The Principal and the Curriculum: A Leadership Story

By Bambi Betts

However you slice it, the principal of an international school is a curriculum leader. Whether there is or is not a curriculum director, heads of department, grade level leaders, instructional coaches, a staff developer, etc., it is STILL the job of the principal to ensure learning, to be the 'gatekeeper' of learning…and that means giving leadership to the heart of where the school defines what's worth learning…the curriculum.

The principal has three jobs when it comes to curriculum:

1. Make sure there is one….lead the process of developing and designing curriculum.
2. Get it going in the school…lead the process of implementing the curriculum – getting teachers to teach it and assess it.
3. Check up on it….lead the process of monitoring the curriculum, asking the right questions and collecting the right data. And then swiftly making the modifications which will further advance learning.

Making sure there is one

By now, the merits of a documented, relevant, engaging curriculum, mapping the way for students to become lifelong, intelligent, resilient, positive contributors are sealed. Every piece of research that has approached this subject offers the same result – in the words of Robert Marzano, establishing a 'guaranteed and viable curriculum' is the number one strategy that, at the school level, will influence student learning. Pretty obvious – if you don't know where you are going, even the most gifted teacher in the world will be challenged to help all students get there…

To give the curriculum real teeth, it is helpful to think of it as the 'contract' between the school and the kids and the parents. In the curriculum 'contract', parents 'promise' to give us some money and to entrust their child to our care for many hours each day, and to support the child as best they can in their learning.

What is our part of the contract? What do we 'promise'? Sadly, most schools cannot claim to guarantee learning. But we can guarantee ACCESS to learning.

And how do we guarantee access? It is in the curriculum that the school prescribes its part of the contract. If done properly, it prescribes, to whatever degree the school decides to commit:

- What learning will each child have access to?
- What forms of assessment will each child have access to? And
- What learning activities will each child have access to?

And to reiterate, the level of prescription is of course entirely a decision of the school. But there must be a decision; and that decision is encapsulated in the documented curriculum.

With no hard data, armed solely with the experience of hundreds of visits to dozens of international schools over the past 10 years, l walk out on the proverbial limb. A huge percentage of the more than 6000 international schools around the world have spent the greatest majority of their curricular effort on making sure there is one…choosing standards, writing learning targets, developing unit plans...borrowing, stealing, sharing, rewriting, writing…writing…writing…and engaging the time of hundreds of teachers and leaders..., and for a good cause. So there is typically SOMETHING documented in most international schools by now. It never stops; it will, by definition, always be a work in progress, as well it should be. But it can't be left there either on dusty shelves or, more appropriately in the last decade, in a similarly dusty web-based tomb.

If you still struggle with how to actually get the curriculum written, here are some 'to dos' and 'to don'ts':

1. Do not assume that all teachers have either the skill or the will to write curriculum. Most teachers rightly believe their job is to TEACH not to define and document WHAT kids should learn.
2. Consider purchasing one of the many excellent options now available.
3. 'Standards' and other similar learning intentions are freely available from hundreds of sources on the internet. Use them.
4. Hire a writing team; some of the teachers at your school MAY have the experience, but don't be afraid to look beyond your own school.
5. Provide the framework and the big picture of what the curriculum will look like when it's complete.
6. Write some of it yourself. Although obviously challenging for any one principal to write it all, any attempt brings benefits way beyond the curriculum itself.
7. If you do have skilled curriculum writers among your faculty, organize them into writing teams….and pay them.

In no way are we underestimating the need to continue to define what students will learn, how they will learn and how they will be assessed – of course this again is the heart. But if we focus all our attention here, we run the risk of what has happened to many of our schools…we get stuck there, and spend little or no energy on the second critical piece.

Even while the ongoing writing continues, a principal needs to swiftly and efficiently determine how that curriculum will actually play out in the school.

Getting it in place (implementing)
A principal organizes and resources the school so that the 'contract' can be fulfilled. There are DOZENS of strategies available to a principal to facilitate implementation, organized around three key notions:

1. How do we organize the adults (professionals) in the school to achieve curricular goals?
2. How do we best organize access to learning so all students have equal opportunity to learn?
3. How do we best provide leadership for organizational infrastructure that will support achievement of curricular goals?

The strategies range from providing templates for unit plans, purchasing and training people in the use of curriculum housing software, guiding the design of common assessments aligned with learning targets, devising an organizational plan that puts teachers together who teach the same curriculum; facilitating learning conversations; devising processes for ensuring resources are available, hiring teachers experienced in specific curricular areas, providing professional development opportunities targeted at both specific curricular areas as well as the current research on how learning happens, creating timetables that offer maximum access to the curriculum by all students, etc.

