

Monitoring the Curriculum: From Plan to Action

The Aurora, Colorado, schools have devised a way to ensure that the adopted curriculum is being implemented as intended.

How can we narrow the gap between the curriculum prescribed by our teacher curriculum committees and the curriculum implemented by the total staff? How can administrators, curriculum committees, resource teachers, and district personnel help staff deliver the adopted program? In our district middle schools, we developed a program-monitoring process, with a program monitoring handbook as a resource, to address these needs.

Developing the Curriculum

For several years, the Aurora Public School System has followed a staff-based curriculum development process. The process, which takes approximately 20 months to develop before implementation, includes the following steps:

1. Development of a plan with timelines.
2. Local data collection from students, parents, staff, and administrators regarding the existing program; solicitation of suggestions for modification and change.
3. Review of literature, research, and trends in the specific program area.
4. Development of program philosophy, goals, and objectives.

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5. Development of criteria for materials selection.
6. Selection of basic instructional materials and supplemental materials.
7. Development of a curriculum guide outlining the content to be covered (the "what") and implementation suggestions and instructional strategies (the "how").
8. Development of a training packet to inservice staff.

9. Conducting both formal and ongoing inservice with staff.

This program fosters partnership between central office and the schools. Direction, facilitation, and major resources come from the district; expertise in instruction and knowledge of classroom realities come from the respective buildings. The process may appear "top-down" in nature, but it is equally "bubble-up": a two-way exchange.

The Missing Link

For years we had wrestled with the issue of consistency in our curriculum. Our curriculum development process gave us the base, but there was a missing link in implementation. We wondered, "What makes a curriculum work? What helps a written plan come to life and have meaning for students?" We wanted a way to make the curriculum committees' vision an operational reality.

We began to develop the concept of "program monitoring." After deliberations with specialists within the district, we defined the concept: "the procedure by which the educational process is observed, checked, reviewed, and sometimes adjusted for quality and adherence to the adopted curriculum."

Rate your behavior 4 = needs improvement 1 = strength

1. Attend subject area meetings	1	2	3	4
2. Provide informal written feedback to teachers about program	1	2	3	4
3. Visit classrooms daily to view programs	1	2	3	4
4. Review adopted curriculum guides	1	2	3	4
5. Use budget to ensure necessary materials are available	1	2	3	4
6. Review copies of interdisciplinary units and "spot check" lesson plans	1	2	3	4
7. Attend inservices on programs				
a. for administrators	1	2	3	4
b. for teachers	1	2	3	4
8. Demonstrate value of planning by				
a. having a plan for monitoring	1	2	3	4
b. adhering to scheduled curricular meetings	1	2	3	4
c. recognize and commend curricular planning	1	2	3	4
9. Use time during administrative team meetings to discuss program	1	2	3	4
10. Recognize and support learning coordinator's attendance at district meetings	1	2	3	4
11. Attend team meetings (including resource team)	1	2	3	4
12. Talk regularly with students about program	1	2	3	4
13. Interrupt learning time (bells, intercom, etc.) only in emergencies	1	2	3	4
14. Model teach	1	2	3	4
15. Review film requests, field trips, speakers for relationship to adopted program	1	2	3	4
16. Articles about program are reviewed on a regular basis	1	2	3	4
17. Recognize the use of approved basic materials	1	2	3	4
18. Talk regularly with teachers about program	1	2	3	4
19. Monitor specific usage of xerox machine	1	2	3	4
20. Know the DRTs and plan for their work in your school	1	2	3	4

Fig. 1. Administrative Behaviors that Signal Program Monitoring

Green Flags

1. Heterogeneous classes with groups within
2. Student interest and teacher enthusiasm in math
3. Recognizing that students may change in math skill
4. Integration of problem solving
5. Students applying math to real-life situations
6. Use of manipulatives
7. Enrichment activities available to students

Red Alerts

1. All students in the class doing the same assignment
2. No or excessive homework
3. Are students grouped homogeneously?
4. Excessive or no purpose for chalkboard work
5. Teacher grading papers while students do homework or students doing homework on own; homework consisting of an excessive number of similar problems
6. Students repeating operations they have mastered
7. Class bogged down on "mastery" of specific operations
8. No diagnostic testing
9. Lack of variety of strategies and class activities at various levels
10. Too much or too little lecture, demonstration
11. Students not understanding purposes of their homework
12. Rigidity of math groupings—no fluidity of movement to allow for weaknesses, strengths, or ability
13. Checking for understanding
14. Overemphasis on "drill and practice"
15. Never any use of calculators

Fig. 2. Green Flags and Red Alerts for Mathematics

Program monitoring should not be confused with staff or program evaluation; they are used in different contexts and for different purposes. Staff evaluation may assess how well a teacher uses a given teaching strategy, whereas program monitoring may determine that an effectively used strat-

egy is not appropriate for the program or materials being used. Program evaluation makes judgments about the value of materials and the relevance of objectives, whereas program monitoring transforms a written program into an operational reality.

