

AMBITIOUS LEADERSHIP: A CASE STUDY OF ALIGNING ENGLISH CURRICULUM TO COLLEGE- AND CAREER- READY STANDARDS AT CARDENAS

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ALIGNING CURRICULUM FOR COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS

The shift to the Common Core at the Lazaro Cardenas Elementary School, a pre-K to third grade school in a predominantly Latino area in southwest Chicago, rested on instructional improvement efforts Jeremy Feiwell initiated five years earlier in 2006, when he became Cardenas's principal. Feiwell knew from his years as a teacher at Cardenas that curriculum and instruction at the school varied widely — every teacher was doing something different in his or her classroom. Meanwhile, the school — where 52 percent of students are English language learners and 97 percent come from low-income households — was the lowest performing of the 23 schools in the community.

By 2016, the school was the highest performing in math in the south side of Chicago, and one of the top schools for reading. In 2015, the first year of the PARCC exam, the school had the highest overall scores in reading and math in its network: 43 percent of Cardenas students met or exceeded standards in reading, compared with the state average of 38 percent. In math, 47 percent met or exceeded standards, compared with the state average of 28 percent.

Cardenas's staff attributes a significant portion of the school's success in recent years to their work developing a curriculum that meets the demands of higher standards. Over the course of his tenure, Feiwell has established high expectations for all students, worked with staff in adopting a coherent school-wide curriculum, and intentionally built teacher capacity and responsibility for continually improving the content and delivery of this curriculum. In this case study, we describe the three phases of curricular improvement undertaken by Feiwell and his staff.

Throughout all three of these phases — although at varying levels of intensity — Feiwell has carried out the practices listed in the inset on the right.

Practices for Developing a Standards-Aligned Curriculum

- **Establishing and maintaining high expectations for all students:** The principal set the expectation that all students would meet the same high standards, and this expectation informed the design and implementation of curriculum.
- **Developing external partnerships to bring instructional expertise to the school:** Over several years, the principal secured grants from three different organizations to bring instructional expertise and training to the school.
- **Engaging teachers in the process of curriculum redesign:** The principal encouraged teachers to take ownership of the curriculum development work.
- **Maintaining a collaborative structure for revising lessons and curriculum:** The principal established norms and protocols around teacher collaboration, setting expectations that collaboration time would be used to develop, review, and refine unit and lesson plans.
- **Creating a schedule:** The principal created time in the schedule for teachers to step out of their classrooms and focus on writing curriculum.

PHASE 1: SETTING THE CONDITIONS

ESTABLISHING A STRONG INSTRUCTIONAL VISION

When Feiwell became principal at Cardenas, he immediately set the expectation that all students — including English language learners — would be held to the same high standards. He did so in two key ways. First, he created a bilingual pathway with dual-language instruction, and held himself and his teachers accountable for ensuring that English language learners were transitioned into general education classrooms by second grade. Second, he began monitoring student growth against uniform expectations and tracking the effectiveness of the curriculum through the school’s assessment system, the Measures of Academic Progress. Teachers in native-language or transitional classrooms might use different approaches to teach a lesson — perhaps using photos, more definitions, and in-depth explanations — but they would expose students to the same curriculum used in general education classrooms, and work with them to master the same concepts.

Feiwell also made some initial program changes to establish curricular and instructional consistency across the school. These changes included adopting Open Court — a scripted, phonics-based pre-K-3 curriculum — and adding one hour of intensive writing instruction to the daily schedule.

DEVELOPING EXTERNAL PARTNERSHIPS TO BRING IN INSTRUCTIONAL EXPERTISE

Feiwell obtained a five-year grant to work with Strategic Learning Initiatives on creating shared practices for teaching reading comprehension, such as teaching students to identify the main idea and the author’s purpose. When the Strategic Learning Initiatives grant expired, Feiwell partnered with Children’s Literacy Initiative to work with teachers on using writing about reading as a foundation for literacy instruction. Children’s Literacy Initiative provided professional coaching to Cardenas staff and helped them adopt common language and routines for daily instruction, such as mini-lessons on the main idea of a text and interactive read-alouds.

