Designing a curriculum for a new school

Case study: Primary
Designing a curriculum for a new school
Tunnelside Primary School

Identification of need

Tunnelside is a community primary school for pupils aged 3–11. It was opened in September 2011, housed in a brand-new building in an area of high deprivation. It was created through the amalgamation of two local schools. The headteacher of one of the two schools was appointed to lead the new school. The headteacher and governing body wanted to design a curriculum that would suit the needs of 21st-century learners, maximise the potential of all, support a range of learning styles and create a positive identity for the new school.

The headteacher also wanted to develop ways of working that would encourage the children’s interests, make them more independent and help them to develop key skills to support them beyond the classroom and into their working lives.

The use of new technologies and outdoor learning spaces are central to the vision of the school, and it is committed to working in partnership with other groups to provide a range of services to meet the needs of the community.

Factors influencing the proposed strategy

A considerable period of time was spent researching and developing ideas during the year before the school opened, to translate a vision of 21st-century learning into a curriculum for the new school. During this development period, the headteacher undertook a wide-ranging review of research and evidence regarding curriculum design and effective teaching and learning. He found this period of reflection invaluable, and was influenced particularly by the work of Abraham Maslow, Howard Gardner, Anthony Gregorc, Rita and Ken Dunn and also by the Big Picture of the Curriculum, produced by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. The headteacher felt that this opportunity to engage in the educational evidence-base was particularly helpful in both defining his vision of a curriculum for 21st-century learners, and planning to transform it into reality.

Leadership challenge and response

There were a number of leadership challenges in opening one new school from two others, in bringing together two groups of staff and pupils and developing a new curriculum. The headteacher wanted to ensure that everyone felt a sense of belonging, and he dedicated much time and effort to ensure that all staff contributed to the vision of the new school before it opened.

An additional challenge for the headteacher was that at the start of the school year there was a considerable difference in the level of staff members’ experience with the various new technologies introduced throughout the school.
Making the change

At an early training session all members of staff contributed their ideas about what the new curriculum should look like. They agreed that they wanted a curriculum with clear overarching aims that would:

- be about achieving the highest standards
- ignite a passion for learning
- encourage problem-solving
- get children working in different ways
- be about taking risks and having fun
- support learning with new technologies
- encourage co-operation and collaboration
- provide opportunities for the children to develop emotionally

With this in mind, the headteacher and the governing body established four key priorities for the new school:

- achieving the highest standards
- delivering 21st-century learning
- bridging gaps
- engaging the whole community (Figure 1)
Figure 1: Tunnelside Primary School’s four key priorities

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<th>1. Achieving the highest standards</th>
<th>2. Delivering 21st-century learning</th>
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<td>This primary school is committed to achieving the highest standards. Expectations for children’s success are high and this extends to children’s behaviour, attendance, attitudes and the support that they receive from both home and school. We ensure, through the curriculum, that children receive the highest level of teaching and that they are motivated to learn. We are an inclusive school that is committed to ensuring success, irrespective of age, gender, ethnicity or physical ability.</td>
<td>We live in the 21st century. Preparing children for their lifelong learning journey is central to teaching and learning, and we aim to support our learners through a creative, flexible and innovative curriculum that encourages both collaborative working and independent thinkers. The use of technology is central to our work to prepare children for the world in which we live.</td>
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<th>3. Bridging gaps</th>
<th>4. Engaging the whole community</th>
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<td>All staff work hard to ensure that the children in their care achieve their full potential and access all areas of the curriculum to be successful learners. Staff are aware of the needs of the children, and provide additional support and intervention activities to ensure that children make the expected progress.</td>
<td>The school supports the work of community groups and understands the way that they can provide extra support for the life of the school and the community that it serves. We actively encourage partnership working that allows children and their families to learn together. Tunnelside is at the heart of the local community, and we are committed to sustaining partnerships within the local community.</td>
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Establishing success criteria

Each priority would be led by a member of the senior leadership team, supported by a governor and key members of staff, and would be at the heart of all school operations. In collaboration with staff, the headteacher also established four clear aims for the curriculum. The curriculum should develop successful learners, confident individuals and responsible citizens, and also engage learners.

Establishing clear aims became the catalyst for a lot of professional debate about what this would look like in practice across the school, and the staff produced a series of outcomes which they listed under each heading.

These priorities and aims are embedded throughout the school and are referenced clearly in the school development plan, website and architecture. They are written across the school entrance and reflected in the names of rooms, such as ‘Aspire’ or ‘Enquire’.

Maintaining momentum

Literacy and numeracy are taught in the mornings, but the headteacher was clear from the outset that he wanted to give pupils a choice about what they were going to learn, where they were going to learn, and how and with whom at each stage as they progress through the school. To achieve this in Key Stage 2, the school has introduced a system of learning menus.

The assistant headteacher grouped together objectives from a number of national curriculum programmes of study under three key areas:

- knowledge and understanding of the world
- creative development
- personal and emotional development

Based on key features of the Early Years Foundation Stage, it was felt that this arrangement would support transition and progression better in planning. Other foundation subjects are taught outside the learning menu.

The teachers devise their own engaging cross-curricular activities to teach the objectives from one particular area over a four-week period. They give their units of work interesting names, such as ‘Marvellous medicines and miracle cures’, or ‘Heroes and villains’, planning carefully to ensure that pupils encounter all national curriculum subject objectives, as well as seeing the important connections between subjects. They present the learning menu that they will be offering to the pupils. The pupils then choose which unit they would like to study with which teacher.

