd like to see in a digital or printed book. Publishers' material must be purchased and updated in large quantities every few years however; this is expensive and can lead to outdated materials. With all these resources, the role of curriculum developers to figure out the best possible ways to create and implement curriculum is becoming increasingly important. The most important thing, according to California's Riverside Unified district director of K-12 instructional technology, Jay McPhail, is to avoid becoming tied to one specific device, citing his district's use of iPads, Android slate tablets, and student-owned digital devices (Ash 3). As Fryer says, "The old curriculum model was one-size-fits-all. The new model is open, shared, and mobile across multiple devices" (Fryer qtd. in Ash 1).

This same new personalized-learning model is shared by one cutting edge website that is changing the way we learn and teach called Khan Academy. Khan Academy is an educational website whose mission is to provide a world class education to anyone for free. Compiled of over 24,000 videos, the site's founder Salman Khan conversationally gives lessons on the topics of math, science, economics, and bits of history. The website incorporates mastery-based learning, providing practice problems for students to answer several in a row correctly and then suggesting videos for the lesson at the next level.

In classrooms that have agreed to be pilots for this new resource, teachers have begun "flipping" their classrooms: sending students home to learn a lesson on the website for homework, then coming to class the next day to work on practice problems. This allows students to work at their own pace when learning, replaying certain parts of the videos as needed. Then during homework time, when they are truly grappling with and understanding the concepts, students are in the classroom with their teacher who is readily able to answer any questions or provide further explanations.

According to Clive Thompson in an article in a journal called *Wired*, creating this teacher-student mentor relationship in the classroom takes the focus off the passive learning done with lecture style teaching and allows class time to be used in a way that promotes a dialogue between

student and teacher. In a well-known study in 1984, Benjamin Bloom found "that students given one-on-one attention reliably perform two standard deviations better than their peers who stay in a regular classroom" (Thompson 2). Using Khan Academy eliminates the harmful practice teachers resort of teaching to the "middle" in large classrooms. Bill Gates, Microsoft CEO, author, and philanthropist, has even endorsed Kahn's approach saying that it "shows that education can truly be customized, with each student getting individualized help when needed" (Thompson 4).

A key element of the Khan Academy program is a dashboard feature that allows teachers to track students progress, "providing individual statistics, showing them and their instructors how many videos they'd watched, how many questions they'd answered, and which ones they'd gotten wrong or right" (Thompson 4). This allows teachers to maximize time in the classroom by going over things everyone missed, skipping the things that came easy, and gauging how students will do on assessments. Similarly, the data that Khan Academy has collected from its users, who have answered more than 50 million questions to date, is allowing Khan to even more concretely "discover previously invisible patterns" in the learning process (Thompson 7).

The innovators at Khan Academy aren't the only ones pioneering digital educational tools. According to an article by Rachel Swaby in *Wired*, iTunes U is pairing with Stanford, Oxford, MIT and about 800 other universities to offer lectures on a wide variety of topics. Connexions is an open source website where subscribers can put together their own hodgepodge of educational materials from videos, documents, and charts which can then be shared with others and continuously edited. PBS Teachers is another comprehensive media site for educators, where lessons of wide variety are organized by grade level and subject. Another, Youtube Edu is a host site to more than 125,000 free instructional videos from independent sources.

As this is only naming a few, staying current with the latest online fads can be daunting. One website that provides short how-to guides on the latest craze and helps curriculum minded educators keep in the loop is edudemic.com. Another website that helps educators to make sense of the chaotic world of education, technology, textbooks, and tools is my classroomwindow.com.

One of the latest tech tools finding its way into classrooms is the handheld mobile device. Kelly Puente writes in an article in *District* Administration about students learning lesson who can go outside, snap photos of geometric shapes, and then come back to the classroom to create and solve their own math problems using real data (Puente 1). Teachers can also personalize homework assignments by sending each student different problems based on their abilities. By getting them to use their own devices, teachers are reaching the tech-generation in a way that they could otherwise be missing out on.

