



## How can school leaders manage curriculum change effectively?

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This is a summary of a study<sup>1</sup> (a 'probe') that examined, synthesised and analysed the approaches that school leaders from seven schools who were effective curriculum innovators (four primary and three secondary) used to support and manage the processes of curriculum change. (The curriculum changes the schools were developing ranged from co-constructing a creative curriculum with learners to an approach based on the International Baccalaureate).

The probe found the effective leaders of curriculum change used three common approaches to involving colleagues, and aligning curriculum change and CPD. They:

- contextualised curriculum change in other school development needs and priorities
- balanced the challenge of staff having to alter their existing practice in response to the curriculum change with structured CPD for making the necessary changes, and
- involved most school staff (and in some cases learners) collaboratively in the development process, supporting staff to tailor the curriculum innovation to their and their learners' needs and context.

The probe concluded that the effective management of curriculum change had three important and distinctive features. These were that:

- the curriculum change was underpinned by an explicit set of principles that staff and school leaders worked towards together over time
- methods and resources used for engaging staff in designing and implementing the curriculum change also modelled important aspects of the curriculum change itself, and
- leaders closely monitored the curriculum change actively and informally and as part of the support they provided as change was happening rather than evaluate it post hoc.

<sup>1</sup> CUREE and University of Wolverhampton (2010) In schools that are successfully developing the curriculum, how are the changes required by curriculum innovation being managed by school leaders? CUREE, Coventry





## What curriculum changes were the schools implementing?

The primary schools' curriculum changes included introducing:

- a themed curriculum based on the principles and framework of the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme, but in ways that were suited to the school's context
- a skills-based approach which focused on developing learners' skills for enquiry and problem solving through a range of curriculum experiences
- a creative curriculum which used learning objectives as the basis for planning and assessment. The school's leaders were particularly keen to introduce a global dimension and a focus on health and wellbeing in the new curriculum because they wanted to encourage the children to see themselves as people who could make a difference in the world.

One of the primary schools was developing a themed and integrated creative curriculum in which topics and themes were developed jointly by teachers, support staff and children, but which also connected to the National Curriculum. The children were given the opportunity to note down their interests and prior knowledge of a theme on spider diagrams and post its etc. The children's notes were then used to produce an outline plan for the next term's work which was reviewed and refined with the children to ensure everyone found something to interest them.

The secondary schools' curriculum changes included:

- the introduction of an enquiry-based approach (initially with Year 7 students), in order to encourage students to take more responsibility for their learning
- building effective learning relationships among staff and students, and creating a personalised curriculum for vulnerable Year 7 students
- introducing Building Learning Power (BLP) to help students take more responsibility for their own learning. (BLP aims to equip learners with a language to think and talk about the ways in which they learn and what they can do to improve their learning).

## How did the leaders link curriculum change with school development needs?

For each school, making changes to the curriculum was focused on furthering existing school development priorities, such as improving attainment in writing. Linking curriculum change and school development needs in this way modelled a belief and expectation that changing the curriculum would have





a direct effect on achievement and attainment. Other potential learner outcomes that motivated the leaders' decision to introduce curriculum change included: increased motivation, participation, independence, confidence and responsibility for learning. Improvements in staff learning and in some cases quality of practice also motivated leaders to introduce curriculum change. For example, when one of the schools closed and reopened as an academy, the leaders introduced curriculum change as a way of encouraging staff to review and develop engaging curriculum experiences for their learners.

## How did leaders support staff in changing their practice in response to the curriculum change?

School leaders put in place a programme of support that typically included:

- multiple (up to three) in-service training (INSET) days with input from leaders and hands-on workshops to enable staff to work together to plan and create resources
- ongoing 1:1 coaching and mentoring from the curriculum change leader to support curriculum planning
- experimentation with new approaches during the elapsed time between INSET days
- classroom observation by leaders to support staff progress with new approaches and gather evidence for the coaching sessions, and
- tools and resources such as planning grids and templates, posters and audit frameworks to give staff practical examples of how to manage complexity during the curriculum change process.

