

Let's Clarify the Way We Use The Word 'Curriculum'

Seven Different Meanings, Seven Possible Names

By Kim Marshall

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When educators and members of the lay public use the word "curriculum," it's often with totally different meanings in mind. In fact, "curriculum" is used to describe seven quite distinct school documents and processes. This semantic confusion is not life-threatening, but ambiguity can cause problems, especially when we're talking to parents and school boards and debating hot-button issues like a "national curriculum."

In a quixotic attempt to straighten this all out, I've listed all seven meanings below and suggested a distinct name for each one. If we can be more precise about the way we talk about curriculum, it might help us make our way through some interesting educational debates in the years ahead.

Curriculum as in state standards. "We have no choice but to follow the Illinois curriculum." Standards are broad statewide learning goals, usually for certain grades (as in, Massachusetts Frameworks for Grades 4, 8, and 10). Almost all states have now linked their standards to high-stakes tests.

Curriculum as in K-12 articulation. "The curriculum nixed teaching about evolution!" This is a district's kindergarten-through-high-school plan spelling out which skills and content will be taught at each grade. It answers questions like: When do we cover the Holocaust? When do we do division of fractions? When do we teach about magnetism? When should students master the persuasive essay? Thoughtful K-12 articulation prevents the overlap and duplication that occur when teachers at different grade levels are in love with the same topic (for example, the rain forest). Articulation ensures that the limited time students have in classrooms will be used efficiently, and that children will move through the grades without major gaps in their education.

Curriculum as in grade-level learning expectations. "The curriculum expects my students to be able to write a five-paragraph persuasive essay by the end of this year." Taking articulation a step further, these documents give teachers their marching orders. They are clear statements of what students should know and be able to do by the end of each year. (Districts sometimes include a "scope and sequence" that maps out the topics for the year, the order in which they should be taught, and how much time should be spent on each one.)

Grade-level expectations have often been ignored in the past, but the advent of high-stakes testing has definitely gotten teachers' attention. Curriculum writers have also found that when expectations are accompanied by exemplars of proficient student work and examples of the types of problems students should be able to solve, passages they should be able to read, and writing they should be able to produce—along with the rubrics used to score open-ended student work—they get much better traction in classrooms. If expectations documents do their job, it's crystal clear to teachers, parents, students, and principals what proficient student work looks like at each grade. No surprises, no excuses.

Curriculum as in classroom methods. "We're using a really rockin' science curriculum this year that says we have to do tons of hands-on experiments." These are the pedagogical approaches (cooperative learning, project-based learning, direct instruction, and the like) that teachers use to convey the standards and learning expectations to students.

Curriculum as in commercial programs. "Our district just bought the most fantastic new reading curriculum from Houghton Mifflin." Facing History and Ourselves, Success For All, and Open Court Reading are examples of published packages that include materials, an approach to instruction, assessments, and teacher training.

Curriculum as in teaching units. "My team just wrote a four-week curriculum on the colonial era in Africa." These are carefully crafted chunks of instruction of limited duration (a six-week history unit on World War II, for example, or a three-week English unit on poetry) that often include big ideas, essential questions, assessments, teaching strategies, and daily lesson plans. Units are most often planned by teams of teachers who share the same grade level or subject area.

Curriculum as in classroom materials. "We're using a new computer curriculum that teaches students how to solve multistep word problems." Narrower than programs and more focused than units, curriculum materials are usually commercial (but sometimes teacher-created) print or other tools, including textbooks, workbooks, worksheets, software, or other media (Houghton Mifflin History of the United States, "Wordly Wise," and Mario Teaches Typing, to name a few). They are designed to teach or drill a specific part of the overall curriculum.

I hope this is helpful in clarifying some of the widespread confusion around the use of the word "curriculum" and helping us be more precise in this critical area of schooling.

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