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## **Taming the Crammed Curriculum: Selective Abandonment as a Strategy in Professional Learning Communities**

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### **Abstract**

*Because time is one of the biggest limitations of teaching, lesson planning, and curriculum development, K-12 teachers must maximize this variable in their instruction by focusing on central priorities and practicing selective abandonment. One of the best venues for this is the Professional Learning Community (PLC). These groups of teachers must agree on a limited number of content standards, tailor instruction to them, and devise appropriate assessment instruments to gather data on student academic achievement. Even though 47 states have agreed to use the Common Core State Standards, it will take time for common assessments to be developed. Thus, PLCs must work now to align assessments with the new standards. PLCs must regularly review these assessment results data and refine instructional materials to meet student needs. Further, building and district leaders must support their teacher PLCs and avoid the urge to institute new programs until teachers have aligned standards, instructions, and assessment.*

Here's an all-too-common scenario in K-12 education: the state or provincial office of education decrees that yet another topic must be added to an already-bloated curriculum. School districts dutifully relay the decree to building administrators and, finally, classroom teachers. And teachers must then perform pedagogical prestidigitation to squeeze the new topic into what they're already teaching their students while preparing them for the crucible of high-stakes testing.

It's no secret to educators that one of the biggest limitations in teaching and lesson preparation is time. But this is a variable that can be stretched only so far. This limitation is also true for curriculum design. Indeed, Tyler (1949), whose groundbreaking work in curricular development is legendary, noted that schools must be very clear about what they will address in the curriculum and what they won't. This is crucial for the intellectual well-being of students by providing the opportunity for judicious depth rather than expansive breadth in the curriculum. And, as we know, the common pattern during the last 70 years has been to add to the curriculum while removing nothing. These additions include Computer Literacy, Consumer Education, Driver's Education, Service Learning, and Sexually Transmitted Infections. The list is seemingly endless—and still proliferating. Each of them has value, but what's the priority? Which topics—and in which sequence—best serve the majority of students?

### **The Need to Focus on Central Priorities**

Something, of course, must give. And the process of curricular cutting we need to implement must work to benefit students and increase their academic achievement. That process,

selective abandonment, a term coined by Arthur Costa (Lovely & Smith, 2004), involves a conscious choice of limiting the curriculum to fewer topics with more in-depth investigation by students. During this time of fiscal downsizing, with steadily shrinking resources, the received wisdom is that we must do more with less. But what exactly does that mean? For policy makers, the answer is obvious: fewer resources and leaner budgets. For practitioners, the answer is also obvious, though difficult to implement: determining what's crucial for students to learn and then focusing on this material exclusively. That means implementing selective abandonment regarding the curriculum.

With the publication of the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education titled *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, the stage was set for the rapid adoption of content standards by states. In their haste not to be left behind, however, many states ended up with standards that lacked focus, coherence, and, most important, brevity. Some states had content standards amounting to lengthy laundry lists, a form of curricular wish list legerdemain that served as rich fodder for politicians' re-election bids but was notoriously weak in sequence and continuity in the K-12 continuum.

Indeed, Marzano and Kendall (1999) found that proliferating content standards, if rigidly adhered to, could theoretically delay high school students' graduation by five years. In essence, what we have is a crammed curriculum that has become the repository of specialized interests. Clearly, we must focus on what's essential to teach our students. The breadth of what's addressed in the curriculum is not nearly as important as the depth of curricular topics (Holmes Group, 2007). We must focus on the central priorities of preparing our students to be ready for postsecondary life and jettison the peripheral matters (Conley, 2005, 2010). But what's the best way to apply selective abandonment to what's taught in our schools? And how do we tame the crammed curriculum?

### **Using Professional Learning Communities**

One of the most powerful ideas in education to be developed during the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the Professional Learning Community (PLC). Formalized as a concept by DuFour and Eaker (1998), PLCs have had a strategic impact on many K-12 schools in the last two decades. Schmoker (2011) asserted that one of the most important professional activities teachers can do is to reduce the number of state content standards to a manageable number, and here is where PLCs can help. If teachers in grade-level PLCs at the elementary school and content-area PLCs at the secondary school focus on agreeing what content standards are the most crucial for their pupils, then they can gather appropriate instructional material and devise specific assessment instruments to measure student academic achievement. And, according to Schmoker (2011), this should be done consistently each quarter of the academic year.

