

WHAT IS CURRICULUM?

Professionals working in the field of curriculum do not fully agree on a definition of the term. Some may see *curriculum* as subject matter or a series of written documents like books and syllabi. This definition is the general understanding of the public.

Over time, many writers in the field have defined curriculum as a set of school experiences. This definition is larger than simply “subjects,” and includes what school people refer to as extracurricular activities. Lunch, play, sports, and other nonacademic activities qualify as a part of the curriculum.

A third, and more modern, definition of curriculum is a plan tied to goals and related objectives. This definition suggests a process of choosing from among the many possible activities those that are preferred and, thus, value-laden. The curriculum is purposeful and defined. Activities shape student behaviors.

Finally, a fourth definition of curriculum is drawn from outcomes or results. This position sees curriculum leadership as targeting specific knowledge, behavior, and attitudes for students and engineering a school program to achieve those ends. This is a highly active definition that accepts change in schools as a normal variable in planning.

These differences in the definition of curriculum are not idle or superfluous, but are important because they focus the responsibility of curriculum leadership. Such focus can be narrow or broad depending on the worldview of the curriculum leader. I favor a dynamic and adaptive definition of curriculum work such as the following:

The curriculum represents a set of desired goals or values that are activated through a development process and culminate in successful learning experiences for students. (Wiles & Bondi, 2007)

CURRICULUM IS THE ESSENTIAL FUNCTION

Curriculum development is the essential function of school leadership. Whether this role is carried out by a principal, an assistant principal for curriculum, a team leader, a department head, or by leading classroom teachers, the curriculum defines all other roles in a school.

In recent years, classroom teachers have taken on much more responsibility for the development of curriculum at the school level. Operating under labels such as “teacher leaders,” these individuals achieve advanced training and return to their schools to work closely with colleagues. This new pattern works well because the new curriculum leaders are also teachers.

Curriculum work is always value-laden; curriculum work is a matter of choosing from among many possibilities the set of values to be promoted in the