



Jenna Nelson, 1st-grade teacher at Saville Elementary School in Riverside, Ohio, leads a discussion of the book *What Do You Do With a Tail Like This?*, a core text used in the Wit & Wisdom 1st-grade curriculum.

STRONG MATERIALS IN THE HANDS OF GREAT TEACHERS

A YEAR OF SCHOOL VISITS HIGHLIGHTS WHAT MAKES CURRICULUM WORK

BY BARBARA DAVIDSON AND SUSAN PIMENTEL

K-12 education has witnessed a sea change in attitudes about curriculum as a serious reform strategy. The movement gained traction in the wake of the Common Core State Standards, when newly created curriculum products emerged.

Robert Pondiscio, senior fellow and vice president for external affairs at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, called curriculum “the last, best, juiciest piece of low-hanging fruit left in our efforts to improve student outcomes” (Pondiscio, 2015).

While there are an increasing number of high-quality, content-rich curriculum products available, as well as venues to assist schools and districts in evaluating them, selecting a high-quality curriculum is only the first step. How teachers make the curriculum their own in the classroom is every bit as critical.

The Knowledge Matters Campaign is a coalition of education leaders encouraging schools to focus on developing students’ foundation of content knowledge. Earlier this year, Knowledge Matters members visited

seven elementary schools that embrace high-quality, content-rich English language arts curricula.

The schools use a variety of instructional approaches and represent different geographic locations, demographic diversity, and governance structures. Their common feature is a commitment to knowledge-rich schooling and belief in comprehensive, high-quality curriculum, implemented schoolwide, as a means of achieving it.

As we toured these seven elementary schools, we sought to discover what kinds of professional learning teachers found most helpful in transitioning to a new curriculum. Four primary lessons for administrators and teachers emerged about what it takes to implement a high-quality, content-rich curriculum well.

LESSONS FOR ADMINISTRATORS

Embrace a “we’re-in-this-together” school leadership stance.

Teachers and coaches stressed the vital role of school leaders in driving robust implementation. Most important to staff was the passion that leaders conveyed about the learning the school was undertaking.



“One of the things I love about this is that I don’t have to keep looking for different things to work on specific skills [with students].”

— Amanda Berger,
4th-grade teacher at Saville Elementary School
in Riverside, Ohio

Teachers at Monticello-Brown Summit Elementary School in Greensboro, North Carolina, remember the tears of gratitude shed in a staff meeting when the principal, Christopher Scott, pulled everyone together at the start of the school year to prepare them to implement the new American Reading Company English language arts curriculum, ARC Core, in their classrooms.

Addressing teachers’ anxiety about the change, Scott made it clear they would be in it together and that continuous improvement mattered, not perfection. By lowering the cost of making mistakes and providing safe spaces for teachers to experiment, Scott and his team created an environment in which teachers relaxed and expressed openness to learning new ways of instruction.

THE KNOWLEDGE MATTERS SCHOOL TOUR

Knowledge Matters is a campaign to make building knowledge a priority for American education. Nearly every major educational goal — from improving reading comprehension and critical thinking to problem solving and creativity — is knowledge-based. Without a solid foundation of content knowledge built from the first days of school, students can't achieve higher academic standards and better outcomes.

Knowledge-rich schools focus on imparting knowledge of the world. They seek to restore wonder and excitement in the classroom by deepening students' understanding on a wide range of topics.

Our goal for the Knowledge Matters School Tour was to gather stories of schools that use the power of knowledge-rich schooling to promote excellence, provide equity, and inspire passion. We were particularly interested in drawing attention to schools that are closing the gap between students who grow up in poverty and their more privileged peers.

The role played by high-quality English language arts curriculum — and the professional learning educators experienced to make this possible in their school — was our focus. Given the paucity of time devoted to social studies, science, and the arts in elementary schools across the country, if children don't encounter these topics in their reading and don't engage with them at home, they likely won't be learned.

The significant role that background knowledge and command of academic vocabulary plays in reading comprehension is not a new discovery, but curiosity has recently piqued about what "knowledge-rich schooling" really means and how it can be advanced through English language arts.

Principals in the schools we visited were constantly in and out of classrooms, as much to learn and grow themselves as to observe how teachers were doing. Teachers expressed their deep appreciation for the presence in their classroom of leader learners, rather than leader evaluators.

Adrian Monge, principal of Detroit Achievement Academy in Detroit, Michigan, said it was important that she "norm perseverance and taking risks" by doing the planning and teaching alongside her teachers. The school had recently transitioned to a new, more structured version of the EL Education K-5 Language Arts curriculum. "It sends an essential message to the faculty that I chose to spend my time learning the curriculum, too," Monge said.