### **Are We Ready for the Common Core Standards?**

As Conley (2011) noted, 47 states as well as the District of Columbia have agreed to replace their state content standards with the recently developed Common Core State Standards. Rolled out in June of 2010, the Common Core State Standards were developed with funding from the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010). The Common Core State Standards are more streamlined than the cumbersome collection of content standards that most states developed

during the late 1980s and 1990s. For example, the Common Core State Standards for English/Language Arts consists of six expectations as opposed to the pages and pages of standards for English/Language Arts developed by most states.

What is even more noteworthy is that 45 states have joined the two assessment consortia composed of groups of states that are developing new assessments aligned with the Common Core State Standards. Some teachers might perceive the Common Core as a move to nationalize K-12 curriculum, but this is not the case. The Tenth Amendment, of course, reserves all matters not specifically mentioned in the Constitution to state and local governments—including education. Indeed, as the Common Core State Standards Initiative (2010) noted, local educators will decide how the standards are to be met, and teachers will continue to create lesson plans and tailor instruction to the needs of individual students. The Common Core does not prescribe particular works of literature, for example, in the English/Language Arts standards. The means of achieving the ends of the standards are left to teachers, and here is where PLCs play a paramount role.

### **What's to be Done?**

Even though the United States Department of Education is funding the development of common assessments tied to the new Common Core, this process could be lengthy. We can't afford to wait until there are approved assessment instruments in place. As Schmoker (2011) advocated, PLCs should focus on the deciding on a manageable number of standards in each discipline, gathering engaging instructional resources, and developing common assessments for the short term. As Shulman (1988) noted, we should follow the doctrine of the "union of insufficiencies" which involves creating multiple modes of assessment to capture an accurate status report of student achievement. Thus, PLCs should create a variety of assessment instruments: paper-and-pencil tests composed of selection items, essay writing responses, oral presentations, case study exercises, debates, lab demonstrations, to name only a few.

In addition, PLCs should meet quarterly to review data with a teacher leader or a building administrator. During this session, PLC members should look for common patterns in the gathered data. Is instruction preparing students for the assessments used? Does instruction need to change or do the assessments? This the type of just-in-time response that will make the curriculum based on realistic content standards not only relevant to student academic needs but also nimble and able to be changed as needed for the benefits of students. And just like a well-constructed lesson plan, PLC members must monitor and adjust regularly to ensure that both instruction and assessment are doing what they should. This isn't glitzy and glamorous, but it is necessary to ensure steady progress of student academic achievement. As Hargreaves and Fink (2006) presciently observed, frequent changes merely for the sake of change have a debilitating effect on schools. Although Hargreaves and Fink were speaking specifically of moving administrators around frequently, it also applies to promiscuous change in curriculum and assessment. Just as school leaders need time to implement a vision into the day-to-day operations of a school or district, PLCs need time to refine instruction and assessment so students may benefit. And abandoning this important professional activity to chase after the evanescent siren song of the latest program fad is irresponsible and counterproductive for student academic achievement.

## The Need for Administrative Buy-in and Support

So many innovative instructional programs that trumpet themselves in the pages of journals and the education trade press slam the targeted readers with overkill hyperbole about the programs' effectiveness. And yet the truth is far less sexy and glamorous. Fewer content standards, consistently taught through a lean, focused curriculum, and regularly measured with appropriate assessments will bring steady improvement. We must also check the results of student assessments regularly and monitor and adjust as needed.

We need to make PLCs the focus on staff development. The most important thing is a realistic, rigorous curriculum well taught with realistic, rigorous assessments. This focus on PLCs needs to be championed by both building and district administrative leadership teams. As Schmoker (2006, 2011) noted, school and district administrators need to become deaf to the siren song of new programs and instead maintain a consistent focus on helping PLCs select a manageable number of appropriate content standards, create high-quality instructional materials, and develop common assessment instruments to measure student academic gains regularly. In addition, teacher preparation programs must also introduce the concept of the PLC to preservice teacher candidates so they will be aware of the power of PLCs in focusing on content standards, instruction, and assessment.

In his 1941 classic, *The Future of Education*, Sir Richard Livingstone wrote that “[t]he test of successful education is not the amount of knowledge that pupils take away from school, but their appetite to think, know and their capacity to learn” (p. 28). As teachers, we must do the hard work of preparing our students for their postsecondary life. This is the key to preparing the next generation to be informed, responsive citizens. And, we hope, to whet their appetites, as Livingstone asserted, to be lifelong learners who think deeply about what it means to become solid critical thinkers, adroit problem solvers with a realistic curriculum taught thoroughly and well.

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