

Reinventing Curriculum

Mr. Jonathon H Pickelmann, Principal

St. Paul's Lutheran School, Oconomowoc, WI

When I came to St. Paul's Lutheran, Oconomowoc, WI, in 2013, I was met with a school that was doing well in a lot of ways. However, in a lot of other ways, it wasn't quite so well off. There had not been a true Principal here in many years, not to mention the fact that many of those "interim" principals were called upon to do several years' worth of time here, part time that is. There had also been a pastoral shortage for the congregation as a whole. Things were going well, at least that was the look of it all on the surface.

During the first few months at St. Paul's, I sat with my Pastor, who had only been here about a year longer than me. He has an interesting past, sending his children to both LCMS schools where he served, but also homeschooling his children. He told me the story of his oldest daughter, and how her educational career through 8th grade had been a roller coaster ride of success and failure, and how the staff here made sure that it would end here on a high note ready for the leap to high school. As we chatted, it became apparent that the curriculum was a bit of an issue. I had also noted this in conversations with the teachers. There was a written curriculum, however it was "borrowed" from another school and was collecting dust on the office shelf in a binder labeled "accreditation".

Wow, that was eye opening. I had seen this in several other places. There really was no plan for the education of the kids. Each classroom was its own "silo". There were no model student outcomes for each class, let alone for the school. What were we producing? Was what we were producing even close to our mission, vision, and philosophy statements? Were we even able to back up what we were

saying in those statements? This sort of made me happy that I was brand new here, and had not been teaching here for a while... Yet, I know how it is; you teach a certain way for a while, and you become complacent with that's how it is.

Between the conversation with Pastor, and looking at the mission/vision statements, it became clear to me that St. Paul's was not living up to its promises. I, for one, do not want that on my watch. I mean, a Christian school that lies? Really? With me as the head? No way! This had to change.

What makes up the heart of a school? Yes, it is the culture, it is the teachers and staff, it is the families and students. But, what is it that makes us different than our "free" competitors down the street (the public schools)? Yes, we can easily say it is the Christian nature of our programs. That is the easy answer. Yet, are our schools really Christian? I mean, not that long ago, a Michigan school was sued by a teacher for wrongful release due to the Americans with Disabilities Act. This went all the way to the Supreme Court of the United States. What came out of the Hosanna-Tabor case was quite interesting; you must teach Christ in every class, every day, or you will not fall under the ministerial exception to employment law.

The question now becomes, in my most Lutheran way possible, what does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we teach His name and the truths of the Bible in each and every class, each and every day. There, now it's a commandment, right? Everyone will abide by this without a problem. Christ is now in our curriculum each and every day! Fantastic! Cue the balloons from the ceiling, the confetti, the ticker tape, the kazoos, and the party hats- oh yeah, don't forget the adult beverages, I mean, come on, we are in WI! The issue has been solved.

Yet, when I ask the tough question, what is our curriculum, of the teachers, why do I get different answers? Why do I get a blank stare? Why do I get directed to the green binder that they

“think” is in the office on the shelf? Something didn’t quite add up to me yet. It was time to go deeper and to really start making this a priority. The only question is, where do you start?

As any modern person, I started looking on the all-knowing Internet (cue the sarcasm). Well, not just the internet, but the vastly powerful Google! Google led me to one of its most trustworthy resources, Wiki. There, now we have it! We now know what a curriculum is! I mean, everything on the internet has to be true, right? Well, maybe not...

OK, so there are lots of components to a curriculum. You can look at this from all sorts of angles; from the differing forms of curriculum such as the taught, the understood, the invisible, etc.; to the more formal systems including scope, sequence, mapping, etc. What we needed was to be able to recognize the differing forms, as well as coming up with the formal curriculum of the school, with maps as well as vertical and horizontal alignment.

Conceptually, the idea is to develop a curriculum for our Lutheran school that was intrinsically Lutheran (Christian) and met the mandate in our mission of being excellent, and made our school a regional leader in academics. I also needed to make sure that we did all that, without burning out the staff who was already tasked with a lot (Church’s 150th Anniversary, completely self-contained classes, no specials to speak of, few preps, expected church involvement, etc...). We also needed to make sure that we had a technology component wrapped in to the curriculum.

The first step seemed to be pretty easy, at first. We needed to choose a subject to work with as the guinea pig for the process. All of the subjects need to be reworked in regard to the curriculum, but they hadn’t been done since at least the last accreditation, if not before. After looking things over, I decided that Social Studies might be one of the easier subjects to tackle. So we began. The next step that we took was to write out “anecdotal maps” at the end of last school year. So far, so good! Except, the easy part was over, or so I thought.