Feiwell also brought in the Illinois Writing Project, a state-level subsidiary of the National Writing Project, to help develop a school-wide writing framework. The new writing scope and sequence infused writing instruction across disciplines, and articulated the skills and genres students should master. After the school implemented the writing framework, English language arts proficiency at Cardenas started to rise. “Reading scores were going up because they were writing more,” Feiwell said.

PHASE 2: MAKING THE SHIFT TO THE COMMON CORE

When Common Core standards came out in 2010, Chicago Public Schools pushed all schools and teachers to develop and pilot a standards-aligned literacy unit. While most schools in the network felt ill-equipped to develop the new unit on their own, Feiwell decided that after several years of strengthening curriculum and instruction, his teachers had the ability to enact the shift without district support, and to do so for a full year’s worth of instructional plans. “At that point, our teachers knew what good reading looked like,” he said, and he decided that the school was “going to take the standards, figure out what our kids need to know . . . and figure out what do readers actually need to do over the course of the year to be successful readers.”

BUILDING BUY-IN

In 2012 to 2013 — the year before fully implementing the standards was a citywide requirement — Feiwell held a series of before-school meetings to dissect the standards with his staff. In these meetings, Feiwell presented the standards to teachers as an opportunity to improve the quality of instruction in their classrooms; he spoke to teachers about moving away from depending solely on their basal readers and developing their own standards-aligned literacy framework. Many Cardenas teachers initially felt anxious and overwhelmed, but Feiwell assured them that while the first year would be challenging, developing an in-house curriculum would give them more choice in how they taught their lessons. Said one district supervisor, “I think he messaged it as an opportunity for his staff; it came down to the mindset around collective learning that he established in the school.”

To support that mindset, Feiwell formed cross-grade groups of teachers and had them concentrate on the coherence and vertical articulation of literacy skills across grades. “We basically dove into the standards from a developmental perspective,” said one early-elementary teacher. “‘Okay, I’m a second-grade teacher — what does the Common Core standard for first grade say for Reading Literature?’ We really dissected what the standards were truly asking kids to do.”

ENGAGING TEACHERS IN THE PROCESS OF CURRICULUM REDESIGN

To make the curriculum design process more efficient and focused, Feiwell created an “Understanding by Design” team, and appointed several strong teachers to serve on it. The Understanding by Design team created a literacy framework that broadly outlined unit sequences and priority standards and specified strategies, focus areas, and essential questions for each unit sequence that would be addressed across the grades. “If I had tasked the whole school with coming up with the enduring understandings and essential questions, it would have taken an entire year,” Feiwell said. “You get a few smart people in a room, and they can knock out the hard part. Then you ask the teachers to knock out the part that relates to them.” The Understanding by Design team created a planning tool for each unit that teacher teams filled out, choosing texts and developing tasks that met the specified level of rigor for their respective grades.

Expectations for daily instruction were also set and embedded into the planning tools and process. Drawing on what they had learned from their work with external partners, the Understanding by Design team included expectations for guided reading, small-group and one-on-one instruction, opportunities for student collaboration, the use of mini-lessons, and the gradual-release model of instruction. To this day, teachers continue to draw upon what they learned from the Children’s Literacy Initiative about conducting effective read-alouds, such as focusing on one skill at a time (e.g., finding the main idea, making inferences) and building vocabulary.

DETERMINING BEST PRACTICE

With a newly established curriculum map and unit structure, teachers were able to adopt or create lessons that best attended to the skills or concepts assigned to the unit or lesson. Drawing on a variety of sources, including the previous basal reader, materials from EngageNY, and lessons they created on their own, teams piloted various approaches and materials to determine which lessons were most effective. Each team met weekly to plan lessons, revise units, and make adjustments in their lessons to fit their students’ needs — a practice they maintain to this day. One teacher said, “As we were teaching a text, we would say, ‘Wait a minute. We can’t do this right now — we haven’t built the necessary background knowledge.’” Feiwell advised teachers to add supplementary reading to give students the knowledge they needed, but warned them not to dumb down the standards-aligned texts they were already using.

