



New Fairfield Public Schools

Academic, Social and Personal Excellence

Review of Curriculum Design and Implementation Processes

Submitted by Judith Wilson
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Introduction and Context

This study was initiated by the Superintendent and Board in August of 2023. Since 2020, the district has been consumed by the challenges of the pandemic, major construction projects, changes in leadership at all levels, support for the annual budget, and the deep social/emotional and academic needs of students. With some of those challenges in the rearview mirror and with a commitment to refocusing full attention to the district's core mission of excellence in teaching and learning, the district posed critically important questions to be studied as a launchpad for future decision-making about district priorities.

It must be emphasized that the context for this external examination is *positive*. The district has many strengths on which to further build. Strong organizations ask hard questions, plan beyond the immediate, and craft multi-year pathways toward their next levels of achievement. As a learning organization, New Fairfield Public School District understands that its work must always be moving forward on a well-defined continuum and that the importance of continuously building capacity within the organization is paramount to the success of its students and staff.

All district work is, and must continue to be, tethered to the district's mission and values:

The Mission of the New Fairfield Public Schools is to engage students, staff, and the community in a partnership to provide a collaborative, innovative, encouraging and safe environment where all members take an active role in supporting each other's learning while also helping students pursue their own passions.

Graduates of the New Fairfield Public Schools are:

- ★ Knowledgeable scholars
- ★ Talented communicators
- ★ Critical and creative thinkers
- ★ Engaged global citizens
- ★ Self-determined and self-reliant individuals

The district has opened a new high school and new elementary facilities that are well-designed and, indeed, state of the art for public schools. The 2100 pupils, their teachers, support staff, and administrators have beautiful environments for learning, teaching, and leading. But, of course, facilities *support* the work and the magic of education. Tending to the *systems* that provide the backbone for K-12 excellence is what the district can now fully focus upon.

The Charge

The charge was to provide an external view of current systems and practices and they relate to curriculum design and curriculum implementation. Basic questions included: What needs to be built out? What needs to be built upon? Are the district's approaches and practices solid? What needs to be strengthened or abandoned? Is the written curriculum the living/taught curriculum?

Process and Participants

It is important to note that the district adopted a fully inclusive process to address its essential questions. Representative teachers, coaches, department chairs, content leaders, grade level leaders, and administrators from across all grade levels were asked to meet with the consultant to share their experiences, opinions and recommendations. Over the course of two days on-site, feedback from more than 70 educators was gathered (30+ from K-5; 40+ from 6-12 and central office). I then analyzed their collective thinking, common themes and trends, singular ideas, and recommendations in order to offer questions and suggestions for the district's consideration as it plans its next steps toward coherence in leadership, curriculum design, and curriculum implementation.

I especially want to acknowledge the positive energy, thoughtfulness, expertise, and care of the dozens of New Fairfield educators with whom I met and thank them for genuinely sharing their ideas for the good of the district and its future.

Key Questions

Over the course of two days of interviews, these questions were often prompts for discussion:

- How does a new or revised curriculum get created?
- Are there guidelines and/or policies for writing curriculum well?
- Is there a big gap between the written curriculum and the taught curriculum?
- Do you have a written curriculum for all the subjects/courses you teach? Is it current?
- What mechanisms are in place to ensure curriculum review and updates?

- Where/how do you access the written curriculum?
- When a curriculum is updated, how is that rolled out? How do teachers become aware?
- Is it a living document that allows teachers to comment, add resources, make suggestions?
- How does professional development support teaching? Does the district provide training when new resources or programs are presented?
- Does the district provide support for teachers to ensure they are comfortable teaching the curriculum?
- What is the relationship between curriculum priorities and how are resources allocated? Does the district provide needed resources for teachers to teach effectively?
- How does articulation of the curriculum occur grade level to grade level and school to school?
- Do some subject areas get greater attention and resources than others?
- What do you wish would happen next? What would be more helpful to you? What is your “next best step” recommendation for the district as it plans for a more coherent, articulated k-12 curriculum?