Part of curriculum is standards. Standards help keep things flowing in the curriculum. In a Christian school, where do we get our standards from? For a number of reasons, we get our standards from the state. Here in WI, the standards are separated in to three grade references – 4th, 8th, 12th – and then they are also split in to 5 categories. The standards in the 5 categories are supposed to be met by the end of the grade references. That is where the guidance ends though. This was at least a good starting point, but it was not enough for me. I went back to the internet, and after searching for a while, I came across several other groups that had standards already developed. This was going to be easier than I thought!

I took all of these standards, and put them in to a spreadsheet. This included all of the State of WI standards, the national standards published by UCLA, and the National Geographic Society standards. This document was large and very cumbersome. It did not bode well for accomplishing the goal of not overloading the staff. We were all getting frustrated. We had spent staff meeting after staff meeting trying to work all of this out. We had discussed standards. We discussed where to go from there. We tried to move forward, but became bogged down. We needed something to get us out of the muck and mire we were trapped in with this curriculum stuff.

At this point, we were just out of the January Van Lunen event. I knew that we were going to have to push through this material, but the time of year and lots of other things were not in our favor. It looked like it this was going to be a lost cause. Luckily, though, I had another conference to go to. I met up with a fellow VL Fellow in Florida a few weeks later, and found out that a mutual colleague had been asking about me as a potential new hire for his school. This led to several phone conversations as well as email conversations about what was happening in his school. Now, at this point this may not seem like too much of a new thing. Yet, I knew this guy. He is a pretty highly respected administrator in LCMS circles. And he was sharing with me how his school was operating, what their curriculum was, and all

sorts of things like this. This was like being asked to take over for your mentor. I was honored, and seized the opportunity to learn as much as possible from him.

How does that fit in to this project? Well, this is how. After spending some time talking with Spencer, I learned about the sequence that his school uses as the basis for their curriculum. What an amazing sequence. And, the best part, it is a free download! The other best part, this is something that gives us vertical as well as horizontal alignment, it gives specific ideas and direction on what needs to be taught in what grades at what time of the year, it really is not that much different than what we currently do, this will most definitely be a differentiator for us as only about 3 other schools in the state of Wisconsin use it, and did I mention that it is a free download.

The Core Knowledge Sequence created by the Core Knowledge Foundation has become our four wheel drive. This has given us a guide and traction to pull us out of the muck and mire of the dreaded curriculum discussion. Once the teachers saw this, there was a look of relief on their faces. They saw that this new program was going to help them, me, the students, and everyone else see that St. Paul's Lutheran School in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin provides an academically rigorous program that is nationally recognized! They also saw that even though there is work to be done, there would not be nearly as much as if we had started completely from scratch.

The Sequence is a PreK-8 Sequence. This is not a curriculum. That comes after you decide to use the Sequence. However, it is also a wonderful cross-curricular program, which involves six subject areas that are important in high quality, liberal arts based, Christian schools; Social Studies, Science, Math, Language Arts, Music, and Visual Arts. All of these subjects are designed to work together in the Sequence, which gives a much deeper meaning to all of the subject areas to the students.

The next steps for us, which will happen the first week of June (and I hope to have some samples and a follow up ready for our July gathering) are to take what we currently do, compare it to

what the Sequence suggests, and determine which version we like better. What makes more sense?

We also need to work through the Sequence and bring in the Christian aspects to each class. We then need to take all of these ideas, and create Curriculum Maps for our school. These Maps then will be in front of the teachers all year long, and they will be able to use them to keep track of their class throughout the year. These maps will be adjustable, and our curriculum will be more unit based than it currently is (now it is more textbook based) to allow for modularity and flexibility in moving things around.

This process has been one of the best that I have ever been a part of. I am very excited to be spending a majority of our after school year meetings working on taking the Sequence and making it into our Curriculum. I know that many of the school families are just as excited as I am, if not more. The teachers are enthused about this too. All along, this was not completely about the end product for me. I was really hoping to design a process for curriculum review that could be used by Lutheran Schools all over the country. While we may not have that part of it all down just yet, we have come a long way already. For example, the larger LCMS School down the road from us, after talking with the principal there, has wanted to work with us in this process. What an honor! The end product will be something that we can be proud of here at St. Paul's, and it will be the basis for this institution, and others, to help build a solid, Christian foundation for their curriculum well in to the future. It will not be completed, then stuck on the shelf to gather dust!