

Practices of effective international school principals

Part 3: Monitoring the curriculum

by Bambi Betts

During a recent visit to an international school, I asked the secondary school principal for a copy of the curriculum to assist me in my upcoming work with the school. She glanced around the room, walked into the outer office and returned with a step-ladder. She climbed to the ladder, reached up to topmost shelf and retrieved a thick, dusty document. Blowing off the dust, she said, “Here it is. We don’t use it much.” Thus was born a passionate interest in the subject of this article - monitoring the curriculum.

Regardless of a school’s specific view of the purpose of schooling (Schlechy, 1990), teaching and learning, or their student population, all schools attempt to engage students in learning of some kind. Written or implied, each school has learning expectations for students.

The “curriculum” is the place where these expected outcomes are articulated. Monitoring the curriculum is the process of gathering information about the status of those expectations, for the ultimate purpose of improving student learning. To monitor the curriculum means to develop a simple, systematic plan for assessing the effectiveness of the curriculum.

It is about avoiding the dusty- shelf syndrome, about paying attention to what is important: are we doing what we say we are doing, and are we accomplishing what we intend to accomplish? Given that the primary purpose of a school is for students to learn, what they learn and how well they learn cannot be left to chance.

The curriculum is the primary vehicle for transmitting the school’s values and for translating those beliefs into daily practice. As we explored in the first article, it is what the school is. The extent to which the curriculum is challenging, relevant, appropriate and successfully implemented in the school is the degree to which the school has fulfilled its mission and purpose. It is the school’s “contract” with its students, parents and teachers. School leaders have an obligation to ensure that the contract is fulfilled. Monitoring the curriculum is that process.

Rightly or wrongly, the current organizational set-up in most international schools places the principal at the center of the curricular process. Ensuring a quality curriculum and a quality delivery may involve a curriculum committee, department heads, grade level teams, or a curriculum coordinator, but, ultimately, the principal shoulders the responsibility.

How can a principal approach this work? There are five key questions regarding the curriculum that concern all school stakeholders, and can be used to organize a curriculum monitoring process:

1. Is there a user friendly, written curriculum available to all teachers?
2. Does the planned curriculum accurately reflect the school's values and philosophy?
3. Is the planned curriculum being effectively implemented? (e.g. are teachers ensuring that students have opportunities to achieve the stated learning outcomes?)
4. Are students achieving the desired outcomes?
5. Is the curriculum commensurate with both current research and understanding about teaching and learning, as well as with the needs of the school's current population.

In other words, is there a challenging, relevant, appropriate written curriculum that teachers are using and students are learning from, which fulfills school mission?

Devising strategies to respond to these questions and then utilizing the data to make improvements is a major proactive activity of the principal that can have direct, measurable impact on student learning. Within the international school setting, there are a many ways to both collect the data for each of these question and use it. While there at least twenty or more possible strategies, we will examine just one or two key examples.

I. Is there a user-friendly, written curriculum available to all teachers?

This question has two parts: Is there something written that guides the work of teachers? Finding out whether there is a curriculum document in your school is easy. Just find the highest, dustiest shelf!

Secondly, is it in a format that makes it possible and likely for teachers to use it?

Often, even though teams of teachers over many years have worked to produce a curriculum document, it still seems to be a shelf-sitter. The most common criticism teachers have of curriculum documents, and very likely the main reason they don't use them, is that they are jargon-filled and laid out in a way that makes their use a true chore.

To discover if format is an issue, conduct a simple survey that asks teachers to list features of the document that are useful and those that are not. Then solicit recommendations about how the format might be improved. The results of the survey should inform the model the principal offers for any further curriculum revision or development plans.

II. Does the planned curriculum accurately reflect the school's values and philosophy?

In many international schools we observe a significant mismatch between the stated vision and philosophy of the school, and day-to-day classroom practices. Is this a result of a school cultural norm that says, "It doesn't matter what's in the curriculum," or is it a reflection of the curriculum itself? Does the school say, for example, that it believes that learners construct their own meaning, and then load the curriculum with so much content that it would be a physical impossibility to "teach" it, much less allow students to construct their own meaning?

The strategy here is straightforward. Compare the beliefs of the school (usually found in the

school brochure) to some pieces of the curriculum. Consider such issues as teaching methodologies, content (amount and type). The goal is the certainty that the written curriculum is not an impediment to promoting key school beliefs.

III. Is the planned curriculum being implemented ? Monitoring teaching

School administrators are both disheartened and frustrated by the fact that, although substantial time, energy and money has been spent on developing a curriculum, teachers still appear not to make much use of it. Once there is reasonable assurance that the curriculum is in a format which is “teacher-friendly,” the principal can and should expect that it is being used to guide both planning as well as daily instruction. A few simple ways to determine if this is so:

Strategy: Ask teachers to write and provide you with a unit plan (something that describes the learning objectives, major assessments, and key teaching methodologies) for each 2-5 week period (depending on age of students and particular learning outcomes). Compare the plan to the larger written curriculum. This process can be carried out by grade level teams, department heads, whole departments, administrators. - whatever organizational structures are already in place for improving curriculum. In some cases this strategy has led to the entire curriculum document being recreated by these unit plans.

