

A roadmap for renewal

Revisiting the
curriculum review
process in Ontario

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The Ontario Teachers' Federation is the advocate for the teaching profession in Ontario and for its 160,000 teachers. OTF members are full-time, part-time and occasional teachers in all the publicly funded schools in the province—elementary, secondary, public, Catholic and francophone.

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Introduction and context

As one of its preliminary phases of its current Curriculum Review Process, on August 26, 2020, the Ministry of Education solicited, from a range of stakeholders, feedback and input on the current iterations of the Science and Technology (Grades 1-8), Science (Grades 9-12), Technological Studies (Grades 9-12) and Computer Studies (Grades 10-12) curricula. The Ministry invited feedback in the form of seven guiding questions in English and eight in French and offered two submission mechanisms: responses directly via an online form for each of the four curricula under review or a separate response.

Although the initial deadline for submissions of September 18, 2020 was extended by 15 working days, there was insufficient time to provide a comprehensive review of all four curricula.

Instead, OTF and its four Affiliates chose to harness this opportunity to focus on providing constructive feedback about the Ministry of Education's curriculum review process itself in recognition of the fact that the current model does not meet the needs of teachers and educators in Ontario. Ultimately, the review process will not result in a revised curriculum addressing the needs of the students in Ontario. In addition, this submission offers some overarching go-forward suggestions for curriculum content development. The submission concludes with a series of 10 recommendations which we encourage the Ministry of Education to heed and adopt.

Review and renewal

OTF, its four Affiliates, teachers and educators in Ontario's publicly funded education system remain committed to a trajectory of continuous improvement focused on ensuring that students receive age and stage appropriate opportunities to gain knowledge and skills which they can transfer to tackling authentic, real-world tasks, issues and problems.

A review and refresh of curricula at periodic and regular intervals form part of an appropriate approach that ensures teachers and students in Ontario's publicly funded schools have access to the most current research-based and experience-informed content and promising practices in each discipline or subject area.



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Recommendation

1. Respect teachers' rights to exercise their professional judgment about decisions related to content and pedagogy.

Consultation and collaboration

Genuine and meaningful collaboration and consultation are predicated on trust and respect; words and deeds must align. It is clear that the status quo with regard to the protocols and procedures currently in use is not working. Pursuing a checklist approach to collaboration does not serve the best interests of teachers and their students. Instead, it is a formula for manufactured dysfunction. Scheduling meetings with stakeholders does not implicitly make them collaborative opportunities; the latter require a dialogic mindset supported by purposeful planning. To that end, we call on the Ministry to adopt a listening stance that seeks to find consensus-based solutions and common ground. It is not enough for the Ministry to enthusiastically embrace counsel that aligns with its own directions on one hand and, on the other, to consistently and blatantly ignore suggestions that challenge its approach.

Past practice for staff from OTF and its Affiliates included being invited, alongside their members, to engage in a collaborative curriculum review process from early phases to final launch. This has afforded critical opportunities and time to draw upon, complement, echo, amplify and share their members' experiences and perspectives in order to effect the most meaningful and beneficial changes. Furthermore, we have both flagged barriers to effective implementation and offered feasible solutions. After all, it is teachers and educators who



bear the ultimate responsibility for animating the curriculum for and with their students and who also have the most direct experience in doing so.

As one key first step, the Ministry should conduct a critical analysis of its curriculum review process, part of which involves soliciting input on ways to improve the transparency and effectiveness of its current process. A re-examination should culminate in the public disclosure of a collaborative model



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which clearly identifies the stages—from beginning to end—of the process and makes explicit the junctures for authentic consultation.

Recommendations

2. Conduct a feedback-informed critical analysis of its current curriculum review process culminating in a new, authentically collaborative model.
3. Schedule regular and ongoing opportunities to engage in authentic consultation at key crossroads in the curriculum review process.



Weighting submissions

Preliminary phases of the process such as benchmarking, e.g. research literature review and jurisdictional scan, are valuable undertakings and represent one reference point for supporting decisions about which revisions to undertake.

Consultation with a variety of stakeholders, e.g. academics, parents, students and other organizations, at various junctures can also surface valuable insights. However, the Ministry must accurately report the nature and sources of the feedback it receives. This ensures transparency and accountability.