School leaders also created teams to enable staff to support each other in the form of paired or group collaboration as they made changes to their practice. To be successful, teams like these needed time and space to meet. Timetables were altered to ensure that shared Planning, Preparation and Assessment (PPA) time was scheduled to make this possible. Additional time was also given to smaller subgroups with special responsibilities within the change, for example groups of teachers who completed action research projects on specific aspects of the change for the (then) QCA.

School leaders were interested in monitoring progress in order to support it. Rather than introduce new accountability processes, they used the same mechanisms they had designed to offer support. So, for example:

- INSET days were used to diagnose individual staff members' starting points and to set clear and usually high expectations of the quality of curriculum design and enactment that was required to support the change
- ongoing 1:1 coaching and mentoring from the curriculum change leader was tailored to meet individual needs and model high expectations through discussions of





documents

- observation signalled to staff that everyone was required to take part and to make their practice and its development available for others to see
- experimentation was as much about challenging staff to jettison established and sometimes poor practice as it was about encouraging creative thinking, and
- tools and resources served the purpose of capturing and modelling the principles underpinning the curriculum change.

The probe found little evidence of leaders using formal processes such as performance management targets to hold teachers to account for the success of the curriculum change or of leaders evaluating the progress and impact of the curriculum changes on attainment through using systems such as teacher assessment, national testing or inspection.

## How did the leaders create ownership of the curriculum change?

All the school leaders did a great deal of work in advance to prepare for the curriculum changes. Typically, the leaders initially enquired into the approach, tested out their ideas with colleagues and explored costs and benefits. But an extended and structured period of adaptation, refinement and development of approaches and resources by the whole staff (where appropriate) was a crucial part of the change process too. There were three main reasons for why school leaders included such a large opportunity/requirement for staff to engage with the development of approaches and resources:

- a general dissatisfaction with the quality and usefulness of 'off the shelf' resources for their own contexts
- the need for staff to feel that their curriculum had been designed/was being designed for them and/or the belief that the curriculum should be tailored to the children ("a way to fit the curriculum to our children and not the other way round") and sometimes to bring about wider outcomes, such as building the confidence of vulnerable students, and
- the contribution that collaborative development of tools and resources makes to staff development, particularly to depth of subject knowledge.

## What principles underpinned the management of curriculum change?

In each school, staff and school leaders had reached a clear and consistent agreement about what the curriculum changes were about and the reasons for pursuing them. These included:

- that individual learners were entitled to interesting, relevant and (sometimes) personalised curriculum experiences





- that curriculum experiences had a role to play in developing learners' confidence and independence
- the importance of designing engaging and challenging curriculum experiences for stimulating learners' motivation, and
- the important role of home and out-of-school learning in connecting school with the real world.

## Why was it important that the processes, activities and resources designed to support curriculum change also modelled the focus of the changes?

In practice, school leaders tried to model the principles underpinning their curriculum change identified above (e.g. that the curriculum should be relevant and personalised, should instil confidence and encourage independence etc). So, teachers who were designing enquiry based approaches for learners were themselves engaged in enquiry and teachers introducing BLP designed posters to capture the principles of BLP for their school. Other research (Cordingley & Bell, 2007<sup>2</sup>) confirms that coaching, co-construction, specialist training, networking and collaboration, regulation and monitoring are powerful processes. So by designing them into the programme of support they offered staff, school leaders gave themselves the best possible chance of successfully changing practice related to curriculum development. According to this research, using these approaches meant that curriculum changes were likely to make an impact in terms of depth, sustainability, spread and ownership.

