



Curriculum: A Catalyst for Change (Part Three)

*This is the third segment of **Curriculum: A Catalyst for Change** co-written by Sara McGinnis and Kyla Slate. Sara is the curriculum director at Sheridan County School District #1 (SCSD#1) in Wyoming. Kyla is a former consultant with the Curriculum Leadership Institute (CLI) who worked with SCSD#1 over a 4-year timeframe to implement the CLI Model, a comprehensive, systemic school improvement model. Other contributors are noted within each part. [Part 1](#) focuses on intentional change at the district level. [Part 2](#) focuses on the role of principals as instructional leaders.*

Teachers in Charge

Most teachers do not see themselves as curriculum developers, nor believe they have been adequately trained to write valid assessments. Serving on a curriculum committee may seem like a lot of unnecessary work to a teacher initially; however, once they go through the process, they realize that thoroughly studying, clarifying, and organizing standards into units of learning targets and then creating aligned assessments helps them to identify what students need to know and do and how learning will be measured. Clearly defined learning targets direct teachers' instruction and student learning. When developing the curriculum, teachers also contemplated key targets locally that were not included in state standards, but were still important for students. They applied various proven educational methodologies such as Bloom's Taxonomy (rev. Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) and Danielson's Framework for Teaching (Danielson, 1996, 2009) to build the curriculum, a foundational necessity for creating common assessments and aligned instruction.

Jill Fightmaster, department chair/teacher at Bradley-Bourbonnais Community High School District #307 (Bradley, IL) states:

"This process has brought about more collaboration among the teachers in the department than I have ever experienced. There are conversations daily regarding best practices in teaching, assessment strategies, and ways to engage students in learning. The process has made us truly "dig in" to our teaching and we have all become better for it in the end."

As teachers collaborate with other grade level cohorts to create the final products, many are excited for change and the challenge of building a new culture in their district. Some are early adopters who believe reform is positive and can only help students. Others may be concerned about moving away from traditional roles or methods, don't see the need for change, or see the work as overwhelming.

Tiffany Kohl, curriculum director at BBCHS#307, gives some good advice for leading collaborative change initiatives and some reflections about possible reasons for resistance:

"Especially in the field of education, I think people are profoundly uncomfortable with change. Changing habits is hard work. Taking a look in the mirror and realizing that maybe what you have been doing might not be the best course of action is a hard realization for most. It hasn't been until recently that this profession has supported

and encouraged reflection and innovation as valued ways to spend time. As educators we always feel like we need to be right. To admit that we might need to change somehow admits that we are not good. Of course this is an illusion that we convince ourselves is reality. As our profession gets more collaborative and reflective this will change. Luckily, there are a few ‘innovators’ that thrive in the zone of change. It is those people that you need to help lead the change in a district. If you can get them on board along with some early adopters, it is much easier.”

In many cases, for the first time in their careers, teachers are afforded all the rights of a true professional. Once this happens, they realize their opinions as decision-makers are highly valued. They often need a little guidance in that role to become focused leaders and catalysts for change.

Kyla (CLI): “In my work with various districts, I am in a unique position to have witnessed the transformation of teachers who went from resistance, to understanding, to commitment, to being a leader. Sometimes the transformation is simply stunning and it can only take place because leaders within the district are not only asking questions and coaching teachers, but also providing support when needed (or getting out of the way when necessary!) and serving as living examples of the shift in culture.”

When teachers are placed in a group of their peers and lack confidence in their roles, they may retreat into themselves, fearful of voicing

new ideas or opinions that differ from others, or may delay work completion efforts. These are natural and common responses to change. Michael Fullan (2001) states that we must listen to those resistant to the process. They often bring up ideas we may have missed and suggest alternatives that we hadn’t thought about. Don’t give up on teachers in this category... leaders can be built.

Sara (SCSD#1): “When someone struggles with this process, I try to discern what may be missing. In some cases, teachers don’t understand the vision. Others may understand the vision, but feel they lack experience or skill. Or, perhaps they don’t have resources in time, money, or support to be successful.”

Yes, we categorically believe that change IS possible. However, it isn’t always inevitable for everyone. We purposely focus on the positive aspects of change; but, it is important to realize that not all resisters convert into supporters. There is a point where persistent resistance transforms into refusal. The reality is that change is a *choice*—a choice that not everyone will make, no matter what supports are provided.

Tiffany (BBCHS#307): “I think this process has strengthened us as a family in that we are learning and growing together. However, with everything being new and different, we have had our growing pains. Changes in philosophy may mean losing staff; and that is okay.”