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A Policy Review of the Rochester City School District's Reform Efforts

Building a Common Language: RCSD Curriculum & Benchmark Assessments

CGR Report to the Community

Rochester City School District Reform Efforts

First of a 5-part series

Building a common language: RCSD Curriculum & Benchmark Assessments

Creating a common curriculum and a system of benchmark assessments is a top priority for Rochester City School District's current leadership. Instruction has been a patchwork quilt across nearly 70 schools, as principals and teachers are empowered to make many independent curricular choices. The newly-created Rochester Curriculum targets this problem and is one of the three key levers intended to raise achievement. Despite some hiccups in the early roll-out, as RCSD enters the second full year of implementation, there is a solid foundation from which to move forward. Work remains to increase training, assess "uptake" and define what success will look like.

What's the theory behind this initiative?

Getting to the Same Page...

1 A districtwide curriculum sets **clear expectations for what all students should know and be able to do.** Mandating its use districtwide ensures that both English language learners and students with disabilities receive access to the same content (which hasn't always been the case). The pre-K through 9th grade scope enables the district to build toward college readiness.

2 A unified curriculum **creates a common language for teachers, principals, Central Office staff, parents and students to talk about teaching and learning.** It makes it possible to talk about what students and teachers are/should be doing in classrooms—to celebrate successes and intervene when necessary. A common framework sets the stage for much of the needed systemic improvement across the district.

3 Consistency across schools is critical for children who change schools. Some RCSD schools have mobility rates of over 25%, meaning that more than a quarter of their student body changes during the instructional year. Varying curriculum, approaches and pace across schools compound the disruption children already experience by moving. Consider a 3rd grade student who moves several times, facing a different approach to literacy instruction each time. And, if schools teach concepts in a different sequence, this unlucky student could finish 3rd grade having completely missed, say, fractions. **Having a unified "scope and sequence" to the curriculum does not guarantee that concepts are learned—but it ensures that all students will be exposed to core concepts.**

DESCRIPTIONS

Common curriculum

- Unified curriculum stating what kids should know and be able to do as they progress through each grade.
- Aligned to NYS standards, includes pacing guides, lessons, activities, resources, student products, and approaches to instruction.
- Not a script for teachers, but does prescribe the scope, sequence, and level of rigor of the content taught.
- Began with English Language Arts and math, moving to Science and Social Studies.

Terms: Rochester Curriculum (content), Rochester Instructional Framework (how to teach)

Benchmark assessments

- Tests that assess student mastery of a discrete part of the curriculum.
- Given three times a year, meant to show areas needing re-teaching or more practice. In "edu-speak," they are formative (think diagnosis, suggesting future action), not summative (think autopsy, no action possible).
- Criterion-referenced, not norm-referenced, which means they compare each child against a set standard, not to other children.
- *Not* meant to predict performance on the state tests, because ideally they enable teachers to remedy the gaps before year end.

Term: DataMate (online system allowing educators to access student results on the benchmark assessments)

Assessing Progress

4 A common curriculum makes benchmark assessments possible. **These assessments let leaders gauge how well students are doing during the year – before the annual state tests are scored.**

Common assessments allow the district to proactively manage teaching and learning across all schools, and hold everyone responsible for student learning.

Timely student performance data enable continuous improvement. Teachers analyze student data to improve the next week's instruction. Principals review grade level or school data to deploy their teachers, to plan instructional strategies, or to select an after-school program provider. Central office staff use school and district data to provide the necessary professional development opportunities, to intervene where necessary, to tweak the curriculum, and to invest district resources in areas of need.

Supporting Good Instruction

5 **Benchmark assessments, promptly scored, diagnose student mastery of certain skills and inform the teaching action that comes next** (these are called “formative” assessments). Many schools in the district had already created their own school-level benchmarks, as had teams of grade-level teachers. The district is catching up to those schools, enabling ongoing cycles of teaching, checking, and then adjusting instruction that span the district.

6 **A common language enables the district to support teacher development.** Benchmark assessments will identify areas needing special attention. It's easier to share “recipes for success” across schools if everyone is using the same ingredients.

HOW DO ASSESSMENTS HELP STUDENTS?

Benchmarking enables teachers to better match lessons and activities to what individual students need. Effective schools do this in a variety of ways, based on student data. Consider these RCSD examples:

- One teacher manages three student groups: one working with her to learn multiplication, another practicing two-digit multiplication, and another exploring division.
- A team of 1st grade teachers pool their classes, rearranging them into three groups for a ½ hour a day to work on needed skills.
- Targeted students are scheduled into a double block of math in 9th grade.
- Staff schedule “lunch bunches” focused on vocabulary, or implement a school-wide focus on math vocabulary.

7 Many educators criticize the use of tests to assess students and drive consequential decisions—“Will Ashley pass 6th grade? Graduate high school? Get into a good college?” And they have a point—these single event, “high stakes” tests can be stressful for students (not to mention parents and teachers). One solution is to test less. Another may be to test more—using well-designed assessments to inform instruction, but without life-changing consequences. **These “low stakes” tests give students a chance to practice proving themselves in a less stressful environment while providing timely feedback to classroom teachers.** Also, tests are another “language” in which college-bound students need to become fluent; our students deserve opportunity to master it.