## Why was monitoring curriculum change rather than evaluating it post hoc important?

The school leaders in this study were heavily involved in the curriculum change in their schools. They led INSET days, conducted observations, gave feedback and acted as coaches and mentors to staff. They also set up teams to enable staff to support one another, developed resources and frameworks and modelled their use and they worked 1:1 with teachers to solve problems as they arose. Other research (Robinson et al., 2009<sup>3</sup>) indicates that by modelling development in this way and investing in it, these leaders were choosing to engage themselves in the most effective leadership practices they could have undertaken in relation to benefits for pupils.

2 Cordingley, P. & Bell, M. (2007) Transferring learning and taking innovation to scale. London: The Innovation Unit. Available at: [www.innovation-unit.co.uk/about-us/publications/transferring-learning-and-taking-innovation-to-scale.html](http://www.innovation-unit.co.uk/about-us/publications/transferring-learning-and-taking-innovation-to-scale.html)

3 Robinson, V., Hohepa, M. & Lloyd, C. (2009) School Leadership and Student Outcomes: Identifying What Works and Why. Best Evidence Synthesis. Available at: [www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/series/2515/60169/60170](http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/series/2515/60169/60170)





## How was the probe designed?

CUREE researchers visited seven schools (four primary and three secondary) known to be highly effective curriculum developers. They interviewed senior leaders and staff and gathered school documentation relating to curriculum development policy and practice, and pupil outcomes. Data gathered by practitioners were also collected. This included action research projects carried out in three of the primary schools and case studies that were co-constructed between the CUREE research team and key practitioners in the three secondary schools about the effects of their interventions. The CUREE researchers used a shared set of enquiry questions (based on previous research) to ensure consistent data were gathered from the different sites. All the data were entered into a database. Reading across the database enabled the researchers to identify common practices, issues and themes. They then tested the results against other research evidence and validated the data in partnership with the schools.

## Some implications for school leaders

- The probe showed the importance of getting staff to work collaboratively in designing and implementing curriculum change for blending skills and knowledge and balancing attitudes towards curriculum change. How might you plan and structure using collaborative approaches to curriculum development in your school? Which tasks lend themselves well to collaborative working? Which groupings of colleagues are likely to generate most learning benefit for both staff and pupils?
- Staff ownership for curriculum change flowed from involving them collaboratively in developing and refining resources for it. At the same time, the process of designing and refining resources was both challenging and developmental. Could you seize on the opportunity that capacity building in this area represents to develop a virtuous circle?
- Planning to ensure progression over the school learning cycle as a whole, rather than within a year group or phase was achieved by school leaders who maintained an overview and embedded monitoring of progression in ongoing, informed school support and challenge systems. How could you go about ensuring that curriculum experiences genuinely secure cumulative progression? Is this something where you involve the middle leaders at your school? What specialist support could you draw on?





## Effective Curriculum Innovation

This is the first of a series of resources produced by CUREE from its work\* on the curriculum in the English school system. This project used a range of research methods to explore and reveal how schools in England and across the world:

- lead and support curriculum change especially through continuing professional development, and
- develop effective curriculum experiences that
  - close gaps for vulnerable children
  - promote well being
  - secure an appropriate level of challenge for all pupils, and
  - enhance young people's engagement with the curriculum by enabling active participation.

Over the three years from 2007-2010, in both primary and secondary phases, we have undertaken systematic reviews of the international evidence base; focussed probes on successful curriculum innovation and practice; large scale analyses of students' perspectives, and surveys and focus groups to elicit the experiences of secondary school leaders and practitioners. The resulting findings, together with other resources, combine to provide valuable insights into what makes a difference when reviewing and developing the curriculum. Whatever the outcomes of the national curriculum review(s) currently (at April 2011) commissioned by the Education Secretary, our findings will be of practical use to heads, curriculum and CPD leaders and teachers.

This booklet is the first of several resources CUREE is releasing based on that work. Other publications, materials, events and services will follow shortly. Contact us using the details below if you would like to know more or visit our website.

\* Commissioned by the, then, Qualification and Curriculum Authority (QCA)

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