Clearly, getting the curriculum in place requires considerable proactivity on the part of a school leader. For an effective principal, a good part of every day is dedicated to creating and refining the infrastructure that makes it possible for teachers to 'teach' – provide access to the curriculum – to all learners. Volumes of models, advice, policies, and examples are readily available. Really, for a principal today it's about having mission driven-criteria to guide this process, such as:

1. Align every educational experience, activity, policy, and practice with the mission. If you cannot find a word or phrase in the mission that justifies the practice, toss it.
2. Base your infrastructure on the research, on how learning happens, not on teacher or principal pet peeves.
3. Take the Google approach and ensure that at least 20% of the infrastructure is no structure – allowing new structures and methods to emerge from teacher and learner engagement with the curriculum.

Is anybody looking? The heart of the matter
Once the learning intentions are fully captured in the written curriculum, no unit plan has been left unwordsmithed, and simple implementation infrastructure established, we begin the intense work of evaluating and monitoring the curriculum – the process of gathering information about the status of those expectations, for the ultimate purpose of advancing learning for all learners in the school. To monitor the curriculum means to develop a simple, systematic plan for assessing the effectiveness of the curriculum.

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 task force, department heads, grade level teams, a curriculum director etc., but the principal is the ultimate gatekeeper and shoulders the responsibility. What we have learned is that the practice of monitoring the curriculum is actually at the very heart of the work of a principal. From the perspective of the organization, it is about accountability to the 'contract'; and from the more important perspective of every single learner in the school, it is about moral purpose and ethical practice.

Regardless of the level or prescription of the written curriculum that a school eventually settles on and documents, regardless of how 'loose' or 'tight', or the multiple strategies employed to get the curriculum in place, the whole curricular enterprise turns on – 'is the planned curriculum actually being implemented and to what extent are the kids achieving the learning targets?' And that means a curriculum evaluation and monitoring scheme.

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

1. Is the planned curriculum being effectively implemented?
2. Does the curriculum produce the desired student learning?
3. Is it still the 'right' curriculum? (e.g. commensurate with the needs of students and current research?)

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

Devising strategies to respond to these questions and then utilizing the data to make improvements is, again, the very heart of the work of the principal. Approached systematically (and calmly!) it can have direct, measurable impact on student learning. Let's explore a few of the practical strategies for each question.

QUESTION 1: IS THE PLANNED CURRICULUM BEING IMPLEMENTED?
School leaders can be both disheartened and frustrated by the fact that, although substantial time, energy, and money has been spent on developing and implementing a curriculum, teachers may still appear not to make much use of it.

Once there is reasonable assurance that the curriculum is documented and 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. So how would we know?

If the documented curriculum includes the components referred to previously (WHAT learning will students have access to? What forms of assessment are guaranteed? And what instructional strategies are guaranteed?), then the broad structure for monitoring is already established. What remains is to decide which specific strategies to use.

Checking up on the WHAT
Are kids getting access to the learning intentions described in the curriculum?

The single most powerful monitoring strategy available to principals to help answer this question is to systematically collect and analyze teacher-developed assessment tools. What a teacher truly values and is holding learners accountable for with regard to understandings, content, skills, and even dispositions – and therefore teaches – is reflected in the tools habitually used to assess student learning. Assessment tools are powerful indicators of what is really going on in the school.

Imagine, for example, that the curriculum stresses the application of mathematics in real-life situations and the skill of clearly communicating the process used to solve a problem. A review of the teacher's assessment tools reveals that 80 percent of test or assessment tasks measure calculation and particular methods of working out a problem. And there are only one or two minor examples where students are asked 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 curricular outcomes?

If a principal could do only ONE THING to monitor curriculum, this would hands down be the top choice.
It is time and effort extremely wisely invested to devise a simple, systematic process to examine assessments, preferably before they are done by the students. A set of criteria when examining assessments is a useful tool, the first criterion being 'Which curricular learning targets is this assessment tool designed to provide evidence of?' If the alignment is not clear, or not there, you have your first piece of data to help answer the implementation question.

Teacher planning documents are another rich source of evidence of implementation. When teachers take the time to plan, they generally follow that plan. If the principal gives importance (weight) to those plans by including them in the monitoring system, the incentive to be attentive to the planning is enhanced. And like most monitoring practices, we differentiate for each teacher. The level of planning we might need to see from teacher A to ensure implementation may be very different for teacher B. The principal's role is to KNOW what strategies will assist each teacher in refining the implementation of curriculum.

The Implementation toolbox expands beyond these two as well, including:
1. Regularly collect evidence of essential, agreed upon teaching methodologies using strategies such as walk-throughs, reviews of unit plans and lesson plans, etc.
2. Compare samples of student work from a particular unit of study to the stated outcomes of that unit.
3. Periodically collect samples of student work and compare to overall curriculum outcomes.
4. Scheduled weekly 30 minute meetings between each head of department/grade level leaders and the principal to examine work samples, plans, etc.

QUESTION 2: ARE STUDENTS ACHIEVING THE DESIRED OUTCOMES? Monitoring student learning
Regardless of how clearly learning outcomes are stated in the curriculum, and how fully they are being implemented, they lose their potential to power and direct the efforts of teachers without a systematic approach to both collecting

and interpreting student learning data. The ultimate purpose of a guaranteed, viable, documented curriculum is to help a teacher 'cause' the intended learning. So systematically looking at learning results is pretty fundamental and provides some of the strongest evidence in the curriculum monitoring process.

