CHAPTER ONE

What It Means to Be a Curriculum Leader

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Beyond

Curriculum leadership has risen to the forefront with the advent of the bipartisan NCLB Act of 2001. Signed into law in 2002, this federal education legislation has dramatically changed the American educational landscape. It has transformed the nature of school leadership and accountability and redefined school leaders’ roles, responsibilities, and authority. One consequence of NCLB is that it has institutionalized the notion that school leaders in the 21st century must be strong curriculum and instructional leaders. Within the context of a global economy, requiring a focus on 21st-century skills and a 21st-century curriculum, NCLB’s emphasis on high student achievement for all has been a wakeup call (Mizell, 2005) that has jolted states, districts, and schools to place greater focus on curriculum, instruction, and assessment. In doing so, it has accentuated the role of the principal as a 21st-century curriculum leader. Principals and district leaders are now more publicly accountable for the performance of the students in their schools on high-stakes tests. Schools and districts must show Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in student achievement, and results must be publicly reported. A key strategy being used widely to achieve AYP is ensuring that the curriculum is covered and is aligned with the assessments.
In such a high-stakes accountability environment, never before has the curriculum leadership role been so essential to school improvement and reform. Increasing evidence points convincingly to a direct link between the curriculum leadership provided by the principal and leadership team and the effectiveness of the team (Commission on No Child Left Behind, 2007; Sanders & Simpson, 2005; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). Attention is being paid to principal preparedness programs and standards for school leadership through the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards, a national model of leadership standards that serve as common language of leadership expectations across differences in state policies. States have asked the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) to update the ISLLC Standards for School Leaders, published in 1996, to reflect the last decade of policy experience and significant political and social changes. The Council is working with the Interstate Consortium on School Leadership (ICSL) and the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) on a national process to update the standards, with guidance and input being provided by the ICSL members (Sanders & Simpson).

Principals can best discharge their leadership role if they develop a deep and broad knowledge base with respect to curriculum. This chapter first reviews current trends in curricula, especially in relation to state and national standards, and then summarizes the research on curricular quality.

**CURRENT TRENDS IN CURRICULA**

It is sometimes difficult to distinguish significant trends that are likely to be influential for several years from passing fads that will soon disappear. However, a review of the history of the field and an analysis of the current literature suggest that the following developments are likely to be influential in the first decade of the 21st century.

**Increasing Importance of State and National Standards**

Discussions of state education standards invariably morph into discussions of national standards for America. The current trend in online learning, including virtual schools, online tutoring, and a plethora...
of Web-based courses, will trigger discussions about how online learning supplements or is integrated in the school curriculum. This discussion will ultimately loop back to the bigger discussion of state and national standards (see National Education Association, 2002; Nixon, 2007).

NCLB Requires State Standards

In response to the Improving America’s Schools Act of 1994 (IASA) and the GOALS 2000: Educate America Act, both of which emphasized standards-based reform, states have set content standards in core subject areas. With the enactment of NCLB, standards-based reform became national education policy (King & Zucker, 2005), and according to Rothman (2004), America embarked on a “de facto national education strategy of reforming schools around standards for student performance” (p. 96).

Under NCLB, as a condition for receiving federal funds, the law requires all states to establish state accountability systems that include challenging academic content, performance standards, and assessments in every grade in grades 3 through 8 and at least once in grades 10 through 12 for reading/language arts and mathematics. Starting in the 2007–2008 school year, students must be assessed in science at least once in grades 3 through 5, once in grades 6 through 9, and once in grades 10 through 12. The standards must specify what children should know and be able to do, contain coherent and rigorous content, and encourage the teaching of advanced skills. NCLB also requires states to align curriculum and assessments and expects continuous progress in achievement by all subgroups of students, who must reach 100 percent proficiency by 2014 (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). (The reauthorization of NCLB may well see changes in how student performance is measured, given the many recommendations for amendments.)

For instance, California uses Accountability Progress Reporting (APR), an integrated accountability system that reports both the state Academic Performance Index (API) and the federal Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and Program Improvement (PI). The API, which tracks the academic performance of schools with a variety of academic measures, is the cornerstone of the accountability system. California Standards Tests (CSTs) are a major component of California’s Standardized Testing and Reporting program (STAR).
CSTs measure progress towards state-adopted academic content standards. The California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE) assesses student performance against the state-adopted content standards for language arts and mathematics; it is a requirement for a California high school diploma.

