

Franklinville Central School Fifth Grade Curriculum Audit

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Abstract

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Franklinville Central School Fifth Grade Curriculum Audit

Franklinville Central School is a public P-12 school district located in Franklinville, New York. This curriculum audit is focused on the fifth grade English Language Arts program. It has systemic implications for the Franklinville Central School District because it has become obvious to the author of this document that the school district has no continuity in its curriculum from pre-kindergarten to twelfth grade. That seems to be due to a lack of strategic direction and curriculum planning both vertically and horizontally. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001, now known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requires local school districts to align their curriculum with New York State Learning Standards and that provide benchmarks for federally mandated “adequate yearly progress.” (O’Shea, 2009) There is no evidence that Franklinville Central School has document that provide the necessary direction for instruction particularly in fifth grade English Language Arts to achieve these ends.

Franklinville Central Elementary School has had exemplary reading scores in the fifth grade for the past two years. The Elementary School has achieved Annual Yearly Progress that is acceptable according to the New York State Education Department (New York State School Report Card, 2009) In June of 2010 Franklinville had the highest reading scores among the component school districts of the Cattaraugus-Allegany BOCES (Dataview, 2010). Franklinville's students have been able to read and compete well on the New York State Reading Assessments in the Fifth Grade. Franklinville Elementary was an early recipient of the federally funded Reading First Program beginning in 2004. Reading First is emphasized pre-kindergarten through third grade in Franklinville.

Reading First increased instructional time spent on the five essential components of reading instruction promoted by the program (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary,

fluency, and comprehension). (Reading First Impact Study Interim Report, 2008) Reading First at its core was a federally funded program designed to improve local education policy and teacher behavior with the ultimate goal of improving student reading proficiency. (Reading First Impact Study Final Report Exec Summary, 2008). Because of the emphasis of phonics and fluency other important language arts skills and student schema have been ignored and that is evidenced too on New York State Assessments. (Dataview, 2010)

Franklinville's fifth grade has four veteran teachers who teach reading at their grade level and together they have one-hundred-eight years of experience. Two of the teachers are special education certified although only one actually functions in that capacity. In addition to that Franklinville Central Elementary School teachers collaborate for thirty minutes at the end of the instructional day. One of the teachers, Diane Watkins, taught reading in third grade for twenty years then worked as a reading teacher in academic intervention services for ten years and in the last three years has taught reading in fifth grade. Demographically Franklinville Central School is situated in a very poor community and many of its students qualify for free and reduced lunches. In 2007-2008 the number of free and reduced lunches was 43% (New York State School Report Card, 2009) and the following year the number dropped slightly to 35% (New York State School Report Card, 2009). Franklinville also has a high special education population of 15.6% classified students (New York State Education Department, 2010). There were ten special education students in Grade 5 in the 2009-2010 school year. That is approximately 10% of this year's class and represents a lower percentage of special education students than the school district's normal rate. In addition to this there is reason to believe that the Reading First program initiated at the school in 2004 and continuing to this day has had little or no impact on the reading comprehension of Franklinville students. Improving students reading ability is a goal for

all schools but studies funded and conducted by the United States Department of Education have determined that Reading First impact on student's reading achievement was not statistically detectable. (Reading First Impact Study Final Report Exec Summary, 2008) Given this information it might be reasonable to conclude that Franklinville students would not score as well as they did on the New York State ELA examination in Grade 5.

Despite the teachers and students exemplary performance in the past three years, there is no systematic curriculum and no framework for such a curriculum in place at the fifth grade level to ensure that best practices are shared and/or replicated at the grade level and with teachers in grade levels above and below. In addition to that New York State has raised the bar for student language arts achievement and it will be necessary to improve the existing curriculum if Franklinville Central Elementary School is to continue to experience success and makes its AYP as stipulated by Race to the Top.

Examination of Board of Education policies at Franklinville Central School reveal a paucity of documents that provide any substantive direction about a locally developed curriculum in any subject area. Franklinville Board of Education Policy 40.2 stipulates that the superintendent, “shall be responsible for the implementation of courses of study and the development of curriculum for instruction as established by the Board of Education.” Despite that directive there is no developed curriculum documents that are extant at Franklinville Elementary School. Franklinville Central School Board of Education policy 40.5 that stipulates the duties of the Elementary Principal states, “(elementary principal) shall assist the Superintendent of Schools with curriculum development, planning and adapting courses of study to the needs and interests of the children with the approval of the Superintendent of Schools. Despite these official documents there are no curriculum documents that can be found.