The overarching practice for monitoring student learning is to ensure there is a systematic comprehensive assessment plan in place which addresses collecting learning data, interpreting it, feedback mechanisms and recording and reporting processes. That process will address collecting evidence of learning from the four distinct categories: external assessments; 'common', school-designed assessments; teacher-made end-of-unit assessments; and ongoing assessment (day to day).

Over the past decade, the notion of using learning data to monitor and drive practice has simply exploded…to the point where it is now almost a full-time job to keep up with the latest approach. Here are three of the most effective strategies from that litany:

1. 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 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 as well as a window on levels of learning.

2. Devise your own set of 'standardized' or common assessment tasks, drawn from the curricular outcomes.

   One of the unique features of most international schools is that they enjoy complete site-based leadership, 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). 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.

3. Set up a dashboard of 10-15 of the key, trans-disciplinary learning intentions in the curriculum and track them regularly across all grade levels. Every month new software appears to assist in this essential monitoring practice.

And the final curriculum monitoring question…

IS IT STILL THE 'RIGHT' CURRICULUM?
Is the curriculum aligned with current research on learning, the needs of the school's current population, the mission and vision, and world class standards?

This set of monitoring strategies compels us to consider both the internal and external integrity of our curriculum.

External Integrity
A concern of many international school leaders, and particularly governance 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? Is our curriculum reflective of all the new learning about learning? 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. A potential pitfall for an international school is isolationist thinking which all too often gets translated into practice.

More than within national system schools, international school leaders need to pay attention to this issue. Although we experience less and less isolation daily, compliments of technology, 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 is obvious. Our parents and boards trust we are doing this and our students rely on it.

Principals will want to have at least one strong strategy for keeping that trust, such as: 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.

Most countries and many schools publish curriculum outcomes or standards in some form on the internet, making this strategy significantly more accessible than in past years. Comparing your curriculum with these is also useful, particularly in schools whose mission is to emulate specific curriculum types.

Another strong strategy supporting external integrity: Keep a list of the key findings on curriculum and examine them against any new findings about learning. Research on learning from cognitive science, neuroscience and neuropsychology are all advancing rapidly, supplying educators with increasingly specific notions about how learning actually happens. School leaders seeking the best for their students will make it a routine practice to continuously monitor curricular practices alongside these findings.

Internal Integrity

Here we ask the questions: are we doing what we say we are doing? And is what we are doing still meeting the needs of our learners?

In many international schools we observe a significant mismatch between the stated vision and mission of the school, and day-to-day curricular and instructional 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? Do the school's core value say, for example, that 'we believe 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? Could this gap also be widened by the robust and rapid development of digital learning and the pressure for schools to be perceived as 'creating innovators?' It is easy to write this stuff into a mission or vision…but a whole different story to do the slog work to get it routinely practiced in the curriculum.

The strategy here is straightforward: It's a gap analysis. Take the mission; underline the key words that define the nature of the school. Consider each of the three major parts of the curriculum. Is there anything about what we want students to learn that is at odds with that word? Is there anything about how we assess or teach that is at odds with that word? (Fig 1). This process can be repeated with the school beliefs and/or learning principles. The goal is to identify where the gaps are as a starting point for curriculum modification.

Fig. 1

MISSION PIECE	Learning standards	Instructional practices	Assessment practices
'inspire students'	Most of our learning standards are less than inspiring	Nothing in our non-negotiables requires teachers to 'inspire'	We ask teachers to do one contextual assessment per unit – much more inspiring than typical tests

To monitor whether or not the curriculum is commensurate with the needs of the actual student population requires leadership teams to be fully cognizant of and, in fact, truly intimate with the school's mission. As the original population of expatriates is being slowly replaced by host country nationals and/or students from other systems, international schools may find themselves in a precarious position. The school is set up, for example to provide a 'university preparatory program,' comparable to that of exemplary UK or US schools, and to prepare students for successful entry into universities in those countries. If the population of the school, or even the dominant sentiment, shifts away from this, does the school alter its curriculum?

This is a challenging one and of course begs the question, are the needs of a group of students in any given school dramatically different from those of any other group of students in the deep sense of learning? Or might we be responding to the hoops of higher education, parent perception, or what's 'convenient' for us educators?

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.

The curriculum…

- Make sure there is one….lead the process of developing and designing curriculum
- Get it going in the school…lead the process of implementing the curriculum- getting teachers to teach it and assess it
- Check up on it….lead the process of monitoring the curriculum, asking the right questions and collecting the right data. And then swiftly make the modifications which will further advance learning.

Who implements all these strategies and how many are needed? Multiple arrangements can work, driven by the context of the school. But there will be one inescapable commonality. As long as the role still exists, it is the principal – the ultimate gatekeeper of learning – who's day-to-day work that will, and should be, anchored by this work.