Build Upon!

1. “We can do anything!” That is a direct quote from a teacher who has seen the best of New Fairfield’s staff’s work over several years. I endorse her sentiment as I believe that the expertise, energy, and care exist to tackle any well-defined and supported bodies of work.

2. Vision of a Graduate: This set of attributes is powerful not just as a well-crafted document or beautiful banners. Its power lies in its use. Routinely use the attributes in curriculum design, in hiring practices, in selection of resources. Consider shifting the label for the attributes to Vision of a New Fairfield’s Learner to apply to all K-12 students and all New Fairfield employees.

3. Facilities: Build upon the beautiful spaces to ensure that they are used for collaboration and creativity, interdisciplinary work, and celebration of student work.

4. Standards based curriculum and instruction: It was clear that teachers understand and most are steeped in the Connecticut Core Standards. This is a solid foundation for curriculum design and high quality instruction.

5. Exemplars: Across the schools, there are (or have been) many examples and pockets of exceptional work in curriculum design, professional learning, and systemic habits of a healthy organization. Several which were specifically mentioned and appreciated and can be replicated or institutionalized:
 - Recent design and rollout of the K-12 math curriculum
 - Coaching model when at its best and its impact on modeling for teachers, providing feedback, assisting with resources, leading teacher learning. Expansion of the coaching model would serve the district well.
 - Consistent use of good consultants to inform and guide best practice
 - Half day release time during pandemic schedule was focused and effective
 - In 2022-23 there was a day for vertical K-12 conversation among teachers and while it needed follow-up, it was a good opportunity for communicating across grade levels and schools
 - There was time for curriculum and instruction topics built in to new teachers orientation this year
 - Identification of *power* standards in some subjects and at some grade levels

- The beginnings of coordinated professional learning opportunities

Note: There are countless examples of great work with students and colleague to colleague on any given day across the district. The few examples listed above relate to curriculum and professional learning systems.

Action Steps for Consideration

The importance of making all decisions through a systemic lens cannot be overstated. There is a crucial difference between a school system and a system of schools. What is done at one grade level, impacts all others. What is offered at one school, matters for students at other schools. What teachers learn in one setting, matters in other school contexts. Coordinating curriculum, instructional practices, professional learning, student activities, and district goals K-12 creates stronger, more effective, and more efficient learning systems for students and adults. (Martin Brooks and Judith Wilson, 2021)

Researcher and educator Michael Fullan has highlighted the importance of “systemness” and coherence via four elements or strategies within a framework that warrant the district’s attention:

The Coherence Framework (Michael Fullan)

The elements of the Framework include four strategies, with leadership essential to each component:

Focusing Direction: Districts set a small number of ambitious goals directly related to student achievement and mobilize the whole organization to support a central moral purpose: improving society through improving educational systems.

Cultivating Collaborative Cultures: Districts foster interconnected and supportive cultures focused on instructional improvement within and across schools.

Deepening Learning: Districts improve teaching at all levels of the system through a deeper understanding of the learning process and how to influence it.

Securing Accountability: Districts develop conditions that maximize internal accountability and promote understanding of the value of external accountability measures.

These four elements contribute to what Fullan calls “collective autonomy,” a systemic condition in which people and the schools within which they work retain the ability to make decisions that impact their own functioning, but do so within the understanding that they are part of a larger system to which they have significant professional responsibilities. In other words, the whole transcends the sum of its parts.

How might this apply to New Fairfield? First, it changes the questions to be asked and then it changes the K-12 structures that are created or replicated...and which must become embedded as part of the DNA of the district. “In New Fairfield we...”

Some of the recommendations made below for New Fairfield’s consideration and possible action are technical in nature (i.e., adopting a universal format for curriculum) but many are adaptive and require a shift in thinking or behavior. They are all systemic and interconnected, even if presented in separate categories. It is all multi-year work but it can all begin soon.

