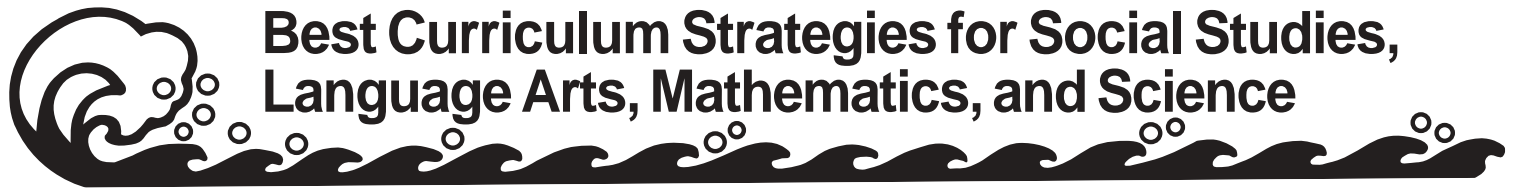


Florida Department of Education
Office of School Improvement
“Ride the Wave” to Success in the Classroom



Strategies for a Better Curriculum

Schools in Florida have been charged with providing a challenging curriculum for all students that is aligned to the Florida Sunshine State Standards and the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Tests. Schools are in search of **best curriculum strategies** to implement. Educational research on curriculum practices that form the criteria for the Blue Ribbon Schools Program includes current thinking about what the core curriculum should be with identified strategies in the areas of social studies, language arts, mathematics, and science. All information presented comes from the U. S. Department of Education’s Blue Ribbon Schools Program working paper, “In Search of The Better School Curriculum,” prepared by Nathalie Gehrke, University of Washington, September, 1997.

Each content area section includes conclusions about current curriculum practices identified through research followed by characteristics of better curriculum practices. It should be noted that studies reported that there are some classrooms where these “Best Strategies” already exist but they are in the minority. Common “Best Curriculum Strategies” in the four content areas include:

- Teaching for thinking, greater access to valued knowledge, and depth over breadth of coverage;
- Integrated curriculum, including both thematic and project-based curriculum;
- Learning activities that are connected to authentic life situations;
- Assessment in the forms of performance assessment, portfolio use, and/or authentic assessment;
- Professional development for teachers supported by resources, especially time.

Language Arts

Research findings of current language arts curriculums show a predominance of a skills and informational based curriculum both at the elementary and secondary levels. Lower ability students are likely to spend more time in reading, receive more workbook and skill-sheet assignments, and receive less writing process instruction. Honors students are more likely to be asked to analyze what they read, while others are more likely to be asked to report or summarize.

Characteristics of A Better Language Arts Curriculum, a curriculum that:

- Is guided by broad statements of the kinds of activities in which students should engage;
- Provides students with integrated language arts experiences;
- Assesses students through portfolios, performances, and exhibitions;
- Uses problem-solving and/or expressive objectives;
- Engages students with cultural knowledge;
- Focuses on activities in which ALL children generate and test hypotheses, reflect on their own learning, are encouraged in their approximations of mature language use, and use that language for meaningful purposes;
- Uses a collaborative style of teaching, that is, one which is more conversational, less authoritarian, takes students’ thinking seriously, and fosters students’ risk-taking; and
- Focuses on children’s oral language development with special attention to the needs of children whose first language is not English.

Language Arts Performance Example

Students are instructed to read a short story and respond with questions regarding their understanding of style and content as they are reading. While the students' read and respond in writing, the teacher meets with individuals and groups of students to discuss and reflect upon inquiry projects they have been working on for several days. Students select a question from those they have been generating and consider methods to answer the question. In the full group a discussion ensues about the art of questioning and the various modes of responding. Students are requested to respond to their question through various media in the coming days.

Science

Research findings for science curriculum show that, while not in all classrooms, instruction focuses primarily on the coverage of factual knowledge rather than conceptual understanding. When science is taught this way, the science curriculum de-emphasizes learning the processes and skills of scientific inquiry. This teaching approach reinforces student conceptions of science as a fixed body of knowledge, rather than as an active process of inquiry into the nature of the physical world.

Characteristics of A Better Science Curriculum, a curriculum that:

- Is taught through a thematic approach to content of science where broad unifying ideas are treated in considerable depth;
- Provides for interdisciplinary thinking that goes beyond the traditional disciplinary boundaries;
- Includes connections between science and technology and the implications of both for human society;
- Emphasizes the inculcation of scientific "habits of mind";
- Provides for the development of skills in scientific inquiry through direct experience with the process of scientific knowing and with a selective focus on fewer topics;
- Includes the linkage of science to other disciplines, particularly mathematics;
- Promotes students' prior knowledge, with careful attention to and respect for students' thinking about science concepts and processes, and the assumption that learning requires that students do, think, and talk about scientific ideas in order to own them and use them;
- Focuses longer and more thoroughly on the fundamental concepts, provides inquiry activities on real situations, and offers plenty of time to debate explanations and then explore policy implications;
- Uses assessment instruments that include hands-on activities (performance tasks) and informal observations rather than separate test situations.