Under NCLB, failure to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) for two years in a row or more results in schools as well as districts incurring a sequence of escalating sanctions, ranging from being in school improvement status to corrective action and restructuring. Under corrective action, one option is that schools may implement a new curriculum. Under restructuring, schools may replace the principal (NCLB of 2001). Therefore, these sanctions place a spotlight on curriculum and the quality of school leadership.

Until recently, 49 of 50 states had content standards in core subject areas (“Quality Counts,” 2003), and now all 50 states have these standards. According to Finn, Petrilli, and Julian (2006), many resources—time, money, and goodwill—have been expended to develop, disseminate, and revise content standards. Several states revise their curricula on scheduled time cycles for different content areas.

BEYOND NCLB: MOVING FROM STATE STANDARDS AND THEIR UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES TO VOLUNTARY NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR STATES

Unintended Consequences of State Standards

While NCLB has relentlessly kept the focus on student achievement and strong accountability for results, it has spawned some unintended consequences that will need to be addressed during the reauthorization of NCLB and beyond.

Quality and rigor of state content standards varies widely. Spillane (2006) notes that school districts can drown out, minimize, or amplify the impact of standards in schools. Other reviews have found that although a few states have improved their standards, some standards have deteriorated (American Federation of Teachers, 2006; Center on Education Policy, 2007). Finn et al. (2006) find that standards were vague and emphasized skills rather than knowledge. Comparisons of state achievement standards across the nation are
difficult to conduct because of wide variations in state tests (Commission on NCLB, 2007).

One commonly expressed concern about NCLB is its effect on subjects not tested and what King and Zucker (2005) call “curriculum narrowing.” Studies invariably show that districts and schools have reduced instructional time in at least one subject to increase time on the tested areas of reading and mathematics—the “teaching to the test” syndrome (Center on Education Policy, 2007; National Education Association, 2004; Rentner et al., 2006; Stullich, Eisner, McCrary, & Roney, 2006). Other studies have found increases in time devoted to writing and decreases in time devoted to the arts, foreign languages, and social studies and that high-minority schools seem to be more affected (Mathis, 2003; McGuire, 2007; Vogler, 2003; von Zastrow & Janc, 2004). These and other criticisms abound and form the basis of many recommendations for amendments in the reauthorization of NCLB.

Call for National, Rigorous Standards

However, continuing dissatisfaction with the public schools probably will place pressure on Congress to develop policies that will effect some standardization while still giving primary authority to the states. In a well-balanced analysis, Smith, Fuhrman, and O’Day (1994) summarize the pros and cons of national standards. They cite several advantages claimed by advocates of national standards: such standards will ensure that all citizens will have the shared knowledge and values needed to make democracy work, they result in greater efficiency because they provide standards for the 50 states, they encourage state and local boards to raise their standards, they will improve the quality of schooling, and they will ensure a large measure of educational equity. Similar points are made by Crew, Vallas, and Casserly (2007). It should also be noted that there is some evidence from international comparisons that teachers in nations with strong central control of the curriculum report greater consistency about what should be taught and what they did teach when compared with teachers in nations with greater local control (Cohen & Spillane, 1992). That variation in consistency is probably one of the factors accounting for international differences in achievement.

Smith and colleagues (1994) also note several disadvantages emphasized by the critics of the movement toward a national
curriculum: past experience suggests that such attempts will not be effective, standards tend to become minimum standards that lower the entire system, development at the national level will draw resources from state and local efforts, they can lead to an excessively restrictive national curriculum that will inhibit local creativity, and standards alone will have no effect on student achievement unless significant time and resources are provided to local school systems.

Until recently, leveraged by NCLB, almost all states had developed curriculum frameworks and standards (McCabe, 2006), and today, all states have frameworks. And those frameworks seem to be moving from very general guidelines to more prescriptive mandates and are typically accompanied by state-developed tests. A report by Hamilton et al. (2007) that studied California, Georgia, and Pennsylvania concluded that standards-based accountability is leading to “an emphasis on student achievement, and many educators laud this focus” (p. 10). Despite seeming resistance to what is seen as the federalization of education, states, districts, and teacher organizations, such as the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), support state standards and rigor. They nonetheless contend that high-stakes testing alone is not adequate for reform and that other support systems need to be in place (AFT, 2006; Hamilton et al.). This finding is supported by more recent research indicating that teachers seem to accept state standards with a sense of grim resignation (Glatthorn & Fontana, 2000).