Prior to the implementation of a curriculum director approximately three years ago under a previous superintendent and the hiring of current Superintendent Michelle Spasiano there was no evidence of curriculum leadership at Franklinville Central School. In addition to that Franklinville Central School had no mission or vision statement nor educational goals for its students that empowered the school board and the school administration to develop a written curriculum.

Brief interviews with the Curriculum Director, Mrs. Kathryn McFarland and the Superintendent of School, Mrs. Michelle Spasiano. note that Franklinville has recently begun an ambitious attempt to rectify this situation and the current administration have begun CDEP planning which will yield a mission, vision and locally developed curriculum across grade levels P-12. A mission statement and strategic direction for the school is key to successful curriculum planning and standards achievement planning cycle (SAPC) is indicated at the school. (O'Shea, 2009, p. 23) The district vision needs to come from a deductive process that examines what our students need to know to be successful citizens in the 21st Century. The leader of this process which will likely be the superintendent will need to focus the group on changing nature of society, the shape of the future; the nature of the community; special characteristics of the student body; current research on curriculum, teaching and learning. (Glatthorn, 2009) After developing a district vision then this planning body will need to develop goals which will in turn provide direction for a locally developed curriculum. Goals will then be aligned with programs and subjects. (Glatthorn, 2009)

An educational goal is a broad statement of the outcomes a district wants to achieve for all students throughout its educational programs. (Glatthorn, 2009, p. 55) The implementation of comprehensive district planning must include a succinct vision developed locally and strong set

of educational goals that guide the development of local curricula. Absent such vision and goals Franklinville will founder as it has no educational compass that guides its board of education and central office leadership. Strong leadership on the part of the principal in determining the extent of curriculum leadership. (Glatthorn, 2009, p. 39)

Franklinville's rigid adherence to the Reading First program which has provided a funding stream that supported instruction in the primary grades could actually be exacerbating its lack of real curriculum planning. There was an overall lack of emphasis on the skills necessary for success on New York State Assessments due to the over emphasis and reliance on the Reading First. Lack of intellectual curiosity and an absence of an overall school district mission/vision statement led previous principals to believe that Reading First was more than a mere funding stream. Anecdotal information revealed that there were curriculum maps prepared at each grade level and those included reading maps but there was no evidence of such documents for this paper.

The current reading curriculum in the fifth grade at the Franklinville Elementary school consists of a one page document supplied by Diane Watkins, one of the teachers in Grade 5. The document is concise and each month there are objectives listed. For example September lists Comprehension skills: sensory imaging; Skills lab: main idea; Grammar skills: complete sentences. October's objectives follow logically and are: Comprehension skills: sensory imaging (2 weeks), inferring (2 weeks); skills lab: finding details; grammar skills: four kinds of sentences/punctuation. In fact each month there is evidence of objectives and there is ample evidence in Mrs. Watkins' classroom that children are engaged and learning. The one page curriculum planning document provide by Mrs. Watkins does not have any reference to the New

York State Common Core and although it could be inferred that there is some alignment. However, since the curriculum is not written any place and there are no documents that connect Mrs. Watkins scope and sequence documents with the New York State Common Core or the previous New York State Learning Standards there would be no way to easily replicate her curriculum should she be reassigned.

The Franklinville fifth grade teachers do meet at least once per year with a staff specialist from Cattaraugus-Allegany BOCES who examines Franklinville reading scores and helps these teachers to identify performance standards from the New York State English Language Arts requirements that need more focus as evidenced from the previous year's scores on the New York State performance tests. Since there is no local curriculum there is also no evidence of local assessments that are necessary to prepare these students to be successful on New York State examinations. Therefore despite the success of the curriculum it would be a good idea to develop not only a local curriculum framework but also local assessments which would mirror state assessments and aid students success with those assessments.

