

'Curriculum' Definition Raises Red Flags

By [Catherine Gewertz](#)

Calls for shared curriculum for the **common standards** have triggered renewed debates about who decides what students learn, and even about varied meanings of the word "curriculum," adding layers of complexity to the job of translating the broad learning goals into classroom teaching.

The most recent calls for common curriculum came from the American Federation of Teachers and the Albert Shanker Institute, a think tank named after the late AFT leader. Many others are working on pieces of that puzzle—an array of instructional resources for states, districts, and teachers. But the calls for "shared" or "common" curricula have sparked particularly heated conversations.

Scholars, bloggers, and activists are exchanging fire about whether shared curriculum means lessons dictated from afar.

They're worrying that the public could lose a voice in shaping what children learn, and asking whether the federal government is overstepping by funding curriculum development.

The common standards, devised by states and content experts under the guidance of governors and state education chiefs, have been adopted by all but seven states.

Some of the debate about common curriculum for the standards is driven, observers say, by the multiple meanings of the word "curriculum."

To some, that term can mean a scripted, day-to-day lesson plan, while to others, it's a lean set of big ideas that can be tackled in many ways. In some states, a textbook becomes the de facto curriculum. In others, academic standards and broad outlines called frameworks, with or without model lesson plans and other guidance for teachers, are rolled together and referred to as "state curriculum." Some school districts purchase off-the-shelf programs they refer to as curricula, and others craft their own.

The multiple meanings of curriculum animate discussions about how to teach the standards. And some observers worry that lack of clarity about the meaning of terms like "curriculum," "frameworks," and "curriculum guidelines" risks muddying a public dialogue about an important issue.

"Curriculum is not always easy to define. But it's crucial that we have clear understandings of what we mean by terms like this," said J. Wesley Null, an associate professor of curriculum and the foundations of education at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. "Otherwise, we have curriculum being implemented that doesn't do what states or districts hope it will do."

Local Control

As controversial as standards can be, curriculum can make people even more nervous because it gets one step closer to the classroom and to defining content, some experts say.

"That's where dicey decisions need to get made. And curriculum, done really well, is going to involve some pedagogical decisions," said Kathleen Porter-Magee, a former curriculum director for a charter school network who now oversees the standards program for the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a Washington think tank.

In calling for "a core curriculum," [the Shanker Institute's manifesto](#), issued March 7, drew criticism from some who saw its proposal as a threat to local control over what is taught. The 200 signatories—leaders in education, business, and government—advocated crafting one or more voluntary, broad outlines of the key knowledge and skills students need, not dictating daily lesson plans or specifying how teachers should teach.

Such distinctions are meaningless, said Neal P. McCluskey, a policy analyst at the Cato Institute in Washington. It's impossible to make a plausible argument that decisions about even "big ideas" in curriculum won't prescribe what happens in classrooms, he said.

"The whole point of having national standards is to drive curriculum," Mr. McCluskey said.

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"When they start talking about curriculum, they're putting meat on the bones of the standards. That gets closer and closer to the students."

Additionally, Mr. McCluskey argued, the common assessments being developed with federal funds by two consortia of states will shape the curriculum. "It's a tricky semantic debate we're having, but those tests will have to test something," he said. "When they test specific readings, we will see that we now have a national curriculum." ("**Tough Work Begins for Race to Top Assessment Winners**," September 14, 2010.)

Macro vs. Micro

Some of the heat in the curriculum debate stems from questions about the degree of granularity at issue. Whether "curriculum" means a high-level outline or whether it means the content of a six-week science lesson affects the conversation. And those meanings aren't always clear.

Michael W. Stetter, who oversees curriculum and instruction for the state of Delaware, said he thinks of curriculum on two levels: the "macro," or the big ideas, which reside in documents such as state standards or frameworks, and the "micro," or what gets taught marking period by marking period. What sets people off, he said, is when talk turns to management of the micro curriculum.

"What rings alarm bells in people's minds is this notion of who would be the august body who decides what is worth teaching and what is not," he said. "It's worse when discussions about curriculum don't make clear what it is we are actually talking about."

Some are frustrated by the black-and-white nature of the debate. Heidi Hayes Jacobs, a Rye, N.Y.-based consultant who trains educators nationwide on curriculum, said it is entirely possible to agree on central ideas for the common standards and leave schools to teach them their own way. It's a crucial distinction, she said, between guidelines and "operational curriculum."

In the medical field, doctors might consult guidelines for the field's expertise in treating appendicitis, but still base each case's course of treatment on the patient's specifics, Ms. Jacobs said.

"What's stirring everything up here is the word 'common,'" she said. "It suggests everything is the same, when people know that curriculum has to be responsive. But we can think of 'common' as more like a town common, a place where we all meet."

Public Input

For some educators, concerns in the shared-curriculum debate center on a shift away from the traditional curriculum-development process, in which states most often craft standards and broad outlines and leave districts to design classroom-level plans.

With public entities making those decisions, community members typically have a chance to provide input as boards or committees are shaping them. Some worry that "shared curricula"—however high level or close to the classroom—could circumvent public access by cutting out the public's role in their creation.

"At what point will all these materials be available for public review? When they're final?" asked Sandra Stotsky, who helped shape Massachusetts' standards and curriculum frameworks when she was a state board member there. "The point of a public, civic process is to allow time for public input, feedback, and revision."

Some privately financed efforts to build instructional resources for the common standards already are doing this in an open, iterative process. Curriculum maps created by the Common Core organization in Washington, for instance, are posted on the group's website and are undergoing constant revision as teachers and others examine and react to them, said President Lynne Munson.

"There is a certain unease about curriculum creation because it connects to content, and there have been various wars in recent decades about reading lists and such," said Ms. Munson. "We are trying to navigate those admittedly difficult waters. Teachers are worried about being scripted, and for good reason. We would be fools to create materials in a process that doesn't draw on the tremendous wisdom of a public-review process."

Leaders of both state assessment consortia—the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium, or SBAC, and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and

Careers, or PARCC—told *Education Week* that their array of instructional resources will be available for review, feedback, and revision while they are being written.

Michael Cohen, the president of Achieve, the Washington-based group formed by governors and business leaders that serves as PARCC's managing partner, noted that the content frameworks, model instructional units, and other products are being created not by private staff members "in a cubbyhole," but by the states themselves. Joe Willhoft, the executive director of the SBAC, said that consortium's exemplar curriculum units, prototype formative assessments, and other tools will undergo a process of creation, use, feedback, and revision.

Federal Meddling?

Some in education policy circles have questioned whether the state assessment consortia's plans to produce instructional resources violate restrictions on federal involvement in curriculum.

While federal grants have often supported curriculum development, sections of federal law bar the government from dictating what is taught. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, for instance, says that federal officials may not "mandate, direct, or control" a state's, district's or school's "specific instructional content, academic achievement standards and assessments, curriculum or program of instruction."

Responding to questions about the use of federal funds for curriculum work, a senior official from the U.S. Department of Education said that the department awarded supplemental Race to the Top assessment money to the state consortia to help them transition to the common standards and assessments.

The official noted that the department did not dictate or control how the states proposed to make that transition, but accepted the consortia's proposals for doing so. Additionally, department officials said, no state is obligated to use the materials the consortia create because the funding is part of a discretionary grant.

Coverage of "deeper learning" that will prepare students with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in a rapidly changing world is supported in part by a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, at www.hewlett.org.