About CGR's Policy Review Series on RCSD's Reform Efforts

The Center for Governmental Research (CGR), a nonprofit, nonpartisan, independent consulting organization, has been engaged by the Rochester NY Board of Education and private funders to assess the Rochester City School District's (RCSD) progress in implementing its strategic plan for district reform. This newsletter is the first of a five-part series of policy reviews that focus on key levers of the plan. The remaining four policy reviews – to be published in fall 2010 – will address: school innovation, use of data, culture change, and effective educators. CGR's goals in producing each policy review are to:

- Inform the community about the complexities of district reform;
- Hold the district accountable for implementing its plan; and
- Support the district in its process of internal improvement.

Will this effort make a difference?

This is a significant investment, with close to \$5 million spent to create the curriculum and assessment system—is it worth it? Reviewing the experience of urban districts and schools that are “beating the odds” and closing achievement gaps reveals a pattern of using common curriculum and benchmark assessments to drive a focus on teaching and learning.

- “Foundations for Success,” research conducted for The Council for Great City Schools, employed a case study model to compare four urban districts that have successfully raised achievement and closed achievement gaps¹. All four successful districts did implement some version of common curriculum and assessments.
- Similar trends emerge from the Broad Prize for Urban

Education, awarded annually to the large urban district that demonstrates the greatest overall achievement and improvement and shrinks achievement gaps for minority and low-income students. Since 2003, every winning district has asserted curricular control and implemented robust benchmark assessment systems.

- A rigorous cycle of assessment that guides instruction is part of the formula for individual schools that “beat the odds.” Locally, successful charter schools like Rochester Prep (True North, Uncommon Schools) and RCSD success stories like School #19 and World of Inquiry (School #58) do very frequent, low-stakes assessments. The results *today* are used to shape the instruction that kids receive *tomorrow*.

Curriculum is a tool in teachers' hands

Only with effective teaching can a rigorous curriculum and regular assessment make a difference. Implementation will determine whether the Rochester Curriculum will improve student achievement. Every teacher, every principal, and every central office worker has a certain degree of autonomy over the implementation—broad support is critical. To this end, RCSD invested in its own teachers to write the curriculum.

One year into full implementation in grades 5-9, opinions on the move to systemic curriculum and assessments are varied. RCSD definitely experienced “start-up” problems such as errors in the tests, inconsistency in the quality and format of curricular units, and a lack of attention to training teachers and principals upfront.

In this context, CGR was interested in establishing baseline measures of “uptake” (are they using it?) and “buy-in” (do they see it as useful?).

WHAT MUST RCSD DO?

Even when a district invests millions of dollars in new curriculum and mandates its use, it may still be ignored. To an outside eye, this is insubordination. Yet teachers generally operate in isolation—classroom doors close. Schools operate with little feedback or oversight. Superintendents come and go. Teachers and principals do what they believe is in their students' best interests—which may or may not be this new curriculum. Power is particularly diffused in school districts. In effect, every teacher is the superintendent of his class, every principal of his or her school. If RCSD wants to assure fidelity to a systemic model, it will need to invest in a trifecta of training, monitoring, and building buy-in.

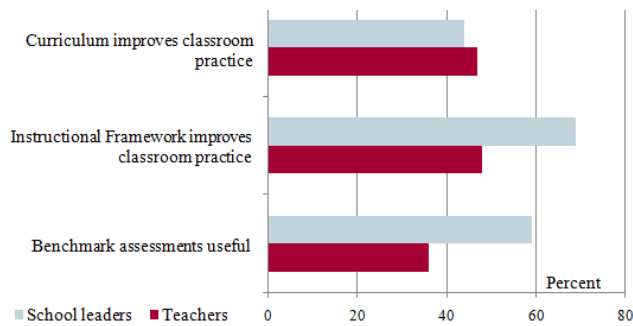
Local Survey and Participation Rates Show Promise

The results of the survey CGR administered in April 2010² show measures of uptake and buy-in for the curriculum at about 50%. After one year, half of teacher respondents who taught grades 5-9 report using the curriculum to plan daily instruction. This is supported by the fact that 54% of administrators say that “all” or “most” of their teachers use the curriculum. Perhaps more importantly, close to the same percentage find it useful in improving classroom practice.

¹ The full report can be accessed here: <http://www.mdrc.org/publications/47/full.pdf>.

² Survey administered electronically to membership of the Rochester Teacher Association and the Administrator and Supervisor Association of Rochester; 57% of RTA members responded, 59% of all administrators, 75% of principals. “School leaders” include principals and assistant principals.

RCSD staff buy-in for curriculum and benchmarks



Participation rates—students who took the benchmark assessments—are another measure of implementation, especially in a large bureaucracy where a top-down mandate does not necessarily mean immediate action. These rates show improvement over the first two years of implementation. The average district participation rate for math benchmarks showed marked increase, with 92% of students being tested in 2009-10, up from 72% in the first year. ELA benchmark participation rose from 83% in 2008-9 to 87% in 2009-10.

