

New curriculum demands new support

CHICAGO SCHOOLS EMBRACE CURRICULUM-BASED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

BY STEPHANIE HIRSH AND JONATHAN BEN-ISVY

In 2017, Chicago Public Schools administrators were debriefing what they had observed while visiting several schools. They wondered why the focus of instruction was so vastly different not only from school to school but classroom to classroom in the same school. They grew concerned that some students had more access to high-quality learning opportunities than others.

Soon, their discussion homed in on curriculum. Several administrators referred to a research report they had studied that examined the importance

of grade-appropriate assignments to student success. The researchers found that “[w]hen students who started the year behind had greater access to grade-appropriate assignments, they closed the outcomes gap with their peers by more than seven months” (TNTP, 2018).

Others referred to research studies linking the quality and rigor of instructional materials with student outcomes. Some noted the efforts of the nonprofit organization EdReports to assess and rank curricular materials in the marketplace.

Continuing discussions led

to a decision to assess the quality, availability, and accessibility of curriculum materials across the district. Until this point, most decisions regarding curriculum and instructional materials had been left to principals and teachers at each school, and many schools, in turn, had left the decisions up to teachers.

In 2019, Chicago Public Schools asked 500 teachers if their school provided curriculum in the area that they teach. Almost 50% said their schools did not provide these resources, and 35% reported spending more than



five hours each week searching for instructional resources. A staggering 85% felt it was very important that the district provide unit plans, lesson plans, and resources for teachers. Chicago leaders knew they had to take action.

A VISION FOR CURRICULUM REFORM

With the visionary leadership of then-chief education officer LaTanya McDade, Chicago Public Schools made it a priority to make high-quality, grade-level instructional materials available to all teachers and students and provide effective curriculum-based professional learning to support successful implementation.

The district dismissed an off-the-

shelf option because available curricula did not meet the district's expectations for cultural responsiveness and equity, including connecting learning to the identity and culture of young people, representing students' cultures, languages, and literacies, and drawing on students' lived experiences. Building from scratch, estimated to take five to 10 years, was a problem given the urgency of the situation.

The leadership team opted for a hybrid approach. The team created a request for proposals for curriculum publishers to customize their materials to meet the district's needs and priorities and partnered with EdReports to develop rubrics to evaluate potential curricula on alignment with academic standards as well as the district's access and equity principles.

These principles include incorporating support for English learners, Universal Design for Learning, and social and emotional learning, as well as drawing on students' lived experiences and valuing their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic assets as tools for learning.

District staff — including content specialists, curriculum designers, and over 300 teachers — engaged in feedback and review cycles based on the content developed by the curriculum vendors, who then revised the content.

Within two years, the new Chicago Skyline curriculum was complete for six content areas in pre-K-12 (mathematics, English language arts, social studies, science, French,

ABOUT THE ELEMENTS

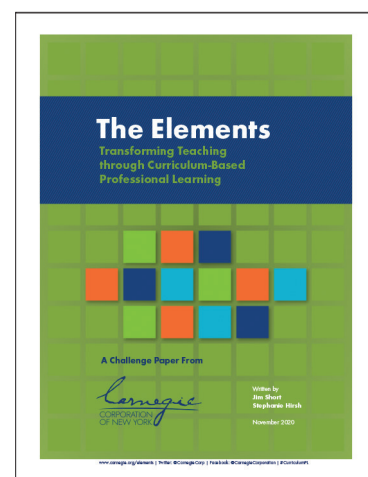
The Elements: Transforming Teaching Through Curriculum-Based Professional Learning is a report from Carnegie Corporation of New York that explores how professional learning anchored in high-quality curriculum materials can improve teaching and learning for all.

Its aim is to guide teachers to experience instruction as their students will, change instructional practices, and lead to better student outcomes. Growing out of Carnegie's grantmaking work, it details the following key elements of curriculum-based professional learning and essentials that underlie the processes of change:

- **Core design features:** curriculum, transformative learning, and equity;
- **Functional design features:** learning designs, beliefs, reflection and feedback, and change management;
- **Structural design features:** collective participation, models, and time; and
- **The essentials:** leadership, resources, and coherence.

For more information, visit

www.carnegie.org/elements.



IDEAS

and Spanish) and its resources were centralized within the Chicago Public Schools technical ecosystem.

With the development of the Skyline curriculum underway, other district staff turned to designing support for school adoption and implementation. As with any curriculum, teachers would need to be prepared and supported to implement the curriculum well. No matter how well-designed, the curriculum will not benefit students unless teachers have confidence and skill in using it.

Skyline's rollout had to be especially stellar because the district isn't mandating its use. Ultimately, each school makes its own decision about which subjects and grade levels of the Skyline curriculum to adopt, guided by a self-assessment tool about needs and staff readiness.

Schools then receive different levels of support based on the results of their readiness assessment. Using this self-evaluation, schools requested one of three levels of support. The district matched the level of support to the level requested based on demonstrated need according to equity indicators.

CURRICULUM-BASED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

During the early planning phase, several Chicago district leaders came across *The Elements: Transforming Teaching Through Curriculum-Based Professional Learning*, a report from Carnegie Corporation of New York (Short & Hirsh, 2020).

The report, which describes essential components of support for effective curriculum implementation, arrived just in time to support the administrators with their curriculum effort. It details the core, functional, structural, and essential components that need to be in place for professional learning to effectively build capacity for high-quality implementation of curriculum.

