

The Case for Curriculum

by Robert Pondiscio

Overview

Curriculum, long thought to be the sole domain of the individual teacher, is an underexamined area for reform. Policymakers and educators should come together to work on reforming the slapdash and unchallenging curriculum that defines learning in many American classrooms and craft new knowledge-rich materials that align with high standards.

A strong, knowledge-based curriculum not only leads to smarter teachers and students but also has beneficial downstream effects, such as giving teachers the opportunity to develop subject matter expertise, help struggling students, and make connections with families rather than spending hours each week creating lesson plans from scratch. Placing curriculum at the center of reform efforts holds the promise of not only raising academic outcomes but also getting better results from the teachers we have—not the teachers we wish we had.

Guidance for Policymakers

- Efforts to improve student outcomes by changing the composition of the teacher workforce or dramatically raising their level of sophistication and skill are unlikely to be successful due to the large number of teachers needed to staff our schools. What must change is the job: teaching must be doable by women and men of ordinary talents.
- While the evidence base is insufficiently robust to say so with certainty, there is ample reason to suggest it is easier, less expensive, and more effective to change curricula than to change teachers.
- The soul of effective teaching is studying student work, giving effective feedback, and developing relationships with students. Teacher time spent on developing and customizing lessons, however valuable, takes time away from these more impactful uses of teacher time. The adoption of a high-quality curriculum and training on its effective implementation are the first, most critical steps toward transforming the teacher's job.
- Let's not ask what more teachers can do. Let's instead ask what are the things that *only* a teacher can do. Everything else should be a job for someone else.

What the Research Tells Us

- Curriculum is a critical factor in student academic success, and comprehensive, content-rich curriculum is a common feature of academically high-performing countries.
- The impact of choosing a better curriculum is greater than replacing an average teacher with a higher performing one.
- Although teachers spend on average more than a dozen hours per week searching for and creating instructional resources and classroom materials, most of the materials teachers choose on their own do not meet high standards.
- Implementing a statewide strategy to encourage the widespread adoption of high-quality instructional materials has proven results.

Scan here to view
the full report.