The lack of local planning documents severely hamper any serious effort to guide the curriculum. Though the Reading First program and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001 (NCLB) brought with it increased accountability it did not automatically provide a local curriculum.(Reading First Impact Study Final Report Exec Summary, 2008) A brief interview with the Curriculum Director, Mrs. Kathryn McFarland reveals that the lack of such planning documents makes it difficult to coordinate the development of a local standards based curriculum across grade levels. Franklinville Central School has one campus that is transected by New York State Route 16. The Elementary School is on the west side of the highway and the middle and high school building is on the east side of the highway. The physical divide is

exacerbated by the lack of a coherent planning document that articulates a local curriculum that should drive a Standard Achievement Planning Cycle (O'Shea, 2005)

Glatthorn says, “strong leadership by the principal that lead to effective teaching and learning will lead to improved achievement outcomes without undue preoccupation with testing. (Glatthorn, 2009, p. 122) It is incumbent that the principal at Franklinville Elementary School begin a process which will lead to the development of a local reading curriculum that is comprehensive in its scope from pre-kindergarten to sixth grade and that this curriculum is tied to the English Language Arts curriculum in the Franklinville Middle and High School. Once a curriculum is in place in fifth grade the process can be replicated across other grade levels as well and the development of a comprehensive curriculum guide across all elementary grades would follow. When those mechanisms are in place a district testing program that is tied to the curriculum could be developed. (Glatthorn, 2009, p. 58) This should supplement not duplicate the state testing program and will aid in the district's recently initiated program of Response to Intervention which will identify those students most in need of remedial help. A sound program to evaluate the curriculum needs to be in place so that programmatic changes can be made throughout the year and prior to New York State assessments each year.

The administration must therefore convene a planning team across grade levels that coordinates a comprehensive reading curriculum that is standards based and tied to the Common Core in ELA as it is articulated in June 2010. (New York State Education Department, 2010). This team must be part of a larger action planning team throughout the district. Carr says, “action planning focuses the educational team on measurable goals in terms of excellence (improving student performance) and equity (decreasing gaps among students).” (Carr, 2001, p. 83) Franklinville currently lacks such a planning group. This group must be become part of a

comprehensive curriculum framework that Without such a document Franklinville Elementary School will eventually founder even with the best intentions. This standards-based curriculum must include all of the performance indicators of the common core curriculum.

It is imperative that Franklinville Central School and therefore Franklinville Elementary School develop an action plan that focuses the educational community on measurable goals. (Carr, 2001) Clarity is achieved when districts and schools formally identify their standards and use them consistently throughout the curriculum process. (Carr, 2001) It is clear that Franklinville can benefit from a Standards Achievement Planning Cycle. (O'Shea, 2005) Without such an approach the reading curriculum will be in disarray and will not serve either teachers or students well. This curriculum must emphasize the acquisition of not only the skills of reading but the development of the necessary schema and scaffolding necessary to support the student's of Franklinville Central School.

There is no comprehensive curriculum-management framework in place. There is apparently only one curriculum document. There is no philosophical framework present although it can be assumed that since Franklinville's fifth grade experienced success over the past three years that teachers were teaching at least some of the performance indicators from the New York State Learning Standards now referred to as Common Core. There is a need to articulate how the New York State and National Standards will be included in the curriculum. There is a need to tie staff development to the redesign and implementation of a Standards Achievement Planning Cycle (O'Shea, 2005) which in turn will lead to an articulation of the timing scope and procedures of a curriculum review.

Assessments need to be developed that are coherent with the curriculum and the data from these assessments must be disaggregated to adequately and appropriately tune the

curriculum planning process. The assessment process is two fold and is need both in the initial planning stage as well as an instrument that allows for the fine tuning of the curriculum to suit the needs of each cohort of students. A system of benchmark tests is necessary to determine the student achievement of critical standards and as a planning tool to assist in the curriculum-management system. (O'Shea, 2005, p. 124) The district testing program should supplement not duplicate the state testing system. (Glatthorn, 2009)

Since there were no curriculum planning documents there is no scope for the fifth grade curriculum other than that identified by New York State which while more than adequate is difficult to coordinate at the local level.