Roles and responsibilities

The last years have been marked by disruptions, whether pandemic related, construction related, budget related, or connected to changes in leadership at several levels of the organization. It is important now for the district to gain clarity around current roles and responsibilities, not just for the individuals in leadership roles but also so that there is clarity for faculty members in knowing who to approach for what. Create an internal communication path for this information.

Specifically define each person's role in curriculum development and professional learning responsibilities (including interface with the Professional Development & Evaluation Committee -PDEC).

Consider drafting an *end-game* organizational chart which might need to be reached in stages over more than one budget year. This will require defining coaches', department chairs', directors', and lead grade level and lead subject area roles.

Design of curriculum

The use of the word "design" is intentional. Educators should be viewed by themselves and all in the organization as designers. Gone are the days when curriculum writing was cut and paste paperwork or when anyone at all could volunteer for summer curriculum work just for the district to comply with a schedule or a mandate. Moreso, each curriculum design effort must be approached in the context of not only standards but connectedness to multiple grade levels and to other disciplines.

Consider design teams instead of individuals.

Consider design projects throughout the year, not just in summer.

Many elective courses do not currently have a written curriculum. Other content areas were "spotty" or the curriculum was dated so not in use. As stated previously, there are good examples of recent curriculum design efforts, also. The message here is that solid curriculum design is not yet an embedded and expected practice across all grade levels and subject areas.

Have a standard plan for sharing a drafted curriculum with other faculty members for feedback before finalization and rollout.

Use universal K-12 templates and formats for curriculum design, ensuring that teachers can comment, recommend resources, make shared

suggestions within the document at any time. Robust use of a curriculum mapping tool is the goal.

Ensure that all teachers have access to all curriculum. (Currently, middle school educators do not have access to most of the high school curriculum, including high school level courses taught in 8th grade.)

A major curriculum review cycle for a subject area might still be in place for every 4-5 years but because of technology and more micro-efforts it is possible for educators to make suggestions for revisions on a regular basis.

One person needs to be the “clearinghouse” for this work, providing the standards, models, and assurances necessary for high quality systemic work.

Articulation and alignment of curriculum

This critical work is one of the hallmarks of a great district. It goes far beyond the written curriculum to ensure that the written curriculum is what is taught and what guides high quality instruction. The best articulation and alignment of curriculum and best practices come from teacher collaboration..time spent in focused conversation and exchange of understandings.

Articulation and alignment are also key to each student’s New Fairfield experience. While teacher voice, style, choice of approach and creativity are treasured, at the core of the work teachers must deliver on a standards based adopted curriculum. Not only is that fair for students, it minimizes gaps in students’ exposure and experience as they progress K-12 through the system.

When and how can this work take place in New Fairfield? Time is always our most precious and most sparse resource in schools. But a coordinated approach to small group, in- person articulation, even every other year,

matters greatly. This is not yet in place across the district, especially between the MS and HS.

Effectiveness of programs and curriculum

Built into the written curriculum and the taught curriculum must be the methods for assessing student growth and the methods for program evaluation. While the program or resources are not the curriculum, they support the curriculum and must be the best match for optimum instruction and student learning. Growth measures and targets, rubrics that are aligned with the standards, analysis of internal benchmark assessments and external assessments, and a plan for program evaluation are all components of a solid design. Are they part of all curriculum design work?

Professional learning

Whether a single employee's experience or the experience of a grade level staff or school faculty, the purposes of professional learning are to build capacity, contribute to collective efficacy, and generally advance a culture of deep professionalism.

While there are examples of professional learning experiences in recent years that have been greatly appreciated (especially the experiences with high quality consultants), in general PLCs, professional learning options, and first faculty days of the school year are viewed as needing to be better planned and better coordinated. While much of this is about communication and too little time, it is also about the importance of building the Learn/Apply/Reflect cycle into the district's standard practice. Learning is not enough; the continuous loop must include Apply and Reflect (shared reflection).

