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# From Content Standards to Practice in Non-Demonstration Sites: What Is the Next Step?

ARTICLE BY **KATHY DEWSBURY-WHITE, JAN KAKELA, AND DIANA MITCHELL**

## Introduction

Most of us would love to be involved in stimulating professional development. We'd like to be supported by our district's administrators. We'd like to have passionate conversations with our colleagues. We'd like to be able to try new approaches and know we have someone to talk to about our successes and failures as we look to see how they might better help students grow in literacy. We'd love to be in situations where we could reflect on what goes on in our classrooms. In short, we wish we could have been part of the teams at the demonstration sites involved in work which is ongoing, collegial, and involves teachers who want to know more and to do better.

But since we weren't part of that structure, how can we get involved? How can this work be duplicated or moved forward with teachers who were not part of the demonstration sites? Although we don't have any definitive answers, we three have worked to increase teachers' understanding of the Content Standards. In an intermediate school district setting we have learned some things which we hope will inform others who will be undertaking this work.

## The ISD Setting: The Reality

Ingham Intermediate School District was asked to assist local school districts to address the new English Language Arts Content Standards in the fall of 1995. With the new High School Proficiency Test and fifth and eighth grade writing assessment scheduled for March 1996, several curriculum directors from the local school districts wanted to have a plan in place — something

that would assure teachers and the public "we are on top of this." And of course, this motivation for curricular reform is exactly what the state intended.

When we listened to local district curriculum contacts, here is what we heard they wanted:

- for teachers and administrators to understand the new English Language Arts content standards and their curricular and instructional implications so they could return to their districts and influence classroom practice;
- to pool resources in a county-wide collaborative project in order to a) share the cost of a language arts expert and, b) minimize the number of teachers needed from each district to accomplish the work.
- to conduct an audit of classroom practices and discover the gaps between the content standards and actual practices;
- to articulate grade level expectations based on the content standards across the county; and
- to develop a professional development plan based on the audit of each district.

This was a tall order with serious constraints driven by scrutiny from a public that doesn't understand the magnitude of the curricular and instructional change needed. We believe that curricular work pertaining to the new mandates will assist schools to prepare all students to approach the raised bar of achievement. Clearly this is important professional development. This is work worth doing.

## What We Did: An Overview

We opened our first 4 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. session not knowing quite what to expect from



our participants, volunteers, and recruits. To demonstrate that we had thought out what we were doing and so participants could see where we were all headed, we had at each session a "road map." This spelled out what we were doing that evening and what it had to do with the big picture.

**Session I:** Participants ...

- listened to an explanation of and were shown a template of what they would be putting together
- were given a handout called "What's In It For Me"
- worked on their vision of quality literacy by writing down what it meant to them and by jotting down signs of it as they viewed two video clips and read samples of student work
- read State Department's Vision Statement and in groups refined it.
- completed a response sheet

**Session II:** Participants ...

- viewed and/or participated in a literature circle discussion
- listened to an explanation of what content standards were embedded in this activity
- watched teaching video clips and in groups identified the content standards illustrated
- were asked to bring to the next meeting a one-page vignette that was an example of best practice at their grade level
- were asked to read three articles for the next meeting which was an all-day session
- completed a response sheet

**Session III:** Participants ...

- responded to the articles in district groups
- reported out two strategies they could use in their district for curricular change
- read a vignette and identified content standards and benchmarks
- listened to an explanation of use of signs of development and achievement
- listened to lecture on assessment
- participated in a walk-through of the work we would do on specific content standards i.e. creating opportunities to achieve that would be present in a

classroom if a content standard was being addressed, creating assessment tasks and tools

- worked on Content Standard 5 in grade level clusters
- completed a response sheet

**Session IV:** Participants ...

- worked with a vignette by grade level clusters to identify standards, signs of development and achievement, and assessment tasks and tools in them.
- revised Content Standard 5 work
- worked on Content Standard 7 in grade level clusters
- completed a response sheet