Analysis of the Curriculum-Management Improvement Model in Chart E reveals that there is vague delineation of the goals and learner outcomes from the planning document provided by Mrs. Watkins. There is some mention of assessment in terms of a review of the material prior to the New York State test. Each month there is reference to a “skills lab” which highlights a number of skills taken from the performance indicators but they are not well written and would be difficult for someone other than the the normal teacher to follow. Since there is no real system of assessment in place there is no way to assess the congruity between instruction and assessment and it appears that these assessments are informal and documentation is anecdotal. This year there has been some improvement in the process as each of the former academic intervention specialists are implementing the Response to Intervention model and classroom teachers are receiving more formalized feed back regarding each student. The process is in its very early stages and is not well tuned. It might be possible to use the RTI model as part of an overall assessment model to help develop and fine tune the language arts curriculum.

In its current format there is no system in place to delineate pre-requisite essential skills, knowledge and attitudes except as they are measured on the New York State Assessments. The implementation of Response to Intervention provides a vehicle for more formal assessments but those assessments are not clearly tied to the curriculum which in turn is not clearly tied to the New York State Performance indicators. The curriculum planning document does not delineate the major instructional tools either. Pearson's "Reading Street – Grade 5" is the basal for this curriculum as are chapter books which each teacher uses to teach the requisite skills but there is not a written document that details any of this. The curriculum document is explicit but incredibly brief and written clearly for the ease of use of the particular teacher for whom this document serves. It is not a document that would serve anyone well other than Mrs. Watkins or someone who was incredibly familiar with her curriculum. Overall the curriculum documentation is poor. The articulation of the objective in the planning document is brief but probably serves its user extremely well.

Because the curriculum document obtained is so brief there are no examples of instructional objectives. It can be inferred from the document provided by Mrs. Watkins that students are encountering the first three levels of Bloom. They are acquiring knowledge and in their reading they are focusing on comprehension and there is some evidence from interviews with the teachers and examination of the curriculum document that students are applying the skills. There is no evidence that students are able to use these skills in writing and speaking which are also part of the English Language Arts performance indicators. These latter performance indicators are important since they are areas that Franklinville has not scored well when consulting the gap analysis documents. (Dataview, 2010)

Evidence obtained from the gap analysis of Franklinville ELA scores reveals that Franklinville students do not possess the necessary skills to be successful across the curriculum. Gains in fifth grade though impressive do not carry over into sixth grade nor are they particularly evident in third and fourth grade. Programmatic changes are necessary at the pre-kindergarten level and must be sustained throughout the curriculum. Glatthorn says, “while textbooks provide a glimpse of the the basic core of material that may be covered in the curriculum, textbooks in general are not reliable foundations for the curriculum.” (Glatthorn, 2009, p. 57) An over-reliance on basal readers and software programs like Waterford reading must be replaced by authentic texts sometimes called “chapter books”, with students learning how to read both fluently and with comprehension.

New York State provides dozens of examples of books (Common Core Standards for English Language Arts, 2010, p. 32-33) that are appropriate for students to use integral to the Common Core that will help students to achieve the standards. The teachers use “chapter books” to provide the students with many extra practice and experience. Two of the trade book titles are “On My Honor” (On My Honor, 1986) and “Danger in the Desert,” (Danger in the desert, 1997).

It is evident from examining the gap analysis that Franklinville students continue to struggle with evaluating information, ideas, themes, and opinions in their reading. They continue to need additional support for note taking and in addition to those deficiencies they have difficulty distinguishing fact from opinion, and reading to collect and interpret facts from multiple sources. The teachers adjusted their teaching in line with the performance indicators however a new group of students brings with it new challenges and invites the question about how well students in the grades three and four are being prepared. (Dataview, 2010)

A locally developed curriculum supported by professional development which will include Silver and Strong's "Thoughtful Classroom," (Silver Strong & Associates, 2008). O'Shea says, "The faculty of the school will persist with novel approaches to teaching if the principal expects to see new behaviors learned in professional development." (O'Shea, 2005, p. 136) One of the salient aspects of the Thoughtful Classroom is the emphasis on notemaking and comparing. Compare and contrast is a performance standard in the K-5 Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts. Superintendent Spasiano also shared that she is moving to implement "Literature Circles" (Literature Circles, 2010) which she hopes will move Franklinville's elementary reading curriculum to higher achievement levels which are expected this year.

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