PHASE 3: CONTINUOUS REVISION AND ADJUSTMENT OF CURRICULUM

Work on the curriculum did not end after the initial alignment process; rather, this process oriented administrators and staff toward continual revision and refinement. During the 2015–16 school year, and continuing into the 2016–17 school year, Feiwell and his staff undertook a new process of curriculum revision. Feiwell said he and his staff asked themselves: “Are our units as rigorous as they need to be? They might have been great four years ago, but are they where they need to be now, for our current population?” To enable the revision process, Feiwell gave teachers three full days of collaboration time beyond district-allocated periods in order to calibrate and complete their instructional plans.

CONTINUING CALIBRATION WITH STANDARDS

Teachers focused their work during these days on assessing and improving the alignment of their scope and sequence and their unit plans to the Common Core. Armed with a Common Core checklist for their grade, teacher teams rebuilt their curriculum map, articulating the week-by-week objectives, mini-lessons, and literacy skills and strategies that would be used to address the unit’s priority standards. They were particularly focused on tracking skill development across units and quarters and ensuring that students had opportunities to practice skills in increasingly complex contexts and with greater independence over time. These days also gave teachers numerous opportunities to discuss *how* to best teach these skills. The teams developed multiple drafts of their curriculum documentation, with the principal providing feedback.

INTEGRATING COMPLEX TEXTS

While the teams kept many of the foundational elements developed in 2012 — such as the essential questions of the unit, the aligned standards, and the reading skills and strategies to be taught — a review of formative and interim assessment data also compelled significant changes to the curriculum and lesson plans. Teachers were “much more intentional” about specifying expectations for complex texts, reading activities, and student learning for each unit. Feiwell required all grade-level teams to integrate interactive read-aloud and close-reading exercises into weekly lessons, and teams included a list of appropriate grade-level texts with each unit plan, indicating whether the texts should be used for read-alouds or close reading. Using Norman Webb’s Depth of Knowledge taxonomy, teachers also developed core tasks for each week and assigned them levels of rigor, which pushed them to develop more challenging tasks and to develop a more coherent sequence of assignments that built learning over time.

USING DATA TO ADJUST CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

The process of curriculum revision has continued into the 2016–2017 school year. In 2016, Cardenas’s overall performance on the reading section of the PARCC exam dropped slightly, pushing the school to closely track curriculum implementation and student performance, and make necessary adjustments. Interim assessment data indicated that Cardenas students continued to struggle with vocabulary. Realizing that existing units did not address vocabulary development in detail, grade-level teams worked to identify a set of grade-wide vocabulary words for each unit, organized by week and by text. All teachers now teach these words, enabling the principal to monitor curriculum fidelity across classrooms.

SUPPORTIVE SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES

MAINTAINING A COLLABORATIVE STRUCTURE FOR CREATING AND REVISING LESSONS AND CURRICULUM

Teacher collaboration has been critical to Cardenas’s robust curriculum and lesson planning work. “You want people to be individuals with their thought process, but team members at the same time,” Feiwell said, noting that he spends a lot of his time supporting teachers in striking that balance. He expects teachers to work together and provides time in the schedule for weekly grade-level team planning meetings, which are centered on the focus standards for the week. In these meetings, teachers discuss how the lessons went that week, identify areas where students still are struggling, and consider instructional materials and strategies they can use to help students learn the standards the next week (see below for an inside look at a grade-level team meeting).

At the same time, Feiwell does not expect his teachers to use the exact same instructional activities across their classrooms — he gives them some flexibility to determine activities based on their students’ needs. Their common understanding that teachers may choose different strategies to achieve the same collective goal allows disagreements to happen more naturally and respectfully.

Teachers highly value this collaborative time. “Our teaching is better because we are talking it through here; we are never scrambling during the week,” one teacher said.