Problems in Setting Standards

Several experts have noted problems with states’ standard setting in curriculum (see especially Fuhrman, 1994). The standards are set by state officials, who are far removed from local schools and free of the burden of accountability. Curriculum standards are often not supported by other systemic changes, such as new approaches to teacher education. Thus, state initiatives, as random acts of reform, are typically fragmented and often contradictory. And in a time of limited resources and the accompanying downsizing of state staff, most state departments of education do not have the resources to assist local districts in implementing state standards. However, part of the NCLB sanctions for schools and districts that consistently fail to meet AYP targets includes assigning them to escalating levels of school improvement status. This measure is pushing states to design
state-level assistance plans for schools and districts in school improvement status, especially for Title I schools.

Although the debate about national standards continues, the patchwork system of state standards and their consequences has led to a louder chorus for national standards. These calls are similar to those made after the report on the 1995 Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) showed that many nations outperforming the United States had national standards (Mullis, Martin, Gonzalez, & Chrostowski, 2004). Further motivating this desire is the fact that, overall, states tend to show good gains on state tests but state scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—dubbed the “Nation’s Report Card”—have been flat or low, despite some modest increases in math (Swanson, 2006). The pendulum swings between a growing consensus on the desirability of state standards and some key resistance to national standards on the grounds of state and local control. A U.S. Chamber of Commerce survey (2006) revealed that 96 percent of business organizations want rigorous curriculum in K–12 classrooms to help prepare students for college and the workplace; less than one-third believe that schools’ current state curricula adequately prepare students for their future professional careers (p. 3).

**Reports Call for Raising Standards**

Crew et al. (2007) argue that states are actually lowering their standards when an avalanche of reports—from the National Academy of Sciences, the U.S. Government Accountability Office, and other entities—suggest that standards need to be raised. They contend that national education standards would give all our schools common targets, clarify what should be taught, give a common definition of academic proficiency, and specify criteria for holding schools and districts accountable. The Council of the Great City Schools (a coalition of 66 of the nation’s largest urban school districts), think tanks, and some U.S. legislators proposed a bipartisan plan to provide incentives for states to adopt voluntary education-content standards in math and science. One bill encourages states to benchmark their own standards and tests to the higher standards of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (Crew et al.).

Similarly, the Commission on NCLB report (2007) calls for raising the bar of expectations through the development of national
model content and performance standards and tests in reading/language arts, mathematics, and science based on NAEP frameworks. The Commission recommends that for NCLB accountability purposes, states could adopt the resulting national model standards and tests as their own, build their own assessment instruments based on the national model standards, or keep their existing (or revamped) standards and tests.

States choosing the second or third option would have their standards and tests analyzed and compared to the national model, and the U.S. Secretary of Education will be required to periodically issue reports comparing the rigor of all state standards to the national model using a common metric. (p. 167)

Certainly, the nature of the reauthorized version of NCLB will influence the pace of the dialogue towards creating national education standards. McNeil (2007) reports that the National Conference of State Legislatures voted against any form of national academic standards, including voluntary standards, declaring that any attempt to unite school curricula across states would be unacceptable until perceived flaws in the NCLB Act are fixed.

This is an appropriate place to clarify some terms used by most of the states in their publications and in this book.

- **Curriculum standards or content standards.** Statements of what the learner is expected to be able to do, in one subject, grades K–12. Example (language arts): Uses the reading process to analyze and understand types of literary texts.
- **Benchmarks.** A more specific component of a standard, usually specified for a particular grade or a grade level. Example (language arts, grades 6–8): Understands the features of myths.
- **Objectives.** A component of a benchmark, usually the focus of a given lesson. Example (language arts, grade 6): Identifies the features of a mythical hero.

