

Quality in Curriculum Documents: Some Basic Criteria

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Schools today are under increasing pressure to demonstrate that their programs deliver what they are supposed to deliver. As a result, there is greater demand on school districts to make curriculum documents available for review by their professional staffs and by patrons, accreditation teams, federal agencies, and even the courts.

This pressure has prompted some districts to develop new documents or update old ones, while others have borrowed documents developed elsewhere and adapted them to local needs. Regardless of how they have chosen to proceed, there has been a tendency for school districts to strive first to meet the objective of *having* a written curriculum structure and to consider only secondarily the issue of curriculum document *quality*. Yet the importance of sound curriculum documents has never been more apparent. Everywhere critics are using these documents to establish baselines of expected performance. If the documents do not speak clearly or properly to this issue, schools obviously are going to be in trouble. School officials must ensure that the documents they have on file are of unimpeachable quality.

The term "curriculum documents" embraces all written forms a curriculum might take, such as philosophy statements, scope and sequence displays, curriculum guides, instructional units, resource units, course syllabi, and courses of study. In

assessing the overall acceptability of curriculum documents, two major dimensions come into play. On the one hand, there is a concern for the quality of the conception, formatting, and writing. On the other hand, there is a concern for the professionalism of the editing and for establishing the legitimacy of the materials.

Criteria for Acceptability of Curriculum Documents

Collectively, curriculum documents embody the written structure of the school program. They properly carry the sanction of the board of education as representing what the community wants and expects to be taught. Just as important, they should be planned, developed, and published so as to organize the subject matter, structure the goals and objectives, and design the learning activities in ways that respond to legitimate staff needs.¹ And they must pass the review of experts in the respective subject matter fields.

In addition, there are more mechanical or pragmatic criteria to be considered. Weaknesses in these areas can severely undercut the credibility of a given document. These dimensions relate to the quality of writing, the professionalism of printing and general appearance, the reputations of individuals listed as developers, and other issues of possible concern to a potential critic.

What we offer here is a set of standards that can be used to assess the major dimensions of new or borrowed and adapted curriculum materials. These criteria should be especially useful to those who have had little experience in preparing curriculum materials. They may also function as a handy checklist for more

experienced curriculum professionals. (We are not the first to develop such criteria. A checklist published by the National Council of Teachers of English² has been used successfully for a number of years. However, we believe a much larger number of elements deserves careful review than is included in that checklist.)

The 12 criteria listed below should not be regarded as definitive. Some may well benefit from rephrasing. Other criteria might be added to make the list stronger. Nor are the questions under each item inclusive. They are simply examples of what might be asked when judging the adequacy of various dimensions of a given curriculum document. Nevertheless, this broad and potentially complex array of criteria can help curriculum professionals and others separate sound curriculum documents from those suffering from qualitative deficiencies.

1. Legitimacy of the Document. The issue of legitimacy concerns the "official standing" of a curriculum document. The goal here is to ascertain whether it has been issued by a legitimate authority.

- What authority signed off on the document in its final form?
- Does this authority have a legitimate connection to the school district (or other issuing agency)?
- Is there a logical relationship between the authority signing off on the document and the school or district where the document is being used?

2. Credibility of the Developers. The credibility dimension attempts to probe the qualifications of the developers. In looking at curriculum documents, we need to know whether

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Figure 1. Curriculum Document Assessment Instrument.

Title of document: _____

Where and when printed: _____

Issuing agency, school district, or school: _____

Directions: To rate this document in terms of the following 12 criteria, refer to the text of the article and put a check in the column that most closely indicates your assessment of the relative adequacy of treatment.

Criterion	Totally Inadequate		3	4	Exceptionally Strong	
	1	2			5	6
1. Legitimacy of the document	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
2. Credibility of the developers	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
3. Specification of intended learners	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
4. Specification of intended users	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
5. Specification of document purpose	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
6. Scope of document coverage	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
7. Labeling of contents	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
8. Consistency with other curriculum documents	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
9. Clarity and useability of format and organization	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
10. Maintenance of internal consistency	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
11. Specification of document use	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
12. Evidence of professional editing and reproduction	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

Summary Ratings: Next to each numbered criterion below, write the number of the rating you checked.

Criterion	Rating
1	_____
2	_____
3	_____
4	_____
5	_____
6	_____
7	_____
8	_____
9	_____
10	_____
11	_____
12	_____
TOTAL	_____

Rating for Entire Document: To obtain the average overall rating, divide the total above by 12.

Average _____

the people involved in the development processes could have been expected to know what they were doing.

- Are developers of the curriculum document identified?

- Is there explicit evidence of the qualifications of those involved in developing the document?

3. *Specification of Intended Learners.* Curriculum documents should identify the specific population of learners for which programs are intended. The object is to determine how clearly this population has been identified.

- Is a description provided of the population of learners to be served by the programs outlined in the

documents?

- Does information regarding learners go beyond simple grade level descriptions to include presumed learning characteristics?

4. *Specification of Intended Users.* Documents that might be of great interest to a district-level supervisor might contain little information useful to classroom teachers. Thus, curriculum developers ought to identify intended users precisely.