Recognizing the promise of site-

based decision making, we developed a process that is based on building input but district driven. The process seeks high quality, not intrusion; it is, indeed, a joint effort of teachers and administrators. The process makes administrators more visible to their teachers and grants teachers supervisory help that is not tied to formal teacher evaluation.

We translated our concepts into a program monitoring handbook, a condensed quick reference for administrators' use (figs. 1 and 2). It includes checklists for classroom observations (both generic and subject-specific), suggestions for gathering and sharing data and providing feedback to staff, descriptions of the basic elements of a monitoring plan, and suggestions for coordinating the process and effecting change by the administrative team. (The administrative team is composed of the principal, assistant principal, and a learning coordinator, an in-building curriculum generalist responsible for program implementation and staff development.)

One section of the handbook contains a short summary of each program area, highlighting program objectives and key implementation strategies. Included in this section are "green flags" and "red alerts" identified with the assistance of our curriculum committees. Green flags are practices we hope to see in classrooms in that subject area. Red alerts are practices that, if seen consistently, call for explanation; they should usually be avoided. For example, in physical education a green flag is *emphasis on skill building*, and a red alert is *dodgeball every Friday or every rainy day*. Examples from mathematics include green flags such as *use of manipulatives* and *enrichment activities available to students* and red alerts such as *excessive or purposeless chalkboard work*, *not checking for understanding*, and *overemphasis on drill and practice*. For teachers, a quick review of the flags can help in developing lesson plans or in assessing particular lessons. For administrators, the flags form a framework for providing feedback to staff and clarifying expectations.

Putting the Process to Work

Initially, administrative teams were trained during their annual retreat to use the handbook; and school staffs were introduced to the concept, purpose, and operational activities of the program-monitoring process. Then, in the spring of 1985, the handbook was revised based on suggestions from administrators, with the help of consultants.

The staff began using the program-monitoring process in 1983-84. In their training, administrators had rated their own knowledge of various programs, shared strengths, fretted over weaknesses, and voiced concerns about trying the idea. This type of sharing had been done across the district middle schools and within each building administrative team. Moreover, administrators had shared the concept with their staffs and solicited their help with the process.

Nevertheless, some administrators and teachers felt threatened by the initial implementation. When curriculum committees developed a short paper on what an administrator should see in a classroom, some administrators greeted the paper with suspicion and apprehension. Could this be an opening salvo on academic freedom? On the other hand, some administrators wondered aloud, "What can I tell teachers about effective implementation of any adopted program in their areas of specialization?" Moreover, administrators saw program monitoring as an added duty rather than as a function they could incorporate into their responsibilities.

To defuse these concerns, we acknowledged the potential for misuse: the "spy" concept, a covert teacher evaluation system, imposition of the "administrator's way" on the teacher, judgments based on limited observations and knowledge, and the like. Consequently, we chose to emphasize the potential positive impact that program monitoring could have on the adopted program, on instruction, and on the educational experiences of students. By enabling teachers to assume an expanded role in the curriculum cycle, we hoped to build trust in the

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process. Furthermore, talking about curriculum and instructional strategies in this context was nonthreatening because the goal was increased student learning, not teacher evaluation. Communication between teachers and administrators became both more open and more focused.

Outcomes

The outcomes of the process—both intended and unanticipated—have been extensive. Now the written curriculum is implemented in a more consistent manner, and materials are used in more appropriate and effective ways. Instructional strategies are more varied and more successful. Interdisciplinary and personalized instruction occur more frequently.

There is more talk among teachers and administrators about curriculum and instruction. As a result of this dialogue, a common language has evolved in teacher and administrator communication with parents and community groups. Administrators participate more in daily curriculum and instruction activities. This is especially true for assistant principals, who typically find much of their time occupied by the unpredictable behavior of middle schoolers, supervisory issues, activities, and the like.

Program monitoring provides ongoing staff development for everyone involved. It enables administrators and teachers to identify problems in translating the written curriculum into effective teaching practices. The curriculum suggests appropriate strategies for achieving objectives; the monitoring process helps identify factors that are causing teachers difficulty. Administrators can then offer immediate feedback and recommend resources, provide training, or suggest alternative ideas. Modifications in program and implementation strategies arise naturally in such an environment. More opportunities are identified and used, and fewer opportunities are allowed to slip by. Staff members experience professional and personal growth about both content and process.

At the last principals' visitation of the 1987-88 school year, principals made these comments about program monitoring:

- "It has become part of each day. Teachers are more comfortable asking for help and sharing their plans and experiences."
- "We schedule meetings of the administrative team to make certain everyone is involved."
- "We use many techniques in addition to classroom visits: collaborative planning with teachers, parent conferences, team meetings, and subject area meetings, to name a few."

In Aurora, we believe that quality in the classroom comes from goals shared jointly by administrators and teachers. We have developed a process for monitoring the curriculum in which all grow professionally in a climate of sharing and openness. Program monitoring helps us complete the circle of curriculum development and implementation. □

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