

Curriculum is a Roadmap

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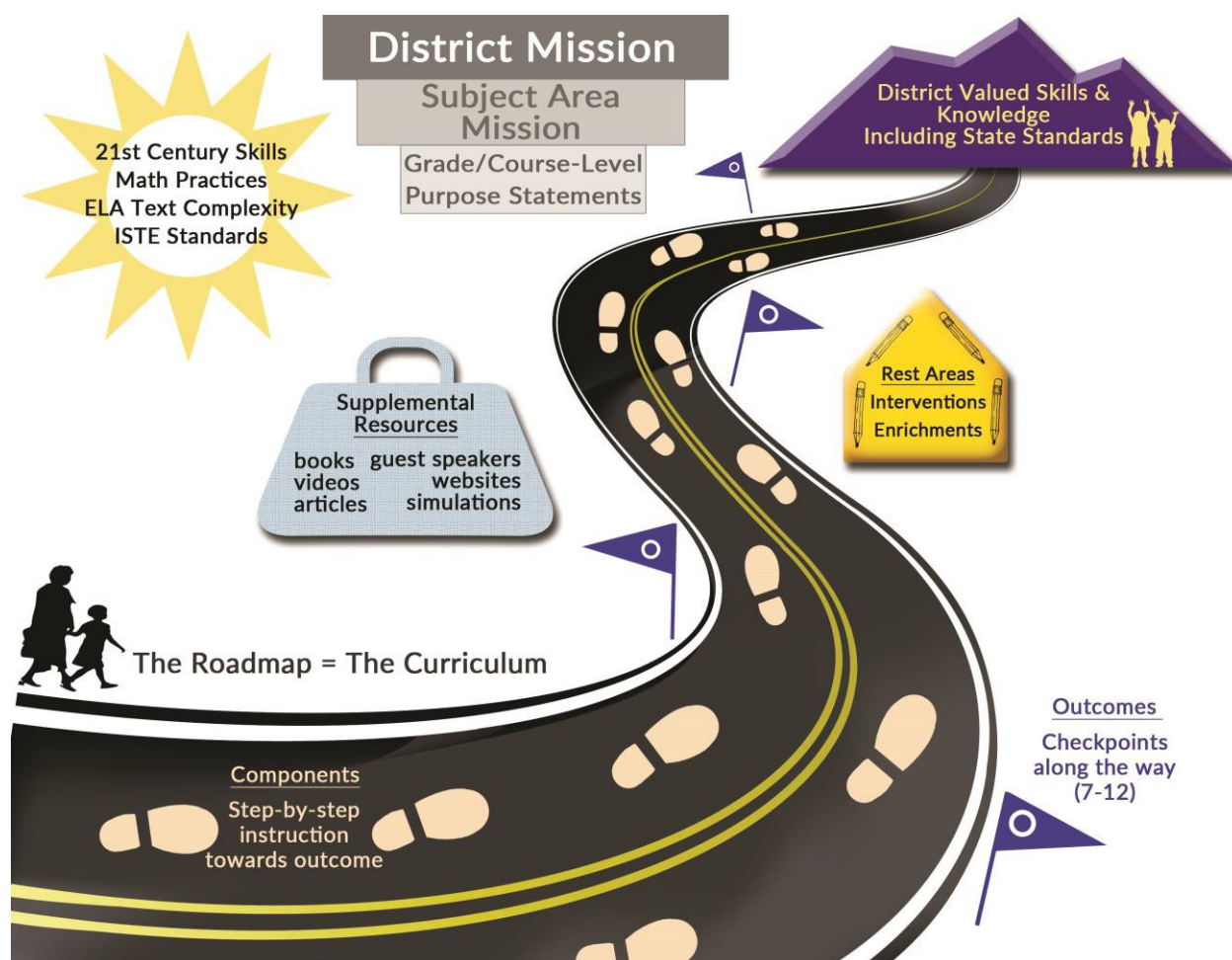
“Curriculum” is discussed on a daily basis in conversations within schools among administrators, teachers, support staff, and outside stakeholders. Strangely enough, it is a term that carries fundamental misconceptions that make those conversations difficult. Unless everyone involved in the conversation has the same definition for curriculum, what is said and what is heard are often very different.

Perhaps the most common misconception about curriculum is that a textbook or series is the curriculum. Textbooks or any other instructional materials are actually resources. Resources are used to teach curriculum, but are not the curriculum itself. Many textbook series have a curriculum embedded into the resource; however, it is critical that a district determine its curricula locally before resources are adopted. This is to ensure that adopted resources properly support the learning that the district feels is essential – not the hidden curriculum that the publisher values.

Another misconception about curriculum has to do with the federal government’s requirement that each state determines a set of standard skills and content that must be taught at each grade level for each content area. Although these sets of skills and content are clearly called state standards, many educators are under the false assumption that they are curriculum. It is clearly stated in most standards documents that they are not curriculum and that districts need to determine their curricula locally to assure that students meet the identified standards for content and skills.

True, local curriculum must fully employ state standards, but the district may value additional skills and content. Furthermore, standards documents may not be organized into a teachable sequence, but rather they are typically categorized according to similar attributes (strands or domains) such as reading skills, number sense, or presentational skills that would not necessarily be taught in isolation of the other strands or domains within the subject area standards.

On the following page, please examine the graphic representation of curriculum as a roadmap and note the role that resources and standards play in the student’s learning journey.



In this illustration, the journey begins with a teacher and her students. This teacher is tasked with leading her students to their final destination (the end of the “road”) which includes their ability to demonstrate skills and knowledge of the state standards and the district-defined values. This could be a daunting task, particularly if the “road” is not broken down into teachable chunks or units. The breakdown of the journey, the roadmap, is the curriculum.

Relationship between Curriculum, Resources, Standards, and Differentiation

Curriculum should be organized to include curriculum targets that can be accurately assessed after a unit is completed. The desired “outcomes” for each of these teachable units are depicted as blue flags along the road in the illustration. Essentially, these outcomes are significant checkpoints of student learning along the way.

To ensure that students can be successful at the unit outcome level, learning must be broken down further into smaller steps that will be formatively assessed on a regular basis (daily or every

few days, at least). These narrow curriculum targets are depicted as footprints along the road. Each unit outcome (flag) includes its own set of footprints.

So, where do resources, best practices, and differentiation fit into this analogy? Resources are what you pack in your suitcase. They are the supplemental materials that make the trip fun, engaging, and successful. There is rarely one resource that will align perfectly to your curriculum, which is why we use the suitcase to represent resources; it is filled with many great tools and materials – some are essential, others are nice to have along.

Incorporating best practices (e.g., 21st-century skills, math practices, ELA text complexity, and ISTE standards) into instruction is like the sun that sheds light on the trip. Best practices help to produce a well-balanced experience for students.

Lastly, differentiation activities (i.e., intervention and enrichment) are the rest areas along the way. It is essential to pause to ensure all students are on board and ready to progress, using formative assessments as indicators of who might need remediation or intervention activities. It is equally important to provide engaging, relevant activities for those students who are already with you and can keep up the pace.

There are so many elements that go into effective teaching; but, the foundation of everything is to determine **what** students need to know and be able to do – the curriculum – and how it will fit into the time that you're given. If you haven't already made your roadmap, make it a priority to identify curriculum targets. You'll feel more confident about having a plan and the chances of students arriving at the destination are much improved!