One of the functional elements was particularly relevant for the district's current phase of curriculum

HOW THE ELEMENTS SUPPORTS TEACHERS

"Our investment in Skyline demands that we provide our teachers with the support they need to successfully implement Skyline in their classrooms," said Jonathan Ben-Isvy, manager of professional learning for Chicago Public Schools. "This means supporting and building content knowledge and instructional practices by rooting these in the Skyline materials they will use in their classrooms and with the very students they will be teaching in mind.

"*The Elements* has guided our vision for successful implementation of Skyline," Ben-Isvy said. "Each decision is made with the intention of being as true to the framework as feasible within the complexity of a school system the size of Chicago."

work: the change management plan. "Change management is a functional design feature that addresses individual concerns and group challenges, including opportunities to discuss and troubleshoot issues that arise when implementing new instructional materials," the authors wrote (Short & Hirsh, 2020).

Building awareness and addressing personal concerns are priorities for successful launches of major curriculum reform efforts, especially when a new initiative means change for everyone, as it did in Chicago's shift to curriculum-based professional learning.

STARTING WITH LEARNING LEADERS

Like most large districts, Chicago Public Schools has long dedicated resources to professional learning, including over 300 central office and school-based staff members to support teachers and classroom instruction.

But, for the first time, those staff have curriculum to anchor professional learning. Helping district leaders make this shift is key.

The first step is ensuring that professional learning leaders experience the same kind of curriculum-based professional learning they are now expected to design and execute for their teachers.

Consistent with the process outlined in *The Elements* (Short & Hirsh, 2020), learning leaders identified different models of professional learning to first build awareness of the curriculum and later refine expertise. The key models to be used include individual investigations of the curriculum and self-paced learning modules, coaching, technical assistance, institutes, workshops, and study groups.

The authors of *The Elements* report, Jim Short of the Carnegie Corporation of New York and former Learning Forward executive director Stephanie Hirsh, facilitated three learning sessions to introduce the core (curriculum, transformative learning, and equity), functional (learning designs, beliefs, reflection and feedback, and change management) and structural (collective participation, models, and time) design elements that they would be using in their future efforts.

Short and Hirsh also addressed how leaders' changing roles and responsibilities relate to what the report calls the essentials (leadership, resources, and coherence) elements. It was an important beginning step to develop a shared understanding for what the work ahead required.

In addition, professional learning leaders have access to self-paced modules to build technical expertise in the Skyline technical platform (SAFARI Montage), Google Docs/Classroom, and the Checkpoint Student Assessment System. Participants have opportunities to earn credentialed badges.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad, associate professor of language and literacy at Georgia State University, facilitated professional learning on the culturally

and historically responsive pedagogical approaches integrated into the instructional materials.

Professional learning leaders appreciated the intensive attention to their needs and interests and feel better prepared to support teachers. One leader said, “Diving into the lessons was extremely helpful, especially walking in the students’ shoes.” Another said, “The scenarios were powerful, actually thinking about how I would use this with a teacher team I support.”

EXPANDING LEARNING TO TEACHERS

While district professional learning leaders continue to engage in their own learning, they are also focusing on building and executing curriculum-based professional learning for their schools and teachers.

For the 2021-22 school year, the type and level of that support is tied to the adoption commitment made by each school, but each level incorporates components of the framework outlined in *The Elements*, especially collective participation, time, models, and reflection and feedback.

All schools have access to Skyline 101, a series of learning sessions that leverages synchronous and asynchronous models to support implementation throughout the school year. These include professional learning with content specialists and unit-specific modules that delve into the core content knowledge and high-impact instructional practices aligned to each Skyline unit.

In addition, school leaders are encouraged to give grade-level and subject-matter learning teams time to use the Skyline unit-specific and

instructional practice modules to promote study, planning, lesson rehearsal, and reflection and feedback cycles for each unit.

Because Skyline is not a scripted curriculum, this helps teachers collaboratively plan and make important decisions like how to best enable their English learners and diverse learners (those who receive special education services) to achieve the grade-level standards.

This commitment to collaborative professional learning is grounded in the district’s recognition of the importance of the collective participation structural element in encouraging all teachers and all students to buy in and benefit.

Thirty-five schools are receiving the highest level of support offered, which includes partnering with a school improvement organization skilled in supporting curriculum-based professional learning and implementation. Participating school improvement organizations are TNTTP, Leading Educators, ANet, and Public Consulting Group.

These schools receive additional resources and time to support ongoing curriculum study, implementation and reflection cycles, curriculum-focused coaching and feedback sessions, and leadership development. Staff members receive additional compensation for committing 60 minutes a week to the professional learning agenda.

CELEBRATING CHANGE

Chicago Public schools released Chicago Skyline with a celebration during which education policymakers, researchers, curriculum developers, district leaders, and teachers gathered to remember why they had launched

this journey, acknowledge their accomplishments to date, and highlight the path forward. Creating moments for reflection and celebration are key to successful change management.

Change management is a critical element in curriculum-based professional learning. A comprehensive change management plan attends to the macro and micro, organizational and individual, technical, and subject-matter changes that need to happen.

Launching, ongoing implementation support, monitoring, reflecting, celebrating, and reporting are all important phases of the plan. Chicago Public Schools has the essential elements in place for long-term success.

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