Tend to the hearts and minds of teachers by sharing the philosophy and research behind the new curriculum.

Teaching to the rigor in the Common Core State Standards involves significant instructional shifts. There is a not-to-be-ignored hearts and minds aspect to setting aside old ways of instruction so that faculty can move forward together to make real progress for their students.

In the case of English language arts, which was our focus during the school tour, the instructional shifts include regular practice with complex texts and their academic language; reading, writing, and speaking grounded in evidence from texts; and building knowledge through content-rich curriculum. The teachers and coaches with whom we spoke considered it monumentally important to ground teachers in the research behind these shifts and study the new curriculum to see how the shifts show up.

The experience of building authentic faculty buy-in and

enthusiasm, based on a shared understanding of the philosophical underpinnings and research base for the curriculum, contrasts sharply with how new curriculum is typically rolled out.

Most new curriculum professional learning tends to focus on orienting teachers to the products, perhaps highlighting some of the design features. Quite often, teachers don't even have materials in front of them. But as Shannon Vaka, instructional coach at Monticello-Brown Summit Elementary, said, "That's not how teachers learn."

Make professional learning curriculum-specific.

What characterizes the professional learning opportunities described to us by teachers and coaches in the schools we visited is that they're messy. By this, we mean they're experiential. The process is similar to the Japanese concept of lesson study.

Shannon Vaka characterizes it this way: "With Kelly (ARC coach), we never did sit-and-get. If we were going to roll it out in 3rd grade, she'd say, 'Let's start there.' She'd take the framework and walk through the lesson with us. She'd demonstrate a lesson, and we'd talk about it together. Or we'd all sit around and plan a lesson together and then draw straws and someone would have to teach the lesson."

What's most compelling — and we would argue very different — about this kind of professional learning is that it's collaborative and often co-led by teachers or early adopters of the curriculum. Grade-level and cross grade-level teams are rolling up their sleeves and working together, engaging in the content of what they're teaching in the classroom and figuring out the best way to deliver it, leaning heavily on the curriculum.

Amanda Barger, a 4th-grade teacher at Saville Elementary School

in Riverside, Ohio, talked about the impact on her practice: “We didn’t have a systematic way of teaching K-4 and were seeing lots of holes. . . . One of the things I love about this is that I don’t have to keep looking for different things to work on specific skills.”

Invest in your teachers through yearlong professional learning systems.

In the schools we visited, gone were the one- or two-day, right-before-school curriculum dives that are hardly worth the time. In their place was significant time for ongoing, sustained professional learning. For example:

- Teachers at Kinder Elementary in Kinder, Louisiana, who are using the new state-developed Louisiana ELA Guidebooks 2.0, said they plan lessons together with their grade level team *every day*.
- Coverage is provided at Detroit Achievement Academy for teachers to use recess and lunchtimes for planning, and students are released early *every Friday* for teacher collaboration time.
- Staff from the Bryant School of Arts & Innovation in Riverside, California, participate in a districtwide teacher collaboration time *every Wednesday afternoon* when students are released early.
- In addition to site-based professional learning opportunities, the Great Hearts network of classical charter schools, which includes Maryvale Preparatory Academy in Phoenix, Arizona, asks faculty to read books (“anything from Plato to Pinocchio”) and offers *year-round institutes* that deepen the teams’ understanding of a range of

SCHOOLS INCLUDED IN THE KNOWLEDGE MATTERS SCHOOL TOUR

- Bryant School of Arts & Innovation, Riverside, California.
- Kinder Elementary School, Kinder, Louisiana.
- Monticello-Brown Summit Elementary School, Greensboro, North Carolina.
- Maryvale Preparatory Academy, Phoenix, Arizona.
- Saville Elementary School, Riverside (Dayton), Ohio.
- Detroit Prep and Detroit Achievement Academy, Detroit, Michigan.

curriculum and content-specific topics.

- During the coming school year, all schools in Guilford County, North Carolina, will get *10 to 12 coaching days* to work on curriculum implementation.
- Teachers in Mad River Local Schools in Dayton, Ohio, implementing the Wit & Wisdom humanities curriculum, get *a full day to work together* in teams to prepare for each new module in the curriculum.

Of course, the elephant in the room of successful implementation is the need for resources required for this kind of professional learning. But there is a payoff for such an investment: Researchers report that teachers who participated in sustained, discipline-specific professional learning that dealt concretely with what they were teaching in the classroom — professional learning that averaged 49 hours across nine separate studies — saw student achievement increases of about 21 percentile points.