What should the principal do about state standards? The practical response is to help teachers accept them as a part of their professional work, noting both the advantages and disadvantages of externally imposed standards. State standards should be treated as the floor for curriculum, not the ceiling.
Movement Toward School-Based Curriculum Development

At the same time as interest is increasing in national and state standards setting in curriculum, educators have reported growing interest in school-based curriculum development as one element of the movement toward school-based management and school improvement. Most schools reporting successful school-based management programs indicate that teachers use their decision-making authority to change the program of studies by adding new courses (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1994).

Although one would expect that the concurrent interest in schools of choice would result in greater curricular diversity, one study concludes that there were no major differences between the curricula found in schools of choice and those found in standard schools (Sosniiak & Ethington, 1992). Perhaps more diversity in curriculum will be found in the charter school movement, because charter schools are largely free of state curriculum control. A current research project by The National Center on School Choice (2007) with Vanderbilt University and Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) is studying the various types of schools of choice with a matched comparison group of regular public schools. The study will compare the curriculum, instruction, and organizational conditions in these schools that promote achievement. It will contrast how schools of choice and regular public schools differ in terms of the content and cognitive complexity of the curriculum and instruction; the differences in alignment among instruction, curricular content standards, and assessments; and how these differences are related to achievement.

NCLB Expands the Core Curriculum

At this point, it is appropriate to mention that beyond the core curriculum of English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies, NCLB has expanded the core to include foreign languages, civics, government, economics, arts, history, and geography. This expanded list more accurately reflects the demands of 21st-century workplaces, colleges, and communities. It is imperative, therefore, that 21st-century skills be integrated into the teaching and assessment of core subjects.
Greater Influence of Professional Organizations

In previous decades, practitioners did not seem to give much attention to the curriculum recommendations of content area professional groups. Those recommendations often seemed too radical and insensitive to the realities of classroom life. However, the current cry for higher standards seems to have given such recommendations greater credence. Almost all the professional associations representing educators in a particular subject field have published their own curriculum standards. Today, the influence of such organizations is more pronounced. They include the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), International Reading Association (IRA), National Reading Conference (NRC), National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), National Science Teachers Association (NSTA), American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), National Art Education Standards (NAES), Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), and others.

A systematic compilation of those professional standards by Kendall and Marzano (2007) indicates that when viewed collectively, they represent an almost impossible task for curriculum leaders. According to Kendall and Marzano’s statistics, a student would have to master three benchmarks every week to achieve all the standards set by the professional groups. (A benchmark is a grade-specific and subject-specific standard.) Principals should become familiar with professional standards but encourage their curriculum developers to use them selectively. If the school uses subject-centered teams, the principal should also help team leaders stay current with professional standards.

Continuing Interest in Constructivist Curriculum

Constructivism is a theory of learning based on the principle that learners construct meaning from what they experience; thus, learning is an active, meaning-making process. Though constructivism seems to have made its strongest impact on science and mathematics curricula, leaders in other fields are attempting to embody in curriculum units the following principles:

- The unit should be problem focused, requiring the student to solve open-ended contextualized problems.
• The unit should enable the student to access generative knowledge (knowledge that is used in solving problems).
• Learning strategies (such as the use of matrices in organizing information) should be taught in the context of solving problems.
• Throughout the unit, the teacher should provide the necessary scaffolding or structure.
• Much of the learning should occur in cooperative groups, because learning is a social process.
• The unit should conclude by requiring the student to demonstrate learning in some authentic manner.

Chapter 13 provides a detailed explanation of the processes to be used in developing a constructivist unit and addresses some critiques of constructivism. If greater depth is needed, three sources may be particularly useful: Wiggins & McTighe (2005), Brooks & Brooks (1999), and Glatthorn (1994a).

Development of New Approaches in Vocational Education

In the face of drastic changes in the global economy, the workplace, and the workforce, forward-looking career educators are moving toward new approaches to curriculum to help students develop 21st-century workplace skills. Two developments seem significant.

An Emphasis on Generic Skills

Though almost all career educators see a continuing need to train students in career-specific skills so that they can gain employment after graduation, there is increased interest in so-called generic skills. Generic skills are not job-specific but instead are general, transferable skills that can be used in almost any career. Perhaps one of the best formulations of generic skills is that produced by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2007). Its formulation is shown in Table 1.1. As can be seen by reviewing this list (or any other list, such as that by enGauge 21st-Century Skills, 2007), the intent is to equip all students with skills that will enable them to function in a changing 21st-century economy and a changing workplace.