The collaborative culture also makes teachers want to come to meetings prepared to share their best ideas. “We motivate one another to not only achieve the best growth in our students but the best growth in ourselves,” one teacher said. To ensure teams work well together, Feiwell looks to hire teachers who are collaborative. He is also intentional about how he puts together grade-level teams, giving consideration to personalities, experience, and skill sets.

The ongoing collaborative process of curriculum development and revision has deepened teachers’ buy-in and sense of ownership. “When we first began developing our own curriculum, we’d have teachers saying, ‘I just want a basal,’” Feiwell said. “But we’re saying that if you’re going to be at the top of your game, you need to be able to figure out what do kids need to know, what *do* they know, and how do you bridge that gap with your instruction?” Most teachers like this feeling of ownership, he said; collaboration with peers and coaching from Feiwell, his assistant principal, and the school’s instructional coach provide support for those who struggle.

CREATING TIME IN THE SCHEDULE FOR CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

When Feiwell first tasked teachers with developing a Common Core-aligned English language arts curriculum, he wanted to give them ample time for the work without making them stay late. He found money in the budget for substitute teachers to cover three to four full days of teachers’ classes over the year. Feiwell and his assistant principal also provided resources ahead of the meetings, such as graphic organizers and background research, and helped the teams set goals for each meeting. “It was like a war room,” one teacher said, adding that the teams were never disturbed or called out of the meetings. “The school essentially told us: ‘This is your only focus for this day.’” Feiwell continues this practice: In the fall of 2016, he hired substitutes so that his teachers could devote several days to finalizing the revision of the school’s literacy curriculum.

INSIDE A GRADE-LEVEL TEAM PLANNING MEETING

At a recent first-grade team meeting, all six first-grade teachers sat looking at the unit overview. That week, they had been working on quotation marks, and the next week would focus on the use of dialogue. One teacher suggested that they use the same text throughout the week for different lessons, such as vocabulary, meaning, and punctuation. They could do a close-reading exercise to build understanding and ask students text-dependent questions to help them understand the deeper meaning of the story.

The teachers chose *Hog-Eye* by Susan Meddaugh — a grade-level book recommended for kindergarten through second grade — and prepared for the close-reading portion of the lesson by identifying the primary questions they wanted students to be able to answer: “How did the pig outsmart the wolf, and how do you know?” The teachers then reviewed *Hog-Eye* together to identify evidence on how the pig outsmarts the wolf; they developed four questions to support children’s search for this evidence: “Why does the pig send the wolf to the garden? Why did the pig give the wolf precise instructions instead of just sending him to get it? Is there really a magic spell? How do you know?” Teachers agreed that they would pair up students to highlight evidence and then have each student write out his or her own response to the larger questions.

They brainstormed other activities. Since the focus of the lesson was on the use of dialogue, one teacher suggested having students create their own dialogue, giving them pictures and having them write speech bubbles with quotes inside. Later in the week, they would discuss how readers pay attention to rhyme and rhythm. At the end of the week, they planned to have students self-assess by explaining what they had learned and what strategies they had used.

For a writing workshop, they agreed the students were ready to work on their how-to books: Students would be researching an animal and writing a book explaining how to live like that animal. With a copy of Webb’s Depth of Knowledge in front of her, one teacher asked which level of the taxonomy conducting research was a part of. Another confirmed that “investigating” and “citing evidence” were both at Level 3. They talked about different books in their classrooms that could serve as models to help the students get started. Students would then be asked to research their animal, looking for evidence to draw upon. The teachers agreed students would work in groups for that portion of the lesson, and teachers would provide guidance. Later in the week, the teachers would help them further their research and demonstrate how to compose a paragraph, with modeling and writing together.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

How is Cardenas’s curriculum development process similar to yours? How is it different?

What practices did Cardenas’s principal put in place that enabled teachers to take ownership of the curriculum development process?

Continuous and targeted cycles of development were a key part of this school’s approach to programmatic and pedagogical improvement. What ideas does this give you about work on curriculum that your school should do?

Like many schools, Cardenas had limited professional development time to comprehensively revise the curriculum. What ideas does its process give you about how to leverage existing time, structures, and resources at your school in order to undertake meaningful program improvements?