**Session V:** Participants ...

- revised Content Standard 7 work
- revised work on vignettes
- worked on Content Standard 3, 8, and 9 in grade level clusters
- completed a response sheet

**Session VI:** Participants ...

- created student profiles as a means to identify development
- worked with First Steps and New Standards as models of determining grade level expectations
- given Language Arts Curriculum Assessment Checklist as preparation for professional development
- took learning back to their school and encouraged colleagues to complete the assessment checklist

**Session VI:** Participants ...

- looked at data, identified emphases of need and strategies to address those needs
- prioritized the areas to develop professional development plans
- evaluated the project

**How the Teachers Reacted**

After the first session, teachers responded to a prompt about their expectations for their work.

*I will feel my time on this project has been well spent if ...*

- "I can take back to individual elementary classroom teachers a *clear, concise,*



specific curriculum that when effectively taught ensures student literacy.”

- “I leave with a better understanding of the content standards and benchmarks AND I have ideas on how to help my colleagues understand them.”
- “I can see how our district’s ideas and outcomes match with state content standards.”
- “We help the community in his county enhance the language arts program to foster success for all students.”

### Reflections on the Project Feedback

The variations in expectations were wide in this group to begin with. One district was under the gun to identify discrete reading and writing skills that would be taught at each grade level. Another district’s nine participants were expected to make an impact on all the other elementary teachers and secondary language arts teachers in their district of over 1000 teachers. Once these two groups decided not to participate, the scope of the expectations shrunk some.

The work began, teachers were immersed in using the content standards and in figuring out how to tell if standards are in evidence in a classroom. Some teachers balked at creating something for others to use (they were a small representative sample); others could see that to understand the content standards they had to get involved in working with them.

Participants seemed most satisfied when they could see how something we used or did had an impact on what they do in their classes. They especially liked some of the vignettes from classrooms because they could see how they could use the material or strategy. Some participants expressed concerns about the lack of an effective infrastructure or system within their district that would help move their curriculum work forward.

We were breaking new ground. Up to this point no one had tried to put the standards into the hands of teachers, no one had done the work of figuring out that important step between creating content standards and getting teachers to put them into practice in classrooms. While working to prepare for these sessions, we struggled with

conceptualizing how all this would look in a document that would make sense to teachers and administrators and be used.

### What Made This Project So Challenging?

- In the political climate of our times, quick answers to complex issues are what is wanted — but ensuring that intentions match actions is difficult, introspective work. We need to allow ourselves the time and resources to make curricular and instructional change thoughtfully.
- Some project participants were recruits, rather than volunteers. This may have inhibited their willingness to examine their own beliefs and practices and involve themselves in personal learning.
- Some participants yearned for clear cut answers and “how to’s.” Unfortunately when you are part of the first wave of putting new content standards into action you are having to negotiate meaning, share ideas, and build communal visions.
- The amount of material presented was staggering and participants felt overwhelmed. Not only had they not encountered the content standards before, but thinking only in terms of best practice was an additional challenge. On top of this, participants: created assessment tasks and tools; identified what signs of development were present in vignettes; and figured out if a classroom had conditions that afforded students the opportunity to achieve the standard. To say that a lot was asked of participants in the time allotted, is the understatement of the 1995-96 school year!
- Hence, this project needed a longer period of time than we had in our agreement with the local districts. To encourage teachers to reflect on their own practices, they need time, time to raise questions, time to absorb new ideas, time to communicate with peers.
- In order for participants to feel their work would be used and thus their time well spent, administrative support is necessary. Administrators have the wherewithal to free teachers to work with other teachers, to encourage teachers to look at new



practices, to encourage the use of content standards, to assess existing instruction. Without support and an infrastructure to move learning forward for all staff members, the pebble in the pond sinks instead of rippling outward.

