

Common curriculum challenges faced by international schools

By Bambi Betts

In my role as a traveling consultant to international schools, I am frequently asked, What are other international schools most concerned about? What work are they pursuing? What obstacles are they encountering? How are they meeting the challenges?

The same quality that makes it possible for international schools to “turn on a dime”—our independence also represents our major challenge. Deep resources must constantly be committed to better understanding the relationship between learning and the place called school. And we often feel alone in that challenge. So it is not surprising that we all want to know what everyone else is doing and how they are doing it.

As each school is independent, with its own particular conditions, there is no singular direction. However, based on the 60 plus schools the PTC has worked with onsite over the past three years, here are some observations.

Security issues aside, by far the most common overarching issue is the attempt to design, implement and monitor a truly effective curriculum. This means a curriculum, which capitalizes on the constant fresh thinking of new faculty, as well as transcends individual teachers and fully implements the school mission. The notion, now validated by research, that a guaranteed and viable curriculum is a major catalyst to more and better student learning is giving real voice to the centuries- old concept of curriculum.

Within this overarching goal, schools are particularly dealing with the challenging work of transitioning from curriculum that is based in knowing things, to a curriculum that is based in conceptual understanding. Many struggle with the infamous tendency of our schools to swing one way or the other, rather than to seek the solution that is truly improving learning, which lies somewhere in the middle.

Many also grapple with the level of prescription required by the curriculum. Should the school define what’s worth learning, or should most of that be left to individual teachers? Should the curriculum include required assessments or is that the professional prerogative of teachers?

The same issues arise over teaching strategies. Significant progress has been made in defining “what” we intend learners to achieve (called everything from standards and benchmarks to aims, objectives, outcomes, etc.). For many it has come at a great cost, and was done without a clear set of criteria for what makes an effective, assessable learning statement. Thus some schools are in the next stage of “vetting” them again.

Given all the work on defining the “what” of learning, professional development on classroom assessment practices is in great demand. The notions of backward design and getting to real understanding are compelling schools to reform assessment processes to more adequately support learning, rather than simply audit it.

And who should be writing curriculum? This is a built-in dichotomy we see in many schools. There is an assumption that teachers will naturally be the writers. Yet, teachers report that they actually have little or no training in curriculum writing. Additionally, school leaders frequently either make the assumption that this work will somehow be accomplished without any significant modifications to how teachers' time is allocated. Often, given community expectations of the school day, the school cannot find ways to make it happen.

And finally, school heads and principals universally face the issue of how to get an effective curriculum in place without turning the whole concept into a dirty word and giving teachers real fuel for the "poor morale" syndrome. It is one thing to write and implement a truly effective curriculum that will lead to improved student learning. How we do that without driving everyone to distraction is a problem everyone must confront.

In a future article, we will share some of the solutions schools have crafted: what's worked and what have been the pitfalls. In the meantime, we can take pride and comfort in the fact that we really are an international community of strivers on behalf of our kids.