

## How Curriculum Mapping Can Carry Your School into the 21st Century

Andrea Fanjoy

I have seen eyes roll. I have heard that it is not what it was meant to be. Based on the number of people seeking help, I have also seen confusion over how to make it work. If kept true to its original purpose, and led with care, curriculum mapping can transform a school and the experience of all in it. Given the current demands on schools to develop *all* students in ways for which there is little precedent, it offers the cultural change most schools need. If you have experienced mapping and don't believe me, or if you haven't heard of it, I hope you'll read on.

Curriculum mapping started in earnest with the publication of *Mapping the Big Picture* by Heidi Hayes Jacobs. At its best, it brings the lessons of organizational learning to the education sector. It both equips and unleashes teachers to be the most effective they can be. It helps tear down the walls that divide us, harness the experience and knowledge of every teacher for maximum effect, and establish a culture of problem-solving and opportunity-seeking.

Mapping is a teacher-driven process of diarizing, sharing and reviewing all the important elements of every subject, including knowledge, skills, assessments, resources and more. Transparent and impersonal, each subject review involves every faculty member at the school, regardless of the subject they teach. Our school's approach varies only slightly from what Hayes Jacobs described. We started mapping five years ago with the help of a web-based mapping program. All teachers in our 1-8 school spent the first year mapping out the knowledge, skills, assessments, integration, enrichment, teaching methods and resources that defined what they did in their classes. In subsequent years, we added critical and creative thinking, as well as differentiated instruction as categories to be mapped. The curriculum maps were accurate, concise, and easy to read. While this represented only the first of many phases of mapping, benefits already included an emerging common understanding of all the categories to be mapped, the establishment of common vocabulary, and brand new awareness of the breadth of teaching practice in the school.

Our second year began with a review of our language arts curriculum. For phase two, all faculty gathered and were given a hard copy of the printed 1-8 language arts maps. All were given an hour in an early-dismissal day to quietly read and complete three simple tasks. First, we underlined anything we didn't know was happening in the language arts program, in the hopes that this small act might help us remember some of the curriculum and make connections to it in our own classes. Doing so allows all teachers to reinforce what others are doing, and also leverage what students have learned in other classes. Second, we circled any gaps, redundancies

and integration opportunities that seemed evident. Third, we anonymously added any other observations or questions in the margins.

Subsequent phases included reviewing school assessment data, learning about current thinking and best practices, and finally sorting the feedback from phase two with the subject-specific teachers, the language arts teachers in this first case. Feedback that was not helpful was discarded. Feedback that was helpful and easy to implement was added to an “easy resolution” list. Feedback that was either debatable or required more research or discussion was added to the “complex resolution” list. Teachers voted to determine the priority of each of these more complex items, and then the path was clear in terms of what needed to be addressed. Each year brings new subjects for review. The process begins again, and the culture it establishes is reinforced.

Here is what we have seen as a result of mapping and the collective effort of the school faculty:

1. **Whole-school thinking and learning**, in which all teachers see themselves as part of an interconnected system, and that aligning this system is in everyone’s best interest. Reflection on one’s subject is now reflection on the subject from grades 1-8. Reflection on assessment, learning skills, teaching methods similarly encompasses all subjects and grades. We are all learning about new ways to teach from each other. Our French teachers have aligned their program with our English teachers. New initiatives to improve student self-discipline, citizenship and leadership were readily adopted throughout the school.
2. **Teacher empowerment**, in which teachers are the primary voices that drive improvement. They know that administrators seek their opinions on everything and will work to address the problems they identify. Because teachers have a strong sense of the whole school curriculum, they have the knowledge needed to talk about and lead the charge on issues both in and beyond their classrooms. Our teachers are initiating improvements beyond what is revealed in mapping. Areas for improvement are brought up daily, not as complaints but out of professional determination that they be addressed by the team.
3. **Professional learning community**, in which teachers, on their own initiative, regularly engage in professional dialogue. Aware of the big picture, and their role in making that picture great, our teachers are inspired to discuss and experiment with all aspects of our curriculum.
4. **Teacher leadership**, in which teachers are confident in their knowledge of the school and so readily assume leadership roles and share expertise in areas of their interest. One teacher felt compelled to lead an effort to create a new student planner, others have taken on action research, multiple others have assumed informal leadership roles in critical thinking, giftedness and other significant dimensions of an excellent school. It is not an exaggeration to say that we have gone from a school with one formal “curriculum leader” to a school of 33 curriculum leaders.

5. **Atmosphere of trust, openness and professional judgment**, in which teachers work collaboratively, supportively, and according to informed reflection. There is no place to hide when all of your colleagues will read and reflect on what you do.

6. **Community satisfaction**, in which talented, determined teachers can work at the peak of their abilities, and parents and students see that high standards and commitment to doing one's best permeate the school. Given the multitude of what happens each day and the many demands of our profession, schools often have a long list of areas worthy of attention. Mapping, and the culture it nurtures, allow faculty to work through that list quickly and effectively.

Of course, success with mapping rests on much more than can be said here. Furthermore, it is no promise of a panacea. I am willing to argue, however, that most schools could benefit from mapping the way that we have, and that these benefits represent a profound change from the way most schools have traditionally worked. In the absence of a compelling alternative, top-down leadership and unaligned effort remain too prevalent in our profession. In that context, too many teachers see their classrooms as their only sphere of influence. They work to solve problems and create opportunities as if they only matter for one course and for one year. Thanks to curriculum mapping, we are uncovering and addressing areas for improvement at a much faster rate than would otherwise be possible, and the impact of improvement is felt across the grades and subjects.

Learning for the 21<sup>st</sup> century has placed demands on teachers for which the current professional culture in too many schools leaves them ill-equipped. Efforts for school improvement that don't put teachers in the drivers' seats are compromised from the start. Curriculum mapping, if done right, lets teachers collectively drive the change by setting them up to do so. Like the flywheel metaphor in Jim Collins' book *From Good to Great*, having all hands work together creates a momentum that is almost unstoppable. Sounds exactly like what we need.