ADVICE FROM TEACHERS TO TEACHERS

Teachers and coaches we talked to shared their biggest challenges implementing a new high-quality curriculum as well as some advice.

Be gentle with yourself about pacing.

Teachers revealed some real difficulties with pacing in the first year of implementation. Valerie Sanchez is a 4th-grade teacher at Bryant School of Arts & Innovation, which uses the Core Knowledge Language Arts program. Sanchez said, “I cried so much that first year because it was hard to fit in all the content, and I felt I couldn’t do it all. . . . The first year is about trial and error. You can’t expect perfection — try everything. The next year is about adjustment and fine-tuning.”

Saville Elementary was in its second year of implementation when we visited in March, and one of the teachers said she was 17 weeks ahead of where she was in the curriculum at the same time the previous year. As Amanda Barger said, “I’m better this year than last, and I’ll be better next year than I am this year.”

Rely on the wisdom of the group when deciding whether (and how) to adapt the curriculum.

Not knowing when to modify the curriculum to fit classroom circumstances, and when to resist the temptation to do so by following faithfully what was written, was a question that dogged teachers in their first year of implementation.

Similar questions confounded coaches as well — for example, how to balance the desire to encourage teacher ownership with a confidence in the elegance and scaffolds built into the curricular design. There are no clear right and wrong answers to these questions, and, in the end, it was the discussion of the questions during professional

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learning communities time that teachers found informative and empowering.

It was when they engaged in this collaborative discussion that teachers had insights into why they (often unnecessarily) felt a modification was needed, found support in staying the course, and got reinforcement that something really wasn't going to work and help in figuring out a solution.

Shift the lift of the work to students.

A few coaches told us that teachers tended to compensate for their unfamiliarity with the curriculum by talking much more than needed while teaching the lesson. They surmised that teachers were, in part, anxious about students' readiness for the material.

Eventually, the teachers realized they were working harder than they were asking the kids to work. A number of the teachers we met with on the school tour were candid about saying they had initially doubted their students could handle the rigor of the new high-quality curriculum. "The hardest thing, if I'm really honest, is believing my kids can do this — that they can tackle these topics," said one 4th-grade teacher. Many teachers told us they had doubts the students could handle the texts and they had to learn to back off and let students struggle.

Norming risk-taking and perseverance, to include a willingness to be videotaped or have a colleague observe a lesson, can pay enormous dividends and help identify delivery hiccups — like talking and doing too much in lessons — before they catch hold.

By putting their faith in the curriculum and that it will all come together, teachers have enjoyed the kind of experience every teacher hopes for, as expressed by this Mad River Local Schools teacher: "You put them out there with a partner to struggle, and

they're so engaged when they come back together."

Take the long view.

As instructional coaches Amy Holbrook, Becky Parker, and Mandy Polen from Mad River are fond of saying, you better be in it for the long haul. "We view implementation as a journey, not a destination," said Holbrook. "A huge part of that journey involves honest reflective dialogue as a way to foster growth. We celebrate small victories."

STRUGGLES AND SATISFACTION

Every teacher and administrator we spoke to at the seven schools felt the struggle to learn the new curriculum was worth the effort. When asked to describe the changes they'd seen in their classrooms, respondents often became emotional. Why? It is our conviction that success in implementing a high-quality, content-rich curriculum has permitted these dedicated professionals to experience the professional satisfaction of seeing their students engaged and learning.

- "I feel like I experience more of those 'lights on' moments." — Amanda Barger, 4th-grade teacher, Saville Elementary School.
- "Every teacher in the building would have a different answer. For some, it's that kids now love to read. For others, it's the way they're writing. In 5th grade, it's the way they're able to argue and disagree and back it with information from their reading." — Shannon Vaka, instructional coach, Guilford County, North Carolina.
- "The work is so conceptually beautiful in idea and execution. When we think about what we value as adults, it's the quality of one's work. They're proving

they're capable of so much more." — Adrian Monge, principal, Detroit Achievement Academy.

- "I could never go back to what we did before because now I've seen how beautifully it can be pulled together." — Crystal Gleason, 8th-grade teacher, Mad River Middle School.
- "They [students] will have this for the rest of their lives." — Katie Luedtke, 3rd-grade teacher, Saville Elementary School.

Talking with these teachers about their experiences was deeply affirming. While everyone said the shift to a new high-quality, content-rich curriculum was one of the hardest things they had tackled in their teaching careers, they also said it was among the most rewarding.

REFERENCE

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