



Education

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Julia Steiny: What gets taught must meet standards; how it's taught is up to teachers

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In the past, a course's curriculum was the textbook. If kids passed the tests provided by the textbook company, they learned what was in the book. Easy cheesy.

But no longer. Like most states, the four states participating in the New England Common Assessment Program have a set of standards that children at each grade level must accomplish. NECAP calls them the Grade Level Expectations, or GLEs.

These expectations are sequential, academic building blocks. Learning each one well, in the prescribed order, forges a solid educational foundation. And in our test-obsessed culture, the GLEs are the roadmap to sure success on the statewide assessments.

But the curriculum itself — the activities, projects and lessons — can be whatever successfully gets the kids to the expected standards.

Referring to the GLEs, Linda Filomena says, "The 'what' is nonnegotiable. The 'how' is up to the teachers. It's not possible to have cookie cutter classrooms. We all have different personalities, different experiences. But the quality of the 'what' has to be the same."

Filomena is Woonsocket's director of literacy and professional development. Her district is working with two others in Northern Rhode Island to create one math curriculum K-12. In the end, they will share one scope and sequence of learning, and one set of cross-district exams. The participating teachers, and there are many, will have shared their tricks and activities for getting across each of the skills or concepts.

Because NECAP has no curriculum. It has expectations, but no textbooks. And you wouldn't really want prescribed textbooks because you want teachers and administrators thinking about how to help each unique kid achieve, and hopefully surpass, the expectations.

The only problem is that teachers are sick to death of having curricula crammed down their throats. The moment they've mastered a set of lessons, wham: Some new superintendent wants to change it up. But if you

don't want them to resist a common curriculum, teachers need to own the work.

To that end, Rhode Island's Department of Education brought experts from Texas' Dana Center to guide teachers and districts in creating their own "guaranteed and viable curriculum." The guarantee is that every day, every child in every classroom works on skills to meet a certain standard. Whatever else happens in a rich school day, the curriculum helps teachers make sure every kid is building a strong academic frame.

And this will be true whether the kids go to school in socioeconomically mixed Cumberland, highly challenged Woonsocket, or tony Lincoln.

The Dana Center's first order of business is to have districts study the GLEs in detail, grade by grade, skill by skill.

Angela Holt, a Woonsocket literacy coach, says, "We have been looking at the GLEs for a while, but you get comfortable and quit noticing the details. With the Dana Center we look at the grade ahead and the grade behind. So for example, everyone has their 'love lessons.' I love teaching about the symmetry of butterflies, but does it fit the GLEs? Should this lesson go now? Does it prepare kids for the next grade?"

Melinda Smith, Lincoln's curriculum director, says, "Previously, we focused on levels [elementary, middle, high]. So, especially at the middle school, the Dana Center helped us see lots of repetition. The teachers didn't trust that the kids had learned the skills, so they were re-teaching constantly." Not only does this waste time, it's boring to the kids.

Conversely, a sequence of specific skills makes it clear whose job it is to teach what. Now teachers can easily pinpoint which skills are missing from a kid's background. Smith says, "We still need to give kids remedial help, but that's separate from the main classroom work. Teachers have to trust that the other teachers are following the curriculum."

So, for example, and I'm paraphrasing the ed jargon, the GLEs ask that first graders understand place values using whole numbers from 0-100. They need to "get" the ones, tens and 100s as an idea.

But some teachers pushed the lesson to a fourth place, to 1,000. It's fine to challenge the kid who's ready to go deeper, but don't insist all kids learn what will come next year. Conversely, some teachers merely exposed the kids to place values, thinking the concept too hard, leaving the actual work of helping the kids catch on for their next teacher. By all means help the slow and push the quick, but guarantee the standard.

The first-grade teachers from all three districts, then, share all the ways they know of teaching place values. Some kids do well with the teaching toys called manipulatives. Others respond to pictorial representations. Participating teachers are developing big bags of tricks and experimenting with what works best for them and their kids. They take these lessons back to their home schools.

Filomena appreciates that the Dana Center is not tied to any products or textbooks. Each of the districts has its own math textbooks. But it doesn't matter. As the curriculum is developed, teachers will take the appropriate units in the books and reorder them. They'll supplement if they need to. And sometimes they cut. The point is to stay true to the sequence of skills.

OK, a common curriculum is a great asset. But who manages quality control? Next week we'll shadow a principal to see the role of administration in this work.

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