More importantly, the Ministry should focus more attention on soliciting input about the curriculum from frontline teachers and educators and special consideration must be given to incorporating their expertise and experience. After all, it is they who can illuminate what does and does not work in the

classroom based on their day-to-day interactions with students and professional judgment. In short, their collective feedback should carry more weight.

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Recommendations

4. Accurately disclose the content and sources of feedback and submissions.
5. Accord more weight to submissions and feedback provided by frontline teachers and their respective teacher unions, federations and associations.

Schedules, timelines and deadlines

In the interests of transparency and full disclosure, it is critical that the Ministry publish a schedule of projected refresh or renewal dates for each curriculum. Only in this way can the Ministry provide sufficient lead-time for all stakeholders to solicit preliminary input and feedback to inform their respective recommendations for the next iteration of each curriculum.

In addition, more consideration must be paid to ensuring that, as the review process unfolds, timelines and deadlines for frontline teachers and educators are sensitive to their workloads and responsibilities. The current accelerated process and compressed timelines fail to provide sufficient time to provide thoughtful, specific, robust and comprehensive feedback that the curriculum review process both merits and requires.

Thus, while it is important for curriculum not to languish in the review process, it is equally critical not to sacrifice an effective process in the interests of expediency. Fast-tracking the review process, especially the final phases of release and mandatory implementation, always represents an easily avoidable misstep.



In the current context, the Ministry must account for the additional responsibilities and burdens with which teachers and educators continue to grapple as a consequence of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and plan accordingly.

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Recommendations

6. Publish a timetable and schedule that establish future target dates for the beginning of a review process for each curriculum.
7. Establish realistic timelines for input and feedback that acknowledge and are sensitive to the time constraints and workloads of frontline teachers and educators.



Release and implementation

Like the broader curriculum review process itself, the implementation phase is a marathon, not a sprint; it is a journey, not an event. Successful implementation of any revised or new curriculum relies heavily on the intersection of many factors and variables. Release and implementation planning must be a forethought, not an afterthought, in the curriculum review process. Policy announcements and the release of policy documents do not translate automatically or magically into practice.

At the time this response was submitted, Ontario remained in the grips of the COVID-19 pandemic. The release and implementation phases of the mathematics curriculum (Grades 1-8) in late spring 2020 offer an illuminating and recent real-world example of the real challenges OTF and its Affiliates predicted in the previous spring 2020 submission to the Ministry of Education entitled *A Measured Response to Implementation: Feedback on the Proposed Revised Mathematics Curriculum (Grades 1-8)*. The Ministry's approach to implementation of the revised mathematics curriculum continues to underscore the consequences of inflexible dates and belated planning for mandatory implementation. As



only one example, clarity about assessment, evaluation and reporting, each of which is a driver of program design and delivery, cannot be hastily addressed weeks or months into the school year. Unless matters such as these are addressed, it remains a near certainty that they will be repeated in this new round of curriculum review.

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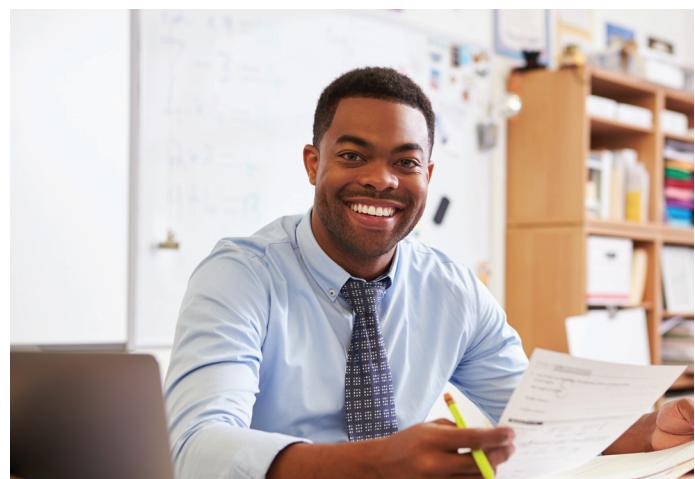
Professional learning and resources