In retrospect, this project was too ambitious. It would have been enough for a start, just to have participants understand the content standards. It would have been enough for participants to scrutinize their own curriculum for best practices.

### **A Different Kind of Curriculum Work**

We are, as a nation, trying out processes to determine what students should know and be able to do as a result of their time in school. National groups of experts have written sets of standards for each subject area, spanning all grade levels, recommending the content and skills necessary to understand the subject matter.

At the state level, in Michigan specifically, we have recommended state standards and required state tests. At the school district level we have districts wanting to make sure the curriculum they offer is not so disparate from national and state recommendations that their students will be ill-prepared to move onto higher education or secure good entry-level employment after twelfth grade.

Why don't we just take these written standards and tell teachers this is what they will teach? If it worked with textbooks (filling the role of written curriculum, an historical truth) why not these written standards? This approach wouldn't work with the standards because the standards are goals, they do not prescribe how to get there. Teachers do have to make collective decisions about what to include and what to leave out. It is incumbent upon teaching staff to figure out how to integrate standards into sensible presentations, units, or courses of study.

### **What We Know About Professional Development**

*How do we accomplish serious professional development?* We have mountains of literature on effective staff development and the change process. For instance, we know the impor-

tance of viewing the teacher as learner, leader, and colleague in helping shape a professional community. We know that we must see staff development as a continuous means for growth in practice, and that serious staff development involves personal learning in relation to one's students. We know that change is a process not an event, is developmental, and is a highly personal experience. We also know that because the individual is a key player in the change process, we must focus on supporting the individual in order to facilitate change. (Lieberman and Miller)

*Given what we know about change and effective staff development, what are the conditions necessary for curricular work to be instructive professional development for teachers?*

First, central administration must acknowledge the magnitude of the work, that everyone has a role to play and that this is an ongoing, long-term commitment by the district. Identifying time during the school year and time for summer work places value on the work. We cannot expect teachers to come to the work at 4 p.m. and be able to do their best thinking. Clearly, allocating curricular work to after-school time, devalues the work. It is the job of central administration to identify funds to support curricular work during the day within the school year and summer work. We put our money toward what we value, and it sends a strong message. The bottom line is that the support and interest of central administration is indispensable to the willingness of teachers to work hard and undertake changes in practice.

Second, building administrators must walk with the teachers doing curricular work and show up when it is going on. It is important for building administrators to become familiar enough with the nature and scope of the work so that it will be implemented. Quite simply, it means the work is the topic of staff meetings. A culture that values reflection on practice is developed when staff meetings devote time for professional discussion. Especially when teachers are engaged in collaborative projects that are off-site, it is crucial that building principals facilitate conversations around the work at the school. If not, the teachers doing



the work will feel only they are responsible for making the conversation happen and feel discouraged. This disillusionment stops the work from being transferred to the building level. And when this happens, the district has misspent public dollars. In short, the long-term significance of curricular work is dependent upon the attitude and supportive behavior of the building administrators.

Teachers soon abandon work beyond their own classrooms when they feel the "extra" effort won't make an impact. Both central administration and building administrators must support teachers so they feel a sense of efficacy. Administrators can assist teachers in believing the work will make an impact by setting realistic time lines, publicly stating that the work is important and will be implemented, providing resources to support the work initiating a dialogue about the work in professional forums, taking responsibility for supervising the implementation, and developing a school culture that takes the profession seriously. Without the active and visible support of administrators, curricula work addressing the new state mandates is destined to fail, and the public will continue to misunderstand the test scores printed in the newspapers.

### What We Learned

- The process of writing curriculum is serious professional development, and it isn't an enterprise we have figured out how to involve teachers in, in a way that results in a quality product that is accomplished quickly and leaves all feeling satisfied and sure about how to ensure implementation.
- State-of-the-art curriculum is born from identifying best practice, having a vision for the future, and taking the risk to commit yourself to a published document that you may have to stretch yourself in order to deliver on.
- Understanding content standards in terms of one's classroom and instructional practices will take time and involves a lot of collegial discussion.
- Decisions about grade level expectations need to occur at the district level, with

100% of the staff contributing to a collective best guess for those expectations.

