

## Summary of Peer Review – Curriculum Management

*Seattle Public Schools has completed a number of academic and operations **peer reviews**. These reviews, which have been performed by national experts, show us what we are doing well and point out how we can improve.*

*The recommendations from each peer review will inform the district's strategic planning process, so changes and improvements to individual programs will advance our overall vision for academic achievement.*

### The Subject

#### Curriculum Management

One of the most important parts of any school is the **curriculum**. The curriculum, which is different for each grade level and for each subject, outlines what students should know and be able to do and how this is assessed.

For a school district, one of the biggest jobs is managing the curriculum taught in schools. School districts must ensure that every student—at every school—has the same opportunities to learn and achieve.

This peer review studied the way the Seattle Public Schools—as a district with some 100 individual schools—manages and coordinates curriculum to help students learn.

### The Reviewers

The Curriculum Management study was conducted by a team of reviewers from the **International Curriculum Management Audit Center** at Phi Delta Kappa International in Bloomington, Ind. The Center specializes in curriculum policy reviews to help school districts determine if they are meeting their goals. The review team was made up of a broad-based group, all trained in the curriculum audit process, that included superintendents, principals, teachers, college professors and curriculum specialists from more than a dozen states. The review team members published their findings in January 2008.

### Summary

Review team members made recommendations in eight areas they concluded would help SPS improve student performance.

- Develop school board policies to set goals for student achievement at SPS and a direction for curriculum development.
- Use district planning efforts to give staff clear direction and priorities, and require consistent follow-through to promote accountability.

- Update the district’s organizational chart to focus on how curriculum is designed and delivered.
- Develop and implement a comprehensive curriculum management plan with goals for what students will learn in each subject at each grade level.
- Formalize the way student achievement is measured so that SPS has data to use in making decisions.
- Develop and carry out a plan to provide equal access for all students in Seattle to school programs and opportunities.
- Develop and carry out a plan to ensure that the goals of each school in the district are aligned with each other.
- Develop and implement a multi-year plan for merging schools using information about enrollment and population trends.

## Study Methods

A curriculum management audit determines whether a school district has a clear **written curriculum** that specifies what students should learn at each grade level; whether teachers actually use that curriculum in the classroom (the **taught curriculum**); and whether students are tested to determine if they have learned the skills in the curriculum (the **tested curriculum**).

To conduct Seattle’s curriculum management audit, the members of the review team **interviewed** about 180 teachers, principals, district leaders, students, family members and community leaders; **visited** 92 schools, making 1,000 classroom observations; and **reviewed** thousands of curriculum materials and other documents.

## Findings and Recommendations

### **Develop school board policies to set goals for student achievement at SPS and a direction for curriculum development.**

The reviewers noted that school districts must have board-adopted policies in place that clearly state expectations for staff and students. Review team members expressed concern that many of Seattle’s curriculum policies date from the 1980s and 1990s. They recommended that board policies be updated and that, in particular, the board develop policies to require that the curriculum across the district be aligned—not to make the curriculum identical but to ensure that students master the same skills each year.

### **Use district planning efforts to give staff clear direction and priorities and require consistent follow-through to promote accountability.**

The reviewers noted that effective planning is essential to help school districts meet changing student needs. The reviewers praised SPS for the attention staff and board members have given to developing plans for the future. However, they expressed concern that the district may have too many short- and long-term plans, with too many goals to be achieved. They recommended that district leaders coordinate existing plans and set clear priorities.

**Update the district’s organizational chart to focus on how curriculum is designed and delivered.**

The reviewers noted that the way a school district organizes its staff should focus on the design and development of curriculum. In other words, every position in a school district should support what happens in the classroom. The reviewers noted that SPS has had many changes in district leadership. They recommended that the new superintendent study the district’s organizational chart and focus staff efforts on supporting teaching and learning.

**Develop and implement a comprehensive curriculum management plan, with goals for what students will learn in each subject at each grade level.**

The reviewers noted that the curriculum across all schools in a district should be “aligned” so that students at each school learn the same basic skills at each grade level. The reviewers noted that in Seattle, each school develops and plans its own curriculum. They acknowledged the strengths of Seattle’s school-based management—in developing curriculum that is specifically tailored for each school and its students. However, they recommended that the district develop an overall plan to ensure that students learn the same skills at each grade level, no matter what school they attend.

**Formalize the way student achievement is measured so that SPS has data to use in making decisions.**

The reviewers noted that school districts must have comprehensive data on what students are achieving and how they are learning. They praised SPS for the amount of data available, and they noted that students in Seattle have been making strong academic gains in recent years. However, the reviewers expressed concern that information about student performance is not always used to improve the way students are taught. They recommended that SPS develop a district-wide plan for measuring student progress and then use that information to make decisions about the way curriculum is designed and students are taught.

**Develop and carry out a plan to provide equal access for all students in Seattle to school programs and opportunities.**

A key part of a district-wide curriculum management system is to ensure that no matter what school a student attends, that student will have the opportunity to achieve and succeed. The reviewers noted that fairness to all students should

include equal access to challenging course offerings, equal opportunities to qualify for special programs, equal chances to enroll in schools and consistent discipline. They noted that school districts must ensure that achievement among student groups is equal.

The reviewers praised SPS for its numerous goals and strategies for addressing inequality. They noted that progress is being made in some areas. However, they noted that inequalities still remain on the basis of ethnicity, gender and income level. They recommended that SPS continue to work to address these gaps in achievement and opportunity.

**Develop and carry out a plan to ensure that the goals of each school in the district are aligned with each other.**

The reviewers noted that school districts must link their budgets with their goals to ensure that students can learn and achieve. To do this, they must set priorities for how money is spent. Not doing this, the reviewers noted, can mean that district-wide effectiveness is left to chance.

In the case of SPS, the reviewers noted that significant decisions about budgeting were left to the discretion of each school. They recommended that the central office take over more responsibility for budgeting to ensure that budget priorities would reflect the priorities of the district as a whole. They also recommended that the district set long-term budget priorities.

**Develop and implement a multi-year plan for merging schools using information about enrollment and population trends.**

The reviewers noted that SPS has experienced declining enrollment and a shifting of population centers within the school district. As a result of this decline, some school facilities are currently underutilized while others are overcrowded. They recommended that SPS reevaluate its student assignment plan and its use of school buildings to develop a plan that will reflect how the population is changing.

**Next Steps**

The Curriculum Management peer review was carried out as part of the **Seattle Public Schools' strategic planning process**. The strategic plan is being developed to help the school district strengthen academic achievement for all students by allowing us to assess where we are now, develop a list of priorities for improvement and then take action. The strategic plan will be adopted by the school board in June 2008 and will be carried out over the next several years.