In lieu of a rush to release the revised curricula, followed by hurried mandatory implementation, a two-year implementation period would provide lead-time to develop effective and engaging professional learning opportunities for teachers that capitalize on the expertise of practicing teachers, as well as discipline experts. Single, one-off sessions and passively-designed professional learning are not sufficient to support effective implementation. In contrast, sustained professional learning—in multiple and varied guises—helps equip teachers with the time and tools to

- build their awareness about what is the same and different in the revised curricula,
- acclimatize to revisions in content or approach, including assessment, evaluation and reporting,
- retool and refine their program and practice/pedagogy, and
- operationalize the revised curricula.

Teachers and educators readily engage in their own learning when they have choice and agency—the very same principles they accord their students. As OTF and its Affiliates underscored in our June 2020 submission related to the revised mathematics curriculum, professional learning, that supports successful implementation of revised curricula, occurs when it

- is timely and time-sensitive,
- is teacher-directed/led,
- is geared to fostering student success,
- respects the current and lived realities of teachers and educators,
- is practical and job-embedded/delivered during the instructional day,



- provides clarity about what is new and different in the curriculum,
- allows teachers to build and consolidate new learnings,
- contributes to a repertoire of effective instructional, assessment and evaluation strategies to support differentiation for students,
- leverages teachers' areas of strengths and addresses both their needs and those of their students, and
- fosters opportunities for teachers to collaborate and network with their same-division and cross-divisional colleagues.

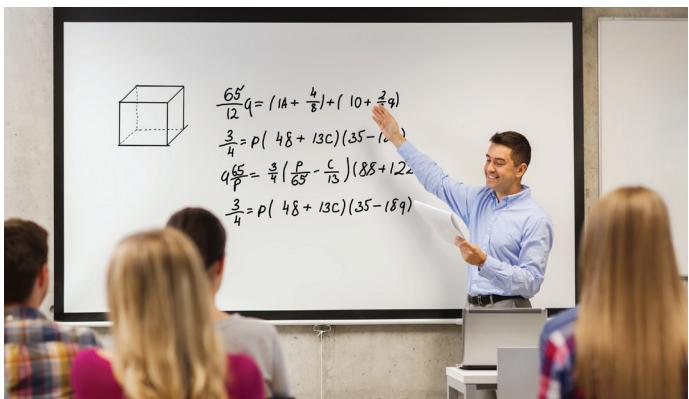
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Recent experience with teacher access to resources and in-service, connected to the revised mathematics curriculum, clearly underscores the fact that the Ministry's promise of timely readiness and availability of 'wrap-around' supports remains elusive. The delivery of these supports clearly reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of how and when teachers and educators adjust their program and pedagogy to align with a revised curriculum. Educators' planning processes begin well in advance of the opening day of a new school year. Just-in-time delivery models do not reflect classroom realities.

The development and deployment of resources and supports cannot reasonably be expected to occur within the all-too-brief interval between release and mandatory implementation. Particularly at the elementary level, teachers and educators are responsible for multiple disciplines and content areas. Therefore, long-range plans, exemplars and sample activities, among others, are particularly important supports that guide and inform their planning. Teachers and educators require timely, not just-in-time, access to an array of professional and classroom-ready resources to ensure successful implementation.



Recommendations

8. Commit to a minimum two-year window for implementation of all revised curricula.
9. Earmark sufficient funding for and provide equitable and timely access to job-embedded, sustained, authentic professional learning opportunities that occur during the instructional day.
10. Earmark sufficient funding for and provide equitable and timely access to professional and classroom-ready resources prior to and during implementation.

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Curricular content and construction

The following are some overarching touchstones for curricular content and design. While these big ideas apply to the curricula currently entering the Ministry's review process, they apply equally to all curricula as they undergo future revision.

Anti-racism

Curricula must be culturally responsive and represent the lived realities and experiences of all learners. It must reflect a deliberate commitment to dismantling systemic structures which perpetuate barriers to students' full participation in their own learning and the achievement of success. To that end, curricula, e.g. expectations, examples, sample tasks, etc., must be filtered through an anti-racist lens that reflects students' own identities and those of others. Special care must also be paid to avoiding superficial or tokenistic mention or exploration of peoples, perspectives and issues. In effect, content and design of curricula must neither disenfranchise nor marginalize any student.

