How important is a high-quality curriculum? A school without a quality curriculum is like a car without an engine—neither goes anywhere. One responsibility of a school administrator is to ensure that quality curriculum is designed, adopted, and implemented. However, a worthy curriculum is more than a list of subjects or topics covered in a school and it is certainly more than a set of objectives for any particular course. It encompasses a number of interdependent factors including what students learn and how, what teaching strategies are most effective, and how the structure of the school supports both student achievement and teacher effectiveness (Rogers, 1997).

The No Child Left Behind act (NCLB) has focused the attention of an entire nation on the curriculum of an individual district, and educators are keenly aware of this external scrutiny. If curriculum is the engine that drives teaching and learning, then the curriculum improvement process becomes the tune-up for that engine through planning, developing, implementing, and evaluating the curriculum (Jasparro, 1998).

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A Comprehensive Process
A typical curriculum evaluation consists of a committee comparing what is currently taught to a set of standards or objectives compiled by a state department of education or a professional organization. In this procedure, curriculum gaps are identified and filled by adding new topics of study to an existing list. Although there is nothing essentially wrong with this process, a more comprehensive review model would also include an examination of the curriculum’s fundamental validity, implementation, and effectiveness (Jasparro, 1998). The final goal of such a procedure would be general agreement to the following:

- The curriculum meets state standards and benchmarks
- The curriculum is relevant and sufficient, i.e., valid
- The curriculum is effectively implemented
- Students are achieving key objectives at an acceptable level.

Certainly the first statement is the easiest to verify; however, time spent on the last three components will heighten the power of the curriculum to impact student learning.

Validity
For a curriculum to be considered valid, it must focus on objectives that are truly worthy including those that are relevant to basic living, academic continuance, career success, and responsible citizenship. Wiggins (1998) stresses the need to first place objectives that qualify as “enduring understandings” at the very heart of the curriculum, followed by those objectives that are important to know and do and lastly those with which it is worth being familiar. Determining exactly those enduring understandings might be is no easy task. At our high school, we have solicited outside input on that very question through a variety of methods. Parents were invited to be a part of a focus group that explored essential components of the curriculum. After several nights of work, the parents made recommendations to include curriculum material that centered on knowledge and skills they believed remained significant throughout their adult lives—skills, such as the ability to solve problems and support arguments, and knowledge, such as the vocabulary required to communicate in the various disciplines and an understanding of civil rights and responsibilities.

Making and maintaining connections with instructors at local colleges to obtain a realistic picture of what students should know and be able to do by the time they enter college has also been helpful. Local employers could surely add insight about what learning objectives truly endure beyond formal education into the workplace. We have gleaned some of the most valuable feedback on curriculum through our alumni surveys, in which former students comment on their preparedness for college classes or jobs. We have incorporated questions about particular subject areas into the survey to gain specific, helpful information about those topical areas in which students felt best prepared and those in which they felt under prepared, and summaries of their responses have been shared with the appropriate departments. Including feedback from outside sources provides for a well-rounded curriculum without the bias that is possible in a strictly internal curriculum evaluation (Dalton, 1999). Throughout the steady unyielding pace of a school year, educators can sometimes lose sight of the relationship between the curriculum and the world outside the school walls. Allowing opportunities for students, parents, and community members to weigh in on curriculum matters goes a long way toward designing a curriculum that is relevant and sufficient and in the best interest of students.

Implementation
The written curriculum, no matter how high the quality, has no real power without proper implementation and that relies most heavily upon trained educators. Regular reviews of the curriculum by individual teachers and departments help to ensure that objectives are being covered completely and consistently. Administrators who are responsible for teacher supervision but have a minimal understanding of the overall curriculum can expect to see evidence during observations that the curriculum is being followed. Here again, the broader definition of curriculum becomes critical. A curriculum evaluation can look at more than what should be taught and if it is taught. An in-depth evaluation will study how it is taught. We use yearly teacher evaluations that are completed by students. These evaluations give faculty members a better understanding of the students’ perception of teacher effectiveness. This information is extremely helpful because it comes directly from the individuals who are most affected by curriculum and instruction.