Strategy: Regularly collect and review teacher-developed assessment tools. This is one of the most telling strategies available to provide data about whether the curriculum is being implemented. What a school truly values with regard to content, skills, attitudes and even ‘habits of mind’ is reflected in the tools habitually used to assess student learning.

Imagine, for example that the curriculum stresses the application of mathematics in real-life situations and the necessity for students to communicate how they solve problems. A review of the teacher’s last ten assessment tools reveals that 90 percent of what students are asked to do has to do with calculation, particular methods of working out a problem. In fact, none of the assessment tools ask the students to describe their thinking process.

Is the curriculum being implemented? Perhaps the teacher can show evidence that these outcomes have been “taught,” but from the perspective of the student, what gets assessed gets learned. Has the curriculum been implemented if we can show no evidence that we are assessing student progress toward the stated outcomes?

Assessment tools are powerful indicators of what is really going on in the school.

IV. Are students achieving the desired outcomes? Monitoring student learning

Regardless of how clearly learning outcomes are stated in the curriculum, they lose their potential to power and direct the efforts of teachers if no data about student achievement of those goals is either collected or analyzed. Typically, American-style international schools, like their public school counterparts, rely heavily on standardized, norm-referenced test data to inform them about student achievement.

At the secondary level, all types of international schools now use IB, AP, IGCSE or A-level results. This is valid data and should clearly be integrated into the set of indicators the

school uses to determine its effectiveness. We do have, however, much additional data beyond what standardized tests can offer. Such data which is readily available to school leadership; it is a question of collecting and using it regularly.

Strategy: Regularly collect and review samples of student work, from both routine assignments required by teachers and major assessments.

Student work is a largely overlooked, readily available, rich source of information about what our students are being asked to learn. A primary activity for every principal, on a weekly basis should be collecting work samples and comparing them both to the original curriculum documents, as well as to teacher as planning documents. While this will not provide a comprehensive study of every class and every teacher, over the course of a year it does provide a wide view of the extent to which teachers are teaching what is in the curriculum.

And this work should extend to all faculty members. Imagine faculty meetings, or department meetings, where teachers regularly bring samples of student work, their planning documents, and their assessment tools, then get assistance from their colleagues in analyzing to what extent students actually achieved what the teacher set out to teach. This is professional growth and school improvement at its best.

Strategy: Devise your own set of “standardized” assessment tasks, drawn from the curricular outcomes.

One of the unique features of most international schools is that they enjoy complete site-based management, the freedom to pursue avenues of improvement with only approval from within their own system This feature opens the door to a key monitoring strategy.

Educators in international schools around the world harbor a concern about standardized testing (indeed, so do national educators). The tests are not based in the schools’ specific curriculum and therefore can’t inform us about how our students are doing with our curriculum.

Schools are now turning to developing a set of internally developed assessments, designed specifically to provide data on student progress toward curricular goals. These are administered, for example, to all students in a particular grade level each year. The assessment tools are designed by teachers and the results assessed on a common rubric, by teachers other than those of students taking the assessment.

The results of such assessments are yet another strong indicator of whether or not students are achieving the stated outcomes.

- V. Is the curriculum commensurate with both current research and understanding about teaching and learning as well as with the needs of the school’s current population ?

A concern of many international school administrators, and particularly school boards is, “How do we know that our school is “good?” Are our students receiving what they should? Is our curriculum challenging enough or as good as that of comparable schools? And how do we balance these concerns with meeting the needs of our student population? Are there conflicts? These are fully legitimate concerns, given the relatively isolated circumstances within which international schools operate.

More than within national system schools, international school administrators need to pay attention to this issue. Although we experience less and less isolation daily , compliments of technology, all international school administrators will recognize the challenge of having a system of curricular improvement that can thoughtfully evaluate and then rapidly integrate the

appropriate up-to-date research and understanding about teaching and learning. Our parents and boards trust we are doing this, and our students rely on it.

Strategy: Compare your curriculum to that of other international schools and/or to the standards of a national system.

On a bi-annual basis, collect curriculum documents from three or four international and/or national schools whichever are more representative of your school's mission. Although clearly there is no such thing, nor should there be, as a perfect and complete curriculum, comparing your curriculum to those of schools with similar missions will offer important data.

Additionally, several countries publish curriculum outcomes or standards in some form; comparing your curriculum with these is also useful, particularly in schools whose mission is to emulate U.S. schools, or U.K. schools, etc.

To collect data on whether or not the curriculum is commensurate with the needs of the actual student population requires administrative teams to be fully cognizant of the schools' mission. Many international schools, as their original population of expatriates are being slowly replaced by host country nationals and/or students from other systems, find themselves in a precarious position. The school is set up, for example to provide a "university preparatory program," comparable to that of exemplary US schools, and to prepare students for successful entry into US universities. If the population of the school, or even the dominant sentiment, shifts away from this, does the school alter its curriculum?

Some possible strategies might include: surveying parents on their satisfaction with the current curriculum and its results; studying not only university placement, but success of students who leave the school at any grade level.

And of course, this discussion begs the question, Are the needs of any current group of students dramatically different from those of any other group of students in the deep sense of learning? Or, are we simply responding to the hoops of higher education?

Curriculum Monitoring: Knowing what we intend to accomplish and systematically discovering if and how well we are accomplishing it. It's about not leaving to chance the school's primary role of promoting student learning.