

Developing a Process for Ongoing Curriculum Enhancement at Lutheran High School East

Chris Steinmann

Lutheran High School East

Background:

Founded in 1958, Lutheran High School East is a college preparatory school found in Cleveland Heights, Ohio. Like many denominational schools, it was founded primarily to educate students who belonged to that denomination and worshipped at local churches. Over the past 50 years, the demographics of Cleveland Heights have changed. There are few Lutherans in the area and what was once known as an upper-class suburb on the east side of Cleveland is now an inner-ring suburb of urban Cleveland.

As the local population changed, the student population at Lutheran East declined rapidly. Enrollment reached 350 students in the mid-1960s and then proceeded to drop to a low of 89 students in the early 2000s. Over a period of decades, Lutheran East had failed to adapt to the changing demographics of the area. It could no longer exist as a school for Lutheran students. It needed to become a school that served the students who live in and around its location if it was going to continue to exist.

Beginning in 2010, Lutheran East defined itself as a school that serves students in its local community. In order to serve those students well, Lutheran East needed to develop a new curriculum model. The majority of students entering Lutheran East were not academically prepared for high school. They previously attended local public schools that were underperforming. The new curriculum model was geared toward meeting students at their level and then raising them up so that they will graduate college-ready, despite having entered below their expected grade level.

The new curriculum model introduced in 2010 has been one of the reasons why Lutheran East has seen double-digit percentage increases in its student body each of the last 5 years.

Students are receiving a great education and that word spreads quickly. There was, however, no model for the regular review of those curricula to examine places where it could be enhanced. Fixing that gap was the focus of my project.

Phase One - Standardizing our Curricula:

After discussions with my consultant, Dan Beerens at DB Consulting, the decision was made that the first step in addressing our curricula was to standardize it. We have a number of excellent teachers who developed these new curricula, but no efficient way to pass it on or to make certain that no gaps exist in them because everyone was working off of their own template. That would change as we implemented the use of *Curriculum Trak*, an online curriculum development and mapping tool.

In October, I led a day of professional development focused on how to use the software. Our teachers learned the ins and outs of the software as well as the reasons why we were moving to it. All faculty members were assigned to input their current curricula into *Curriculum Trak* before returning to school following our Christmas break. As a faculty, we approved three goals we wanted to achieve as a result of this process:

- 1) Standardizing our curricula so that they can be easily mapped and updated on a regular basis.
- 2) Benchmarking our curricula to more than just the state/national standards in each subject area, but also to the ACT standards for each area. This would mean some updating of the curricula as it was entered.

3) Integrating a Biblical worldview across our curricula so that the Gospel is the center of all subjects- not just our Theology courses. Practically, this means that all curricula would need to be updated to include methods of grounding each topic in the Gospel.

Phase Two – Mapping Our Curricula

In the late winter of 2014, our teachers finished entering all of our existing curricula into *Curriculum Trak*. We then set out to evaluate the curriculum maps for each department. *Curriculum Trak* has a number of helpful mapping tools which we wanted to take advantage of. It allows you to view your curricula by subject area and then see a list of objectives per class or a list of all the benchmarks that should be covered and how often they are instructed and assessed.

I met with each department, along with our Guidance Director. The purpose of these meetings was to take a thorough look at our curriculum maps. What areas are we hitting well? Are there holes in our curricula? Are we spending too much time hitting some things and not enough in others? Those questions were debated by subject area. We found it especially helpful to look through our data from the past few years of ACT testing and Ohio Graduation Test data while doing this. In the areas where we traditionally see strong scores, we know that we are doing well. In the areas where we see ongoing weaknesses, we knew that our curriculum needed to be changed.

Each department then made a list of recommendations for how the curricula in their department needed to be updated in light of the testing data and the curricula utilized by the rest of the department. Those recommendations would then be folded into curriculum updates to be done over the summer of 2014 in preparation for the 2014-2015 school year. The Head of each Department will oversee those curriculum updates.

Phase Three – Ongoing Evaluation of Curricula

The goal of this project was not to have a “one-time fix” of our curriculum. As a by-product of the process, we have seen significant changes over the course of the year. The goal, however, was and remains larger. We want to avoid the situation that Lutheran East found itself in a decade ago. We want to constantly be evaluating our academic product and tailoring it to our community and the needs of our students. It is not acceptable to look around and realize that you are a school whose setup does not adequately serve the students in the school or the community around the school. In order to avoid that position again down the road, we needed to have a process in place so that our curricula always match who we are and the direction we want to take our students.

In discussions with our faculty, a Curriculum Committee was established. That Committee will be made up of the head of each department, the Guidance Director, and the Principal. That Committee will meet quarterly to discuss the possible addition/subtraction of classes from the course offerings. It will evaluate standardized testing data and make recommendations to each department about trends which should influence curricular updates. Finally, that Committee will oversee updates and changes to curricula that the departments make after their mapping and curricular review meetings that will take place each semester. This process will allow our curricula to stay relevant and challenging to our community.

Challenges Faced:

Much like any project, this project had a fair share of challenges:

- While most of our faculty saw the value in on-going curriculum development, it was not a universal hit among faculty. A few faculty members did not buy-in to the process and that slowed everything down for a few months while they got on board.
- *Curriculum Trak* has a number of great reports that you can run to evaluate your curricula once entered. Some of the reports, however, are cumbersome to read and work through. This was a source of frustration for many teachers.
- The decision that “Biblical Integration” would be part of the template for all unit plans entered into a curriculum was a popular idea at first, but became more of a sticking point as teachers started working. Many teachers realized that while they are Christian and strive to be a Christian leader, they don’t center their specific subjects in the Gospel. That was a valuable wake-up call for a number of faculty members.
- The timing of future Curriculum Committee meetings remains in question. It is ideal to do them towards the end of the year, armed with your data from the past school year. Realistically, at the end of the year many people just want a break and don’t want to consider big changes for the upcoming year. There was an administrative challenge in pushing people to work hard at this as it is in the best interest of students and the school to be prepared for the upcoming year. I foresee this being a challenge each year.

Successes and Impact on the School:

- Lutheran East now has a fully standardized curriculum that is saved electronically and can be utilized by anyone in the school community. If a teacher leaves, their replacement has a curriculum that reflects who we are and can build from it instead of starting from scratch.

- Teachers are more conscious of Biblical integration into their lessons. While this was not the goal of the project, it is a fantastic by-product. It can be tough to center math class on the Gospel – but very rewarding for our students when that goal is accomplished.
- Teachers within departments began to collaborate more. In a small school like ours, I assumed that everyone in a department was on the same page. As they read through the curriculum maps, it became obvious that I was not correct in that belief. The level of collaboration increased as teachers spent time discussing their curricula.
- While major changes to our curriculum were not made in the first year, substantive changes did occur as teachers saw gaps and weaknesses. Our students will be blessed by these changes in upcoming years. More importantly, we now have a process to continually identify gaps as they arise so that our academic product matches our community year-in and year-out.