Accessibility, accommodations and differentiation

Universal design for learning—a good for all, but necessary for some' approach—must be evident in all aspects of curricula from development to delivery to evaluation. Curricula must ensure that students have numerous and varied opportunities to explore content and skills in ways that respond to their respective interests, strengths, abilities and learning needs. Curricula must reflect a deliberate commitment to dismantling systemic structures which perpetuate barriers to students' full participation in their own learning and the achievement of success. Finally, curricula must also lend themselves to differentiation of content, process and product (including accommodations and modifications) in ways that meet and



are responsive to all students and especially those with special learning needs.

A 1-12 continuum

Curricula should be mapped to spiral up from Grades 1 to 12 in a developmentally appropriate fashion with each successive grade/division building upon the foundation of the preceding grade/division. The 1-12 continuum chart should be replicated in both elementary and secondary curriculum documents to support intra-divisional or grade program planning as well as encouraging cross-divisional conversation among teachers and educators.

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Enduring understandings and essential questions

Curricular expectations should be clustered into big ideas (enduring understandings) and complementary essential questions that underscore the key learnings and takeaways that students are expected to master or internalize. Further, these big ideas should serve the broader goal of preparing students for an unpredictable future in ways that empower them to contribute meaningfully to society, not simply the narrower context of the workforce.



Authentic applications

Students are most engaged in their learning when they see authentic and relevant connections between what they learn in a classroom and school context and the wider world. Therefore, curricula should continue to afford opportunities for students to communicate their learning and to transfer it to authentic, real-world applications and audiences.



“Doing” disciplines

Curricula should integrate and make explicit connections to the ways in which and means by which discipline experts in the field know and do. In keeping with this goal, curricula should be framed so as to invite a constructivist, student-centred and inquiry-based approach to teaching and learning.

Interconnections and intersections

While curricula should reinforce discipline-specific knowledge and skills, they should also make appropriate links to other disciplines and contexts to better reflect the interconnectedness of learning.



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Conclusion

OTF and its Affiliates believe that a new roadmap for the curriculum review process is an attainable goal. However, it will entail a willingness and commitment on the part of the Ministry to do things differently.

To support teachers and educators in Ontario's publicly funded schools, the Ministry of Education must also acknowledge the unprecedented circumstances in which all Ontarians currently find themselves and develop a curriculum review process that responds accordingly. This will be especially critical since the trajectory of the pandemic remains uncertain and unpredictable.

OTF and its Affiliates continue to commit to building and supporting conditions that foster student success in Science and Technology (Grades 1-8), Science (Grades 9-12), Technological Studies (Grades 9-12) and Computer Studies (Grades 10-12).

Given sufficient time, dedicated resources, and sustained professional learning opportunities, teachers and educators will be set up for success and that will translate into supporting students to successfully adapt to and navigate life in the 21st century and to contribute meaningfully to an ever-evolving world.

Recommendations

We strongly encourage the Ministry of Education to heed the counsel of OTF and its Affiliates and act on the following series of 10 recommendations tied to the curriculum review process

1. Respect teachers' rights to exercise their professional judgment about decisions related to content and pedagogy.
2. Conduct a feedback-informed critical analysis of its current curriculum review process culminating in a new, authentically collaborative model.
3. Schedule regular and ongoing opportunities to engage in authentic consultation at key crossroads in the curriculum review process.
4. Accurately disclose the content and sources of feedback and submissions.
5. Accord more weight to submissions and feedback provided by frontline teachers and their respective teacher unions, federations and associations.
6. Publish a timetable and schedule that establish future target dates for the beginning of a review process for each curriculum.
7. Establish realistic timelines for input and feedback that acknowledge and are sensitive to time constraints and workloads of frontline teachers and educators.
8. Commit to a minimum two-year window for implementation of all revised curricula.
9. Earmark sufficient funding for and provide equitable and timely access to job-embedded, sustained, authentic professional learning opportunities that occur during the instructional day.
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