

TEACHER-DRIVEN CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Do your teachers have content knowledge and an entrepreneurial spirit? Use them!

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The drive toward standardized curriculum and testing has diminished the opportunity to innovate in the classroom—a trend that has driven veteran teachers from the field and caused new graduates to pursue other options.

Ever since the Harlem Academy was founded in 2004, retaining and empowering great teachers, and building a program that meets students' specific needs, have been critical, intertwined goals. We have learned many lessons about creating space for teacher-driven curriculum development, supporting teachers throughout the process, and navigating some of the inherent challenges.



SNAPSHOT FROM HARLEM ACADEMY: U.S. HISTORY (GRADES 7–8)

Sean Robertson's two-year program uses primary documents to investigate six turning points that transformed our nation's development. The curriculum challenges students to think like historians—unraveling different perspectives and developing their own analysis of events. Extensive time is set aside for recent events, giving students the context to understand the world around them. Robertson has been teaching at Harlem Academy for 11 years; in 2016, he was recognized as the New York State History Teacher of the Year by the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.

and skill development, taking notes to drive the next round of revisions. Beyond teachers' own impressions, they gain feedback from biweekly mini-observations, internal pre- and postassessments, standardized test results, and student input.

Program development continues each summer, with teachers revising older field guides and developing the next one. It therefore generally takes four years to develop, pilot, and revise three units. (At that point, the first unit has had three rounds of revisions, while the third unit has had one round.) This process continues indefinitely, but the magnitude of change diminishes with each passing year as the curriculum becomes more stable.

Common Challenges

Prepare for blood, sweat, and tears. Before you get too excited about the prospect of innovation and building new programs—a warning: Don't reinvent the wheel. If an existing

program meets our instructional needs, it is our preference to use it. It is easy to underestimate the burden of starting with nothing and the effort it takes to move past the mediocrity of a published program. It is often better to put in the effort to strengthen an existing, lackluster program than it is to start from scratch. In-house curriculum development is an arduous process that takes planning, testing, reflection, and constant improvement. It is messy, and sometimes you have to pull the plug, even after a lot of work.

Evaluate fair funding. Most of the substantive work for curriculum development happens over the summer. Teachers are often highly motivated to do this work, but schools need to ethically navigate the issue of fair compensation. In addition, there can be unexpected expenses. For instance, the cost of small-batch printing of textbooks developed in-house offsets cost savings anticipated from not buying textbooks from an outside company. That said,

there are many funders who are interested in taking on one-time projects with concrete outcomes, and a creative and industrious administrative team can often find grants for this kind of work. Foundation Directory Online (<https://fconline.foundationcenter.org>) is a good place to start your search.

Institutionalize new curricula. From the outset, it is important to think about how the curriculum can exist without the teacher creator. For instance, when a teacher develops his or her own curriculum, some materials may be on their computer at home. Protocols with partnering organizations may be informal. There is no teacher's guide because of the heavy burden to create student materials. All of this is normal and understandable, but it represents a risk if a plan is not in place.

Cultivate a Culture Celebrating Improvement

This work begins with establishing a culture that encourages new ideas,

Define Your School's Instructional Needs

To determine whether your existing curricular options fall short of your school's goals, be sure the team has a shared understanding of what matters for your school and student body. Whenever we are considering an existing or new curricular opportunity at Harlem Academy, we evaluate it on the following criteria:

- **Depth:** Is the content sufficiently focused and limited so that there is time to achieve the depth needed to grapple with the larger questions of each discipline?
- **Practice:** Is the curriculum designed with enough opportunities for both structured and applied practice to ensure the skills become habits?
- **Challenge:** Does the curriculum offer real challenges that can be overcome through sustained effort?
- **Engagement:** Does the curriculum spark intellectual curiosity by incorporating experiential opportunities, real-life connections, and culturally and developmentally relevant content?

When we recognize that one or more of these components is missing from existing curricular options, we begin to consider what we might do to fill the gap.

Retaining and empowering great teachers, and building a program that meets students' specific needs, have been critical, intertwined goals.

Ensure Teacher Readiness

In selecting teachers for this work, consider individuals with these four key attributes:

- A broad and deep content knowledge
- An understanding of schoolwide and subject-specific instructional goals
- A demonstrated expertise in lesson prep and delivery
- An entrepreneurial spirit (often the teacher will have piloted some smaller innovations that provide a glimpse of a teacher's process and the program's likelihood of success)

A Multiyear Process

Start small. The decision to develop a curriculum generally starts with the seed of an idea. History instructor Sean Robertson's two-year history program at Harlem Academy, for example, started by him supplementing the textbook with primary documents. That led to a recognition that there was not enough time to do the important historical thinking needed to unravel these documents while racing to cover all of U.S. history. It is generally through this kind of

organic process that we recognize an opportunity to build a program in-house. (See sidebar, page 52).

Make a plan and begin development. Once we recognize that a smaller, less-formal innovation is working and filling a critical gap, we begin the curriculum planning process. This includes defining unit goals, scope and sequence, assessment plans, partnership opportunities, and timelines for deliverables and pilot implementation.

Most of the actual curriculum development work takes place over the summer. During that time, the teacher develops assessments based on unit goals, establishes key partnerships, and creates lesson plans and student materials. We generally bind materials for each unit into small books, called "field guides," which serve as student textbooks and workbooks. As a guideline, it is reasonable to build out a single unit each summer.

Begin the "pilot, revision, and development" cycle. As teachers begin to implement the new curriculum, they collaborate closely with supervisors as they evaluate what is working and what needs revision. They consider pacing, comprehension,

THE MULTIYEAR PROCESS OF CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT



Unit 1: Write (summer), Pilot (fall), Evaluate/Revise (winter/spring)

Unit 1: Implement (fall), Evaluate/Revise (winter/spring)

Unit 2: Write (summer), Pilot (winter), Evaluate/Revise (spring/summer)

Unit 1: Implement (fall), Revise (winter/spring)

Unit 2: Implement Unit 2 (winter), Evaluate/Revise (spring/summer)

Unit 3: Write (summer), Pilot (spring), Evaluate/Revise (summer)

Unit 1: Implement (fall), Evaluate/Revise (winter/spring)

Unit 2: Implement (winter), Evaluate/Revise (spring/summer)

Unit 3: Implement (spring), Evaluate/Revise (summer)



honest evaluation, and fearless experimentation. These core values set the stage for teachers to innovate by elevating program improvement as a central goal and making it safe not only to suggest solutions, but also to implement them.

Bury the hierarchy. Recognize that no one person or position has a monopoly on wisdom. Push serious questions to everyone and encourage solutions coming from anywhere. Support the growth of the organization by cultivating demonstrated talents as they emerge from each team member.

Relish accountability. Set measurable goals, document practices, assess

progress, and learn from mistakes as an organization and as individuals. With each task, each day, each month, and each year, ask what went well and what could be improved. For instance: How can I grow from my own reflection and analysis of the results? How can I learn from the people around me—students, families, supervisors, and coaches? All are accountable for strengthening the school, sharing wisdom, giving feedback, and communicating ideas with one another.

Experiment fearlessly. There is always opportunity for improvement when we are willing to make space for innovative thinking. When testing a new idea, follow an intentional process of

planning, implementation, assessment, and revision to maximize gain and minimize risk. 📌

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