

Foreword

In my career I was honored on several occasions to participate on district-level curriculum writing teams. Each experience was professionally rewarding. And while I believed my individual students benefitted from my experience, there were many students whose teachers were not given similar opportunities. The district tried to compensate for this situation by offering curriculum orientation sessions. However, there were limits as to the impact these one-shot sessions could have on my colleagues' teaching.

Research consistently reinforces that the most important factor in a student's learning is the quality of teaching experienced each day. That quality is influenced not only by the qualifications of the teacher, but the content of the lesson, and the strategies applied by the teacher to facilitate student learning. My experience demonstrated for me that when teachers are given the opportunity to study and design powerful lessons based on standards, more students experience success.

Years later what I learned "in practice" was explained to me "in theory." In 1998 Susan Loucks Horsley and several colleagues wrote a comprehensive professional learning strategies guide for math and science teachers. It was my first exposure to the concepts of curriculum implementation, replacement units, and curriculum development and adaptation as professional development. Considering curriculum development as a powerful form of professional learning was based on several shared assumptions as follow:

Those closest to the level of implementation are best suited to develop curriculum. Through the process teachers increase their content and pedagogical knowledge and reflect on their teaching.

The development of curriculum provides teachers with numerous opportunities to learn from others who have expertise outside of the classroom.

Teachers can increase their understanding of both content and pedagogy by thinking carefully about the broad goals of the curriculum and the specific content, skills, and attitudes that students need to acquire. (p. 80–81)

For too long the potential impact and relationship of school and team-based curriculum development has been ignored. Too many school systems still hold curriculum development as a district-level responsibility and fail to recognize the potential benefits to sharing the responsibility between the school and central office. Our current system of education is organized around standards and assessments at each grade level. And while ensuring all students are held to similarly high standards, schools and teachers need the flexibility to design the curriculum and lessons that

will ensure their students successfully meet the standards. Districts that hold the curriculum reins too tight may unwittingly fail to realize many powerful benefits that may accompany sharing the responsibility with leadership teams at the school, grade level and department levels. These benefits may include the following:

- Curriculum that addresses the immediate needs of the learners. Data driven decision making provides teachers with insights as to the standards that are challenging students and the curriculum that will be most helpful in addressing those challenges. Data indicates what students know and where they are struggling. While curriculum may be sequenced for one particular approach, much of it is better revised when the data indicates students are either not ready for what is scheduled next or can move faster than the curriculum recommends.
- Curriculum that addresses the interests and strengths of students. No independent group of curriculum writers knows teachers' students interests and assets better than the assigned classroom teachers. Teachers provided the context and support for ongoing curriculum refinement are better situated to meet student needs. In addition, research demonstrates connections between student engagement and student learning.
- Curriculum adjustable to the identified needs of students. In addition to strengths and interests, students have unique needs. Once again teachers are best positioned to understand their students' needs and need to feel empowered to make the decisions regarding how the curriculum can be adjusted to meet their students' needs.
- Curriculum that is understood and appreciated by the classroom teachers at a deep level. In fact, teacher who divide up lesson assignment responsibilities as opposed to collaborating in the development of lessons have very different experiences in classrooms. There is no substitute for the depth of knowledge that results from the joint development and assessment of classroom curricula. Scripted lessons can have limited impact on teachers and their students.
- Curriculum that considers the context in which it is delivered. Schools, communities, families, can bring different strengths to a learning community. When teachers are encouraged to develop curriculum that takes advantage not only of their students' strengths but their families' backgrounds and strengths, then they can find ways to engage families in the learning process and leverage the benefits that accompany family involvement.

Kay Psencik understands all these benefits. In fact she has understood them for almost 30 years. Having spent most of her career at the central office level she recognized the importance of balancing the roles and responsibilities for curriculum development in the ways that best served the educators and their students. This book represents a compilation of her best strategies.

Educators who choose to embrace the professional learning approach advocated by Psencik will unleash a *powerful, proven, and practical* process. Psencik writes like the skillful facilitator she is. She begins each phase with a discussion of her core beliefs, outlines steps to reach an identified goal, and shares strategies for assessing progress. She is detail oriented out of respect for the many challenges and expectations that confront educators and her hope to help others surmount the problems many educators face.

Psencik creates a *powerful* and compelling vision—all students performing at standard—for school leaders committed to school-based professional learning. Curriculum development as professional learning for teacher leaders is an effective strategy to achieving the vision. As teachers work collaboratively to review standards, evaluate curriculum, design lessons, and create assessments, they engage in embedded curriculum development and adaptation. Over the course of a school year, they create a useful student-focused and standards-based curriculum that ensures all students meet objectives. Psencik’s approach to curriculum development offers a powerful job-embedded professional learning model.

Psencik’s approach is *practical* as well. Through each phase, Psencik reviews the assumptions upon which she bases her recommendations, then moves to a review of the relevant research base, and finally offers questions to focus the learning team on the critical issues. During each phase, educators are encouraged to reflect, write, and adapt. Psencik includes case studies that demonstrate the results she experienced with the process in many different school settings. The results are indisputable, demonstrating the process can work. At the same time, she recognizes that each site has its unique challenges and she closes with reflective questions to further support the team learning process.

Kay Psencik’s approach to curriculum development and school-based professional learning has *proven* results to support it. Her approach has demonstrated impact with many constituencies in diverse settings. Her ideas were shaped by her experience working in both a rural school system and a large, urban school system. Psencik advocated for curriculum alignment and development during the school year as opposed to after the school year, and for professional learning that enabled teachers to understand deeply the standards their students were expected to master long before others were thinking about the issues. The book she has written exemplifies her countless success stories from the west coast in Oregon to the east coast in New York.

Kay Psencik has been a valued colleague for almost 30 years. I marvel at how much she has learned and how much she has accomplished since our first meeting. Enjoy the passion and expertise that Kay Psencik brings to life in this book. Use this text to transform your learning communities—you will gain the knowledge and skills to begin the important journey to ensuring every educator experiences effective professional learning every day so every student achieves.

Stephanie Hirsh