- Articulated grade level expectations are only valuable when data (student work) is collected over time to see if the collective "best guess" is proving to be accurate for the vast majority of students, and if not, expectations are adjusted accordingly.
- Allocating curricular work to after-school time, devalues it. Central and building administration play a key role in identifying time during the school year and time for summer work. Additionally, allocating budget and resources to accomplish curricular work is important and administrators who are physically present for a portion of the work see the possibilities for implementing the work.
- From the demonstration sites we can see that teachers work best toward change if they have a support network — people who they can talk to about their work and who value what they were doing. Teachers cannot be expected to change anyone but themselves and change is nurtured through the establishment of a support network.

### Possible Next Steps

When the ultimate goal of curricular work is sufficiently understanding content standards so that they can be found in classroom practice, all staff within a building and district must engage in negotiating meaning, identifying best practice, agreeing upon grade level coordination and K-12 articulation and consequently, in building communal visions. While IISD attempted to lend structure to beginning this work and creating a written frame of reference, the work is far from complete. With our experience and the research to draw on, we believe the ISD can be supportive but certain curricular work is best accomplished in certain contexts. Thus we hope the following list can provide places for other districts to start.

*At the building level* professional conversation could focus on:

- sharing classroom practices to see how content standards can inform and broaden their practice.



- discussing one content standard at a time and how it might be addressed in their teaching.
- sharing a written vignette of a project, strategy, or assignment from each teacher's classroom and looking for the number of content standards embedded in it.
- reading articles that focus on the issues and philosophy behind content standards and discussing them.
- viewing and discussing a video that addresses a specific interest or need such as what constructing meaning means. ISD's often have excellent video collections.
- discuss the district's curriculum in terms of their own practice, focusing on the parts of the written curricula that seem most meaningful and those parts whose expectations seem unrealistic or not developmentally appropriate.
- talking about grade level expectations by using student work as concrete examples of what students are actually doing.

*At the local district level* teachers can:

- share the kind of assignments and activities being used to address specific content standards at early elementary, later elementary, middle school, and high school. Determine and articulate how each grade level can build on what the earlier grades do.
- determine whether some content standards such as the one on inquiry and research (CS 11) will have special emphasis in certain grades.
- share their expertise on strategies related to the content standards such as how they run a reading or writing workshop.
- audit their present curricula in terms of the content standards to determine which areas need more emphasis.

*At the Intermediate School District level* instructional support personnel and/or consultants could:

- offer interactive opportunities on specific issues related to the content standards such as a workshop to acquaint teachers with current multicultural literature, to involve teachers in reading response activities etc.

- offer interactive opportunities on a specific content standard focusing on what's known about implementing this content standard and ways to extend what is already done in classrooms.
- coordinate efforts to develop anchor papers and student writing profiles of what can be expected in student writing for each grade level.
- provide leadership to help teachers weave the content standards and benchmarks into instruction through the development of thematic units.
- jump start and provide articles for beginning professional conversation groups at the building level.
- assisting language arts teachers who may be taking the lead in Writing across the Curriculum in their school or district.
- provide training on how to conduct a curriculum audit.

### **Our Conclusions**

We found it takes an extraordinary amount of time and talk to make changes in classroom practice, and it eventually has to get down to the building level with full participation of the staff to have impact on students. Central to such ongoing professional teacher dialogue is administrative commitment to providing the conditions that support it. Thus, when the goal is seeing content standards reflected and articulated thoughtfully in classroom practice, the MELAF demonstration sites are the strongest evidence to date of proving the research right. While the building is the hub of the essential conversation, the local district and intermediate school district are spokes that can both focus and extend the conversations. It takes a whole village to raise the bar.

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