

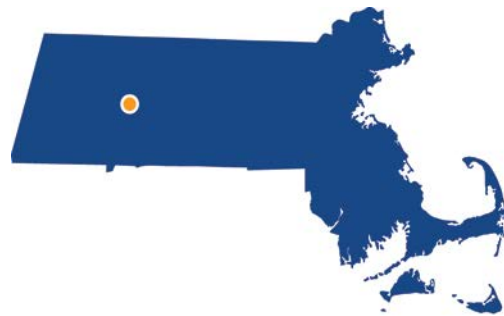
# Moving to a Shared Curriculum

## Teachers Leading the Way in Northampton Public Schools

In the 2012-13 school year, as we began to get deeper into supporting our teachers with the transition to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks (including the Common Core State Standards), we identified a challenge: there was such a high degree of differentiation in instruction and materials from classroom to classroom that it was hard for us to figure out how to best support teachers. Our district really values teachers' independence, but we realized that we also needed to bring some alignment back in to our district. So we began a district-wide push to get all teachers trained on the Understanding by Design (UBD) framework with the ultimate goal of capitalizing on the expertise of our many talented teachers by having them write and share UBD units with their colleagues.

After an initial training day and a few months of time, we realized that our vision wasn't going to work. For one, we realized that we didn't have enough time or capacity to fully support all teachers in curriculum writing. We realized just how large of a task it is to build truly high quality units, lessons, and assessments – this simply could not be done during PD days. We also realized that some teachers were more enthusiastic about this work than others. We realized that curriculum writing is a skill that not every teacher wanted to take on at this scale – and we were OK with that.

Our new challenge was that we still felt it was important to improve everyone's capacity to plan effectively and gain the bird's eye view that curriculum writing offers, but we had to be realistic about our limitations of time and capacity. We wondered: **How can we offer more support to a smaller group of teachers and still work towards our goal of a more aligned curriculum for every grade and subject?**



### Leaning on Department Chairs

Our first idea was to lean on the teacher leadership structure we already had in place. At the time, that was Department Chairs, who were accustomed to helping manage the change process for their departments. They were charged with leading teams and supporting their peer teachers and therefore seemed to be the most natural go-to when thinking about how to support teachers in writing curriculum.

However, we realized soon that this was also not the right plan. Not all Department Chairs had a strong passion for this; meanwhile, teachers who were enthusiastic about it were not all Department Chairs. It quickly became clear that we would need to design an entirely new role for teachers who wanted to take on curricular leadership.

### **Creating a New Role**

We began by speaking with some of the teachers who were already engaged in curriculum building. We got input from the teachers on this new role, including what it would entail, what it should be called, and how teachers would be compensated for their time. One thing the teachers were very clear on is that it would be extremely important for the curriculum to be very high quality. And, in order for the teachers to achieve the quality they had in mind, they would need a significant amount of time to devote to the work. This led us to decide that though the project ahead of us was enormous – we were essentially starting from scratch with no up-to-date shared curriculum across the district – we would start slow, with each teacher writing two units over the course of the year.

We brought the following proposal to the Superintendent for approval in January:

- The new role would be called Curriculum Teacher Leader, or CTL.
- Teachers would apply via an online application and be interviewed.
- CTLs would receive a stipend of \$25/hour for 25 hours worth of professional learning.
- CTLs would be trained on the UBD model and would be paired with another CTL who could provide ongoing peer support during the writing and evaluation phase.

The proposal was approved and we drew up a formal job description and application, which we posted online.

### **Launching the Work**

Our goal was to get 25 CTLs up and running in year one. Partly, that was what we could afford, but also we wanted to make sure that we could adequately support CTLs, as well. After 3 weeks, we received 18 applications, all of whom we accepted. We decided to move forward with the idea that we could accept new applications as the year progressed.

The CTLs received a daylong UBD training to kick off their work, monthly professional development on UBD skills, and then applied the concepts to their unit writing. CTLs were also paired with someone teaching similar content. Some pairs spent the next 2-3 months working mostly independently on their units with monthly check-ins. Other pairs worked more closely together the whole time. Either way, we all agreed that the pairing was an important support and quality checkpoint.

### **Letting Go is Hard**

While the CTLs were busy at work, we began to pick up on some concerns from other teachers. Specifically, they expressed worry and even sadness about letting go of the curriculum they had each built over time. For many teachers, their curriculum was near and dear to their hearts, including favorite books, materials, and activities they had honed over the years.

We had been so focused on moving forward, that we hadn't anticipated or planned for the strong emotional attachment that many teachers were feeling. In retrospect, we should have seen this coming. However, we were early enough into the planning that we were able to put some supports into place to help teachers make the transition.

Most importantly, we continued to focus on quality of the units. We knew that if teachers saw an extremely high quality of work, they would feel better about making the switch. We did this by ensuring that CTLs were strong teachers who were respected by their peers and that the CTLs had adequate time, professional development, and peer support to do their work.

We also devised a multi-tiered system for vetting the new units. First, CTLs got feedback from their partners and other CTLs. Next, they could post drafts of their units online via the Atlas Rubicon software and ask questions of their peers, who could review the units and give suggestions for

additional revisions or ideas for materials that could be incorporated. Finally, the entire staff, department-by-department would review a unit in its entirety during a daylong professional development session. We hoped that these multiple opportunities for input would increase buy-in and ease the anxiety over leaving a familiar curriculum behind.

Also, we made a point of engaging directly with teachers who were feeling unsure. We had a lot of personal conversations and gave them the space to air their concerns. We usually concluded these conversations with the understanding that allowing our own homegrown teacher leaders to take on the challenge of building curriculum was better than buying a curriculum off the shelf or adopting units that other people had made. Our Director of Curriculum and Instruction was the point person for this so that it did not fall on the CTLs themselves to defend their work. It was important that we, as a district, were clear on the benefits of moving towards more alignment, which came down to our students and how we could ensure that they were being best supported on their K-12 journey in our district.

### **What's Next**

Now that we have reached the end of our first year (really, less than a full year due to our false start and re-envisioning), we are very pleased with our progress. We have between 50% to 80% of units completed for most middle grades and subjects, as well as some elementary writing units and some high school ELA, social studies, science, and foreign languages. We still have many grades and subjects to work on, but this success feels great to us. Building high quality curriculum is hard work and the learning curve is great, so we feel very good about our progress.

Next, we are planning some additional trainings for our CTLs, including a workshop on general leadership skills, including facilitating meetings, having difficult conversations, motivating people who are reluctant, and maintaining positive

connections. We hope that these skills will help the CTLs support their peers back in their schools with the transition to the new shared curriculum.

We are also planning a district-wide PD day next November, when CTLs will lead their peers in a training on the principles of Understanding by Design. This will help move us towards our goal of helping all teachers become more skilled in unit planning.

Lastly, we are creating a new leadership role – a modified coaching role where teachers meet centrally to plan PD to deliver back to their colleagues the following week in their schools – and we are building an online PD catalog where teachers can access and even request PD from their peers.

We have been thrilled with the work of our CTLs and are more confident than ever in our decision to look to the experts within our district to build an outstanding curriculum for all of our students and teachers.