"Innovation is a team sport" (Tony Wagner 2021) When teachers are together with time for reflection and wondering, innovation occurs.

All districts face the challenge of time for professional learning and there is never enough. However, if the district is serious about the quality and importance of professional learning, it should:

- Investigate other district's models and novel approaches to use of time
- Empower the PDEC in new ways and with a new set of working guidelines
- Plan PD months in advance and give every employee an understanding of how it will matter to them
- Never assign anyone to a PD session just to have them in a prescribed spot; PD has to be aligned with an educator's role and work
- Consider micro-learning; podcasts; mini-sessions
- Minimize the use of instructional time for PLCs (elementary level)
- Add more early release student days and/or late arrival days (explain the WHY to parents)
- Invest further into Tri-State Consortium membership as will provide a high level learning experience for individual participants and the district as a whole tristateconsortium.org

Our students' learning depends on our educators' learning. Our educators' learning enriches curriculum design and instruction.

Special education

The integration of curriculum standards, professional learning, and resources for special education faculty is imperative. Create accountability for the procurement of all resources for special educators when a program or sets of materials are procured for "mainstream" education classes. This is not currently the practice.

Include special education faculty in PLCs and professional learning opportunities as those opportunities apply to their work with students.

Onboarding

Whether one or 15 new faculty or instructional support members join the staff in any given year, each needs to quickly understand not only the culture and overall expectations of the district but what and how they are expected to teach. Creating a multi-year required experience for new faculty and new instructional support staff yields great benefits for student and faculty success. Deep dives into the curriculum, the available resources, and the feedback cycle from coaches and administrators can catapult new educators (even those with experience elsewhere) toward success in New Fairfield. A brief orientation and a pairing with a mentor are not enough for the complexity and expectations of 2024 and beyond. How might the district invest more systematically and over more years in new hires?

Educators' Voice and Trust

New Fairfield's staff is talented and devoted. All efforts to engage them in leadership of professional learning, input of ideas, feedback, etc., will pay dividends for students and the district as a whole. Like educators everywhere, they want to trust and be trusted. They want to know that when they invest time and energy in curriculum design or professional learning, it matters. Trust in the workplace is based on Competence, Care, Sincerity, and Reliability (Feltman 2021). Building upon those four pillars in all facets of work across the district will contribute to the strength of the district overall.

Also of value would be the regular practice of using protocols to take stock of district work. The National School Reform Faculty website has many free resources but two that might enhance processes in the district are:

Protocols Back to the Future Protocol <https://www.nsrffharmony.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/future.pdf>

Success Protocol https://www.nsrffharmony.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/success_ana_ldrshptteams_0.pdf

Communication

The WD-40 of all successful organizations is communication. There is the basic communication of information: where, when, etc. While most of the 70+ people in these input sessions felt the district did a very good job at the technical information, they also hoped for more lead time and advance notice. The bigger and most meaningful communication work, however, is the “storyline”: 5% about where we have been/10% about where we are/85% about where we are going and **WHY**. When we paint a clear picture for each other and our constituents, we provide clarity and motivation and engender support and participation in the journey.

Why are we changing a curriculum template?

Why are we piloting a new program?

Why are standards changing?

Why is this PD required?

We place our efforts, thinking and energy where we see value. As a district practice, regularly ask if the WHY has been clearly communicated.

Concluding Statement

Why do high quality curriculum design and implementation matter? They close school experience gaps for our students. They keep educators tethered to the district’s mission and values. They keep instruction current and aligned with research and best practice. They help a district maximize its talent, time, and resources.

New Fairfield is operating from a position of strength; is asking the right questions for systemic growth; and clearly has the potential to take bold moves to strengthen its work through design and integration of PK-12 systems.