As with all these technology based tools, problems arise when districts can't or won't provide funding for each student to have access to a digital device. In addition, some teachers and administers view the methods of educational technology as too underdeveloped, new and changing too quickly. Don Knezek, CEO of International Society for Technology in Education says, "Educators will need time to assess its benefits and limitations… [They're] still going to need to see a lot of development before [digital devices] reach their full potential (Puente 2*)*. According to Ash, "Until every student has access to a device, most districts rely on proprietary print materials as the primary" (3). Though it is important to recognize new tools as legitimate options for curriculum development, all things take time.

While technology advancements serve as catalysts for change in the way people learn, the federal policies made to affect education are far less focused on the process of learning and much more so on the result. Understanding the background on one of the most important educational legislative reforms in decades, The No Child Left Behind Act, is crucial to understanding the expectations placed on curriculum developers to get kids to succeed as well as the obstacles preventing them from doing so.

According to an article in the New York Times by Sam Dillon, NCLB was put into place by

the Bush administration in 2001 to increase accountability in schools. To do this, the law required students to be tested annually on the subjects of math and reading from grades three to eight; if the schools did not meet "adequate yearly progress" according to the test scores, they were forced to implement an intervention program for teachers and students and were in danger of closing until the scores met the standards of "adequate yearly progress" (Dillon). The goal of NCLB was to make every school in America 100% proficient in math and reading by 2014 but by eight years after its enactment, most states' scores were still around only 20 or 30 percent proficiency (Weber 4). Though funding for schools has more than doubled since 1971, scores have remained flat, thus concluding that money isn't being spent on the right types of reform (Weber 5).

Former curriculum director Jan Wright believes that NCLB has narrowed curriculum. She also says it has impacted the way students are asked to think, suggesting that the NCLB-mandated assessments "made it harder to assess higher-level thinking and also made it harder to teach higher-level thinking." According to Lorin W. Anderson in an article in *Phi Delta Kappan,* researchers agree that different subjects are disproportionately given time in the classroom, but some are at odds in attributing that to educational accountability legislation. Anderson cites research from 2007 showing that 90% of instructional time when to teacher-driven instruction and individual desk work whereas small-group instruction took place less than 10% of the time. She then compares this data with data collected during the 1970s and 1980s and finds that little has changed; lectures and desk work comprised 85% of instruction and only the remaining 15% was spent on alternative student-centered methods.

A common reaction of educators is to blame NCLB and other accountability legislations for their reliance on generic teacher-centered lecturing an rote fact memorization are methods because they reflect the expectations of students on state-mandated tests. According to Anderson, there is actually no evidence "that the amount of time spent in test preparation has a positive effect on student learning, achievement, or test performance" (2). According to Ruth Mitchell from the Center for Public Instruction, instead of spending time on test preparation, it would be better for teachers to coordinate their lessons with a detailed, helpful curriculum created by curriculum developers and instead use test data as feedback for future curricular and instructional decisions (Anderson 4).

Though the provisions of most federally mandated education legislation are far-from solving the problem, it's important as curriculum developers to not get caught up in being limited by them. A curriculum specialist's job is to continue molding the bare bones of the curriculum and eventually, based on the research and evidence of sucess, state legislature will follow. The most promising example of this so far is the development of the Common Core State Standards. According to its official website, "The Common Core State Standards Initiative is a state-led effort coordinated by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). The standards were developed in collaboration with teachers, school administrators, and experts, to provide a clear and consistent framework to prepare our children for college and the workforce." Over the past year, the CCSS has created standards for "English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects" and "Common Core State Standards for Mathematics." It also includes the guides "Application of the Standards for English Language Learners" and "Application to Students with Disabilities."