When each child has chosen their learning menu, the teacher is given a list of the children in his or her group, along with pupils’ individual literacy levels, so that the success criteria for each child can be differentiated. Over the course of 12 weeks the pupils cover all the national curriculum objectives, but choose the group and teacher with whom they will learn. Importantly, taking such an approach requires careful tracking of pupils’ experiences and attainment to ensure that all make good progress. Detailed records of each pupil’s learning path are kept to ensure that each child has met all the objectives in every subject over each 12-week cycle.
Evaluating impact

Learner outcomes

At the time of writing, the school has been open only for one year, but end-of-year reactions to the new school and curriculum gauged through questionnaires and interviews with staff, parents and pupils have been very positive.

Teachers are excited about devising the learning menus, and the quality of teachers' planning has improved as they collaborate and compete to design compelling and effective learning. New staff joining the school have been equally enthusiastic about this way of planning and delivering the curriculum.

Pupils and parents speak enthusiastically about the school and learning menus which they say have inspired their children. When interviewed, one group of pupils talked animatedly and articulately about what they had learned and the ways they had learned. They described the learning menus as highlights of the year: memorable learning experiences included volunteer work at an Age UK centre, and tasting dried salt and vinegar cockroaches. They particularly praised the element of choice that they were given, and felt that they learned better this way.

Opportunities offered to young people

Staff note that they have seen improved standards of achievement and an increase in pupils' enjoyment and engagement in learning. Incidents of challenging behaviour, which were very high in the opening term, have reduced dramatically over the course of the year. Attendance has risen to 95 per cent, and the headteacher feels that this is largely due to the curriculum and the impact of the learning menus in particular.

A local authority inspection mid-year highlighted the need to ensure that good-quality writing is an integral part of the learning menu approach; both staff and pupils felt that this was partly due to using books initially without lines. This has been changed and there will be a greater focus on this aspect next year: in each learning menu block pupils will complete a minimum of four pieces of extended and purposeful writing.

Staff have embraced the opportunities offered by new technologies, and peer learning has been much in evidence in achieving this. Registration and cashless catering use fingerprint technology, and all Year 6 pupils use hand-held media players, which they can purchase at the end of Year 6. During a recent ‘E-vent’ the whole school was involved in podcasting, making animations and videos and using programmable floor robots alongside experts from Radio Manchester.

Professional practice

The school has lost four members of staff during the year. Some felt that the new curriculum and ways of working were not for them, and have returned to work with the headteacher of the other amalgamated school.
Lessons for the future

The headteacher, staff and governing body continue to monitor the impact of the school curriculum on pupils’ engagement, attainment and achievement. They review ways of working as the school moves forward.

The headteacher feels that he has learned that key features in delivering change are having a clear vision, knowing how to make people feel included and taking ownership of the changes. It is also important to remember that others will have different perspectives from one’s own, and to consider how to manage this.

Continuous review

Having reviewed the work of the first year, staff have decided to make some changes to the organisation of the learning menus. They will spend a longer period of time on each unit to make sure that learning is deep, and they will begin to integrate mathematics and English where relevant. The assistant headteacher with responsibility for this area of the curriculum will not be based in the classroom in the forthcoming year, and will be readily available to assist new staff in delivering this aspect of the curriculum. In addition, parent consultation evenings will be reorganised to cater for the fact that pupils work with a number of different teachers during the learning menus approach.
Appendix 1: School context

This is a brand-new community primary school which opened in September 2011 for children aged 3–11. It serves a community which scores in the most deprived 1 per cent in the country. There are 480 children in the school, with 2 classes per year group.

The school has a Sure Start children’s centre attached and a language resource hub. This provides specialist provision for statemented children with speech and language disorders, and caters for children from across the local authority. The children who attend have a range of speech and language disorders, including difficulties with expressive, receptive, phonological, semantic and pragmatic language. They receive specialist help with intensive teaching from experienced staff and speech and language therapy while still being part of a mainstream primary school. Additional professional expertise in physiotherapy, occupational therapy and educational welfare is provided by specialist agencies as appropriate.

Appendix 2: School aims

This school aims to have successful learners who:
- are challenged to achieve their best
- are literate and numerate
- are supported in their learning
- work co-operatively as part of a team
- are equipped for 21st-century technologies
- are aware of world news and world history

This school aims to nurture confident individuals who:
- are independent learners
- are problem-solvers
- understand the purpose of learning
- see learning as fun
- have enquiring minds and a thirst for learning
- are self-motivated
- are happy and secure
- are risk-takers
- are clear about their future goals and aspirations
- have their self-esteem, personal, social and emotional needs taken into account
This school aims to develop responsible citizens who:
- understand that knowledge is a lifelong journey
- have a well-developed sense of community responsibility
- have strong self-discipline
- are able to collaborate and work in teams
- care about others

This school aims to:
- engage parents and members of the community so that every child matters
- recognise children with special educational needs and who are gifted and talented
- offer a curriculum that takes account of learning styles
- provide a curriculum that is based on children’s needs and their interests
- promote the principles of the Early Years Foundation Stage throughout the child’s development
- provide a curriculum that is aspirational
- put a focus on early reading
The National College exists to develop and support great leaders of schools and children’s centres – whatever their context or phase.

- Enabling leaders to work together to lead improvement
- Helping to identify and develop the next generation of leaders
- Improving the quality of leadership so that every child has the best opportunity to succeed

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