To encourage student input on curriculum, a group of 20 students were invited to participate in a professional development day for teachers. The students represented a wide range of abilities, interests, and academic success. Teachers had previously formed five committees and each committee was stationed in a different classroom on that day. The students
were divided into five teams that traveled from room to room in 20-minute blocks to share their ideas with the faculty committee. The students were surprisingly candid and well-spoken as they described what was working well and what they still needed from their high school education. Besides hearing about effective methods of instruction, the teachers heard again and again that the students desperately needed to be active participants in their own education. These thoughts made an impression that no inservice has ever been able to match and have influenced the methods of curriculum delivery for many teachers.

Evaluation
The last component in a comprehensive curriculum review is to evaluate the degree to which students are achieving key objectives. Standardized testing provides one means of assessing students, and a teacher-written assessment targeting specific learning outcomes is another. The latter may be more suitable as the correlation between the selected curriculum and the assessment instrument will be tighter. Teacher collaboration in designing common assessments to use across subject areas or grade levels is another task that yields great benefits. If all of the U.S. History teachers get together and write a final exam to be administered to each U.S. History student, the probability of curriculum consistency between teachers is much higher. Comparisons between the test results and the learning objectives are more meaningful because they can be applied across the broad group of course sections. The most exciting result of writing a common assessment is the positive power that flows from teachers working closely together to improve curriculum and instruction. It is important to note that using student achievement to evaluate curriculum should not occur in isolation. It is still possible for students to perform well on poor quality objectives. A comprehensive curriculum evaluation must inspect student achievement only after the quality of the curriculum has been verified.

Outside Influences
Educators certainly play the biggest role in curriculum evaluation and revision. They must be aware, however, of the tremendous influences by several outside sources. Both federal and state government influence what is to be taught and how it will be assessed. Textbook publishers have considerable power in setting curriculum as do agencies that design standardized tests like the ACT, SAT, or state-sponsored achievement tests. Professional associations (such as the National Council for Teachers of Mathematics) and accrediting organizations (such as the North Central Association) weigh in on curriculum issues and are often referenced during evaluation. The impact of outside influences is not inherently negative; the various organizations can act as valuable resources for those responsible for curriculum evaluation and development. Recommendations for curriculum modifications resulting from research of outside sources should be examined and appraised in light of what is best for students. Nonetheless, it is not in the best interest of students for educators to completely relinquish the power found in designing curriculum to those who do not intimately know the students.

Challenges
Although the benefits of conducting regular curriculum evaluations are great, there are a number of potential challenges. Finding the right combination between state standards and benchmarks and community-based curriculum needs can be problematic. Keep an open mind about the integration of relevant curriculum into what has already been prescribed and allow experienced teachers to have flexibility in their curriculum design. Some teachers may resist curriculum changes when traditional or favorite topics are affected. Reassure those teachers that their success in the classroom is based upon how they teach and not what they teach, and encourage them to take risks that can powerfully affect students. Achieving a proper balance between breadth and depth of curriculum is difficult but crucial. A curriculum that covers
everything yet lacks necessary depth does not significantly improve a student’s ability to learn and therefore threatens future success in school and career.

A major hurdle for curriculum administration is solving the time dilemma. The comprehensive curriculum evaluation process takes more time than the traditional method. Setting aside regular time during the school year for departments to meet and discuss curriculum and instruction issues keeps the topic at the forefront and reduces time and effort later when a full curriculum review is scheduled. An additional challenge for educational leaders is the hesitancy and uncertainty that comes from lack of familiarity with the existing curriculum and with current trends. Use the curriculum evaluation process as a means to become acquainted with the learning outcomes for the school and to talk with teachers about what is going on in their subject areas. Challenges notwithstanding, the benefits of a quality curriculum evaluation far outweigh any possible difficulties or obstacles.

The keys to successful curriculum evaluation are having an established plan that cycles through each of the curriculum areas at least once every four to five years and charging responsible staff members to both oversee the process and hold other participants accountable. Keeping curriculum up-to-date is a continual process that demands focused time and attention. New curriculum is being developed and promoted to educators all the time; however, without an evaluation plan to study the quality, implementation, student achievement, and effectiveness, the chances of true comprehensive curriculum improvement are slim (Jasparro, 1998).

To keep the curriculum engine running smoothly, regular tune-ups must be performed by highly-trained personnel who can diagnose engine problems before they lead to an actual breakdown. With careful attention, quality curriculum can motivate teachers, inspire students, and contribute to the highly effective education desired by all. PL

References