The CCSS explicitly express that these guides are "a clear set of shared goals and expectations for what knowledge and skills will help our students succeed. Local teachers, principals, superintendents and others will decide *how* the standards are to be met. Teachers will continue to devise lesson plans and tailor instruction to the individual needs of the students in their classrooms." Jan Wright says that the CCSS were adopted by the state of Illinois two summers ago. As they're starting to affect the district, she feels that they are making curriculum better. "The previous standards were very broad and vague," she says, "These are much more detailed and much clearer about teacher's expectations."

The initiative called Common Core, though not to be confused with the Common Core State Standards, is part of a consortium of groups providing curriculum tools to implement the CCSS in schools. Comprised of several highly educated and experiences educators and curriculum developers, they were the first to publish "curriculum maps" for the English Language Arts standards of the CCSS. These maps include unit by unit lessons for each grade level and incorporate points of the standards, suggested objectives, suggested works (including poems, stories, nonfiction works, and art/music media), sample activities and assessments, interdisciplinary connections, and other resources. The Common Core provides well developed and content rich curriculum that the CCSS calls for.

Fredrick Hess, director of American Enterprise Institute's Education Policy Studies, stresses that it is important to note that though the CCSS and its consortia of curriculum providers will never become a federally run initiative, it does get a heavy portion of its funding from the federal government. As of now, education reform is a non-partisan issue on Capitol Hill and advocates have an easy time of finding support. Because of American competitiveness and the fact that currently, our standards and tests are in a state of disrepair, educators believe that politicians will continue to vote up for funding for curriculum, even though the U.S. Department of Education technically has a law against it. Hess warns that this is something that may change if we get a new party in the White House, since much of the enthusiasm and support for the CCSS comes from the Obama administration (Hess 2).

Experts seem to agree that behind all the educational fads that come and go, like "co-teaching" and focusing on "core" subjects, what makes for good teaching and learning is a solid curriculum. Part of thriving in the world of educational engineering is knowing these trends and being able to spot them for their inefficiencies. In an article by Anne Wescott Dodd from the book *The Last Word: The Best Commentary and Controversy in American Education,* Wescott attributes the sways in teaching-style to social and political movements. She laments that whatever the public demands from schools, administrators and curriculum specialists must cater to them. This isn't all that far from the truth, says Jan Wright, who had one situation where several school board members were pushing for Advanced Placement classes in her district's high school while she wanted them to be dual credit (college credit, and high school credit). She remembers having to really listen to all parties and be accommodating to the things they wanted. Recently at Glenn Westlake Middle School in Lombard Elementary School District 44, administrators have decided to cut general music courses in exchange for more foreign language courses. "What we've done is respond to the community and what they want," said Superintendent Jim Blanche in an article in the *Daily Herald*.

She also points out that curriculum reform tends to follow a trend abandonment of student-centered experiential curriculum for the old, "tried and true" ways of doing things. Though very tried, the lectured-centered, test-based ways of doing thing are not always true, as we've read so far.

The way that educators are able to instantly share and communicate has forever changed peer collaboration. The days when teachers waited for the monthly teaching magazine to appear on their doorstep filled with opinions of only a handful of people are over. Now with Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, and other social media networks, people are to see and read in real time what their colleagues are up to in their classrooms, what their mentors are doing, and what experts are saying. People are forming opinions on education reform more accurately than ever before.

Dodd warns from personal experience, that the enthusiasm that young mover-shakers have in making changes has often been only to avail as they see the national mood swing back again. With the new research-based, pragmatic movement towards the Common Core State Standards however, his may change.

Though the job of a curriculum developer can be tireless and stressful, knowing that you are advancing the excellence of education can be immensely gratifying. After first getting your feet wet in the classroom as a teacher and finding you have ideas for new advancements in your school or

district, start thinking about applying to a Graduate school program and getting yourself a Type 75 administrator's certification. Sure you might receive a pay upgrade, but you'll be part of the excitement of crafting new curriculum. You'll work with all different types of people on a more personal level, as you become a mediator among the students, parents, teachers, administrators, and politicians. After reading this guide, you should know that curriculum development is an intensifying field for many reasons, but mostly because curriculum in schools matters more now than ever.

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