Resistance to Change in the District is Understandable

Why would teachers oppose what appears to be such a sensible change? A centralized curriculum and assessment system takes discretion away from the classroom teacher. A teacher who has invested 30 years in a unique—and effective—approach to teaching 5th grade math might be reluctant to adopt a new approach. A preference for more autonomy isn't limited to teaching, either. Most professions struggle to achieve a balance between standardized practice and individual autonomy—what makes schools different is that teachers operate in a more collective enterprise. The approach of the 5th grade master teacher affects what is possible in 6th grade—or what the child experiences in a different school in the same year after changing schools.

It's also true that many schools in the district already had a coherent, rigorous curriculum and assessment system, and were making effective use of student data to target instruction. For them, a districtwide cur-

riculum may seem like a step backward, making them resistant. In effect, the district is trying to move from “pockets of excellence” to a higher standard for all schools.

Moreover, many teachers have expressed their opposition to “more testing.” Much of this opposition is principled, to be sure. Mingled in, at least for some, is the fear that the assessment system will be used to assess teachers, not just their students.

From CGR's perspective, this baseline is fairly encouraging, given the district dynamics and the fact that RCSD has opted not to employ heavy-handed, central office-led monitoring tactics. There is clearly work to be done in convincing teachers of the purpose and use of the benchmark assessment data—but knowing the baseline provides a starting point.

STATUS CHECK ON THE CURRICULUM – SUMMER 2010

The first hurdle in launching a new curriculum is to write it and get it in teachers' hands. Rochester invested millions in its own teachers to write the curriculum. The curriculum was implemented for grades 5-9 during the 2009-10 school year, and will extend downward to grades 3 and 4 this school year. Teams of teachers have been continuously writing and revising—a process which will continue for the near future. Main actions in the summer of 2010:

- 1. Quality control.** New teams are reviewing completed work, incorporating feedback, and reviewing the grade 3-9 progression for coherence and rigor.
- 2. More explicit supports for English Language Learners and Students with Disabilities.** Wide achievement gaps persist for these groups of students; ensuring access to rigorous curriculum is a basic first step.
- 3. Linking core ELA and math instruction with Social Studies and Science content.** The curriculum now provides explicit links and ideas that will

reinforce both the content and the reading/writing and math processes students need to master. Media and technology links have also been integrated into the curriculum that will reinforce both the content and the reading/writing and math processes students need to master. Media and technology links have also been integrated into the curriculum.

- 4. A curriculum for K-2.** A team of Teachers on Special Assignments will produce the curriculum for Kindergarten, 1st and 2nd grades.

What needs to happen next?

The district has made significant progress creating the curriculum, the assessments and the supporting data system. Now the same degree of focus needs to be placed on strengthening implementation.

- Focused professional development for both teachers and principals is critical. Professional development needs to center on establishing the curriculum as a common language, and then on deepening the understandings and application. The current team of curriculum writers will form a cadre of teacher leaders to provide the professional development for the district. This may improve buy-in. Will the next survey of teacher and principals show broader and deeper support for the Rochester Curriculum? Stay tuned.

Common curriculum and assessments alone will not improve student learning—effective teaching will. This strategy provides a common framework for focusing on what teachers do and what students learn.

- The benchmark tests and the DataMate system used to report results need more work, and the improvement process based on user feedback is ongoing. One DataMate enhancement that is in process will allow the option of taking math benchmarks online, yielding true “real time” results.
- The teams of teachers designing the Rochester Curriculum and the test-writing consultant are continually working to align the tests with NYS requirement changes, and ultimately to include test questions modeled on TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) or other national/international standards.
- There is a clear need to continue to educate district staff at all levels on the purpose of benchmark

assessments. Some dismiss the tests because they’re not predictive, which they are not meant to be. Support varies at the school level—some schools are highly sophisticated at using the benchmark data to group instruction, to rethink the way a certain skill is taught, or to deploy resources strategically, while others seem to administer the assessment and pay little attention to the results.

The **real work is in building principal and teacher capacity in knowing HOW to use the data** the benchmark system generates.

Some schools took off, using the data in highly sophisticated ways, while others rarely even logged into the DataMate system. Only 28% of teachers said that benchmark data help grade-level teams strategize about instruction, and 40% of secondary teachers say that their schools rarely or never analyze student assessments for instruction—both are practices that effective schools employ. These numbers highlight the district’s opportunity to be proactive and aggressive in teaching schools to use data effectively.

- The district has placed a large strategic bet by investing millions in the curriculum and assessments. RCSD should formalize a system for ensuring its use, because only then will it be able to know if it is having the desired effect on student achievement. RCSD has opted not to monitor adherence to pacing guides and mandate lessons with frequent central office walk-throughs, which we think is the right decision. CGR does recommend making it more of a priority in building-level observations, supervision of principals, and instructional decision-making at all levels.

Race to the Top Watch

Part of the NYS’s RTTT plan is to develop a system of statewide assessments modeled on the common core standards (voluntary national standards). RCSD hopes that NYS recognizes the work that’s been done here as a foundation, rather than starting from scratch.