- Does the document identify the audience to which it is directed?

- Are the intended users indicated on the cover or title page so the reader doesn't have to "read the fine print" to get this information?

5. *Specification of Document Purpose.* Individual curriculum documents serve many ends. Contents of a given document should make clear to an intended user the specific purpose it is to accomplish.

- Is the function of the document indicated?

- Does the document explicitly refer to its relationship (if any) to other curriculum documents? (For example, is the document equal to, subordinate to, or superordinate to other documents?)

6. *Scope of Document Coverage.* There are many kinds of educational programs. Consequently, there are many kinds of curriculum documents.

No single document can reference more than a small part of the total educational "territory." In looking at the issue of scope, we are trying to determine exactly what a given curriculum document claims to be responsible for.

- Does the document identify the precise segment of the educational program it is intended to serve?

- Is there a description of how this document "fits in" with other curriculum documents that frame other program dimensions?

7. *Labeling of Contents.* Curriculum documents should provide users with a quick reference system for finding individual document components. Further, individual parts of documents should be labeled separately.

- Is a table of contents provided?
- Are individual parts of the document well marked and easy to find?
- Are terms that describe the contents likely to be understood by first-time users?

8. *Consistency with Other Curriculum Documents.* Only in a very few cases do individual curriculum documents stand alone. Typically, there are important interrelationships among sets of documents that constitute the curriculum structure of a program. For example, properly, the content selected and the pace of its sequence as described in a scope and sequence document are consistent with the district's philosophy statement. Content in the scope and sequence document should also be consistent with content in the curriculum guide. Similarly, an instructional unit should be directly related to the specific curriculum guide that governs its contents and provides for coordination with other units.

Sound curriculum documents reflect consistency in terms of formatting, terminology, notation systems, and in other "mechanical" dimensions as well. These consistencies make it easier to work with separate documents. They also reflect careful editing and signal a developmental effort when documents "belong together."

- Is the format consistent from page to page?
- Is the format parallel from document to document?
- When notation systems are used

to tag related elements (goals, objectives, learning activities) is the system identical in all similar documents?

- Are the contents of interrelated documents cross-referenced?

9. *Clarity and Useability of Format and Organization.* Good curriculum documents are characterized by a logical, identifiable plan of organization, explained in precise and uncluttered language.

- Are users introduced at the beginning to a plan that is followed consistently?

- Is an easy-to-understand notation system used to identify individual components?

10. *Maintenance of Internal Consistency.* The probability of inconsistencies within documents increases in proportion to (1) the length of time involved in the developmental effort, (2) the number of curriculum documents that are prepared, and (3) the number of people who participate in the process. Format conventions established at the beginning may not be observed throughout all documents. Additionally, the amount of detail in later sections may be much less than that provided in earlier sections (when writers are "fresh"). There may also be inconsistencies in terms of activities not matching objectives, or evaluation items not tying clearly to objectives. Even the general quality of writing may vary among sections of a document, reflecting stylistic idiosyncrasies of different writers.

- Is each section worked out completely? (Is the document free from "thin" sections?)

- Is a common scheme of element subordination followed consistently throughout?

- Are all elements promised in the format actually delivered?

11. *Specification of Intended Document Use.* Good curriculum documents provide users with explicit information regarding how materials are to be used. Directions should indicate how much freedom the user has to vary from the contents of the document in implementing the described program.

- Are instructions provided regarding how the document should guide the user's behavior?

- Do instructions tell users how

much freedom they have to deviate from document guidelines?

12. *Evidence of Professional Editing and Reproduction.* The final appearance of a curriculum document has a great deal to do with the psychological impact it will have on users. In general, a document that appears sloppy tells users that it is unimportant and not to be taken seriously.

- Does the language of the document reflect careful editing to ensure smooth, error-free usage?

- Has the document been printed and bound, resulting in a final product that is equivalent in appearance to what one might expect in commercially-prepared materials?

A System for Quantifying Evaluations of Curriculum Documents

These criteria provide the basis of a system for making quantitative comparisons of curriculum documents. The assessment instrument in Figure 1 can be used to measure documents in terms of individual criteria and as a whole. One application of this procedure identifies "soft spots" in existing documents. Another centers on making comparative ratings between two or more documents. (For example, curriculum guides developed in two districts of an 11th grade U.S. history course might be compared.)

We have found it helpful to introduce curriculum developers to this assessment instrument before they begin work. By using the instrument to assess existing documents, they seem to acquire a "feel" for areas of curriculum documents that often are weak. This experience sharpens their resolve to avoid mistakes made by others as their own curriculum development efforts move forward.

The Curriculum Document Assessment Instrument is not copyrighted or in any other way legally protected. We invite all to use it—and modify it where appropriate—in their own curriculum work. ■

¹ For an illuminating response to the need for attending to teachers' concerns when planning to modify existing curriculums, see Fenwick W. English, "Curriculum Mapping," *Educational Leadership* 37 (April 1980): 558-559.

² Dorothy Davidson, "Trends in Curriculum Guides," *English Journal* 56 (September 1968): 890-897.

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