Science Performance Example

An elementary class is studying energy use in the home. Students determine the source of energy and where the energy is transformed. They use journals to record the types of energy their families use daily. Students record how long appliances such as televisions and home computers are left on each day and if lamps are turned off when family members leave the room and how much energy these require. Students analyze their records to determine if their families could be more efficient in their use of energy in the home. (1995, Florida Department of Education)

Social Studies

Research findings for social studies instruction show that the majority of classes are teacher-centered. The typical curriculum pattern (what is taught at each grade level) for both the elementary and secondary levels can be traced back to 1916. These findings conflict with research identifying characteristics of a better curriculum that is inquiry-based and activity oriented.

Characteristics of A Better Social Studies Curriculum, a curriculum that:

- Focuses on what students should know and be able to do;
- Emphasizes themes rather than memorization of facts;
- Recognizes that more is less and in-depth coverage is preferable to surface skimming;
- Draws connections to other strands of the curriculum, especially language arts and mathematics, but also science and technology;
- Demands extensive use or study of new technology;
- Involves service learning activities;
- Presses for strong connections to the science curriculum where there are some natural connections; and
- Includes the study of world languages integrated in the study of other cultures.

Social Studies Performance Example

Third grade students are studying governance and communities, exploring governance patterns and what it means to be a citizen in each community. Students begin with the study of their own community, they conduct similar studies in a teacher identified "sister" community, two early communities in North America, e.g. the Anasazi village and the Jamestown settlement, and a fifth community of their choice. They compare pre-industrial and industrial communities and the ethnic diversity and social relations in these communities as well as the governance.

Mathematics

Research findings for mathematics curriculum indicate, while there are many classrooms with excellent curriculum and instruction, overall it is an underachieving curriculum. There is a steady decrease in the amount of new content over the years up through eighth grade followed by an astounding increase in the amount of new content when students enter the traditional Algebra class. Many teachers rely only on traditional textbook and instructional formats.

Characteristics of A Better Mathematics Curriculum, a curriculum that:

- Emphasizes a broad range to mathematical topics, conceptual understanding of the mathematical ideas underlying operations or algorithms, ability to solve non-routine mathematical problems, and the application of mathematics to all students' lives;
- Establishes classroom environments where it is clear that thinking and problem solving are highly valued, students' ideas about mathematics are respected, and ALL children are challenged;
- Provides activities where students will think, talk, write, and model or draw out mathematical expressions;
- Promotes the use of manipulatives, technology, extended discussions, and group collaborative work;
- Expects that ALL students participate fully, take responsibility for their learning, and reflect on their thinking orally and in writing;
- Focuses on what students can do, not what they can't, by utilizing student portfolios or measuring student gains;
- Increases the amount of instructional time spent on non-algorithmic strands: problem solving, measurement, geometry, algebraic thinking, and data analysis, at the elementary and middle school levels;
- Decreases the amount of student time practicing mechanical skills;
- Increases the opportunities for secondary students to persist in mathematics; and
- Is part of a systemic support system that includes alignment with assessment; parental, community, and media support; and excellent teacher professional development.

Performance Example

Mrs. Cuevas wants her students to understand how algebra, geometry, and computation can be used together to solve problems. She sends her students to the gym in groups of three and four to measure the basketball court. The students measure the floor layout, including all lines, curves, and basket positions. After returning to the classroom, students use algebraic strategies to determine the correct measurements for constructing scaled models of the court. (1995, Florida Department of Education)

In "Best Practice, New Standards for Teaching and Learning in America's Schools" (1998, Daniels, Zemelman, and Hyde) lists **Common Recommendations of National Curriculum Reports**

- ◆ LESS whole-class, teacher-directed instruction (e.g., lecturing)
- ◆ LESS student passivity: sitting, listening, receiving, and absorbing information
- ◆ LESS presentational, one-way transmission of information from teacher to student
- ◆ LESS prizing and rewarding of silence in the classroom
- ◆ LESS classroom time devoted to fill-in-the-blank worksheets, dittos, workbooks, and other "seatwork"
- ◆ LESS student time spent reading textbooks and basal readers
- ◆ LESS attempt by teachers to thinly "cover" large amounts of material in every subject area
- ◆ LESS rote memorization of facts and details
- ◆ LESS emphasis on the competition and grades in school
- ◆ LESS tracking or leveling students into "ability groups"
- ◆ LESS use of pull-out special programs
- ◆ LESS use of and reliance on standardized tests
- ◆ MORE experiential, inductive, hands-on learning
- ◆ MORE active learning in the classroom, with all the attendant noise and movement of students doing, talking, and collaborating
- ◆ MORE diverse roles for teachers, including coaching, demonstrating and modeling
- ◆ MORE emphasis on higher-order thinking; learning a field's key concepts and principles
- ◆ MORE deep study of a smaller number of topics, so that students internalize the field's way of inquiry
- ◆ MORE reading of real texts: whole books, primary sources, and nonfiction materials
- ◆ MORE responsibility transferred to students for their work: goal setting, record keeping, monitoring, sharing, exhibiting, and evaluating
- ◆ MORE choice for students (e.g., choosing their own books, writing topics, team partners, and research projects)
- ◆ MORE enacting and modeling of the principles of democracy in school
- ◆ MORE attention to affective needs and the varying cognitive styles of individual students
- ◆ MORE cooperative, collaborative activity; developing the classroom as an interdependent community
- ◆ MORE heterogeneously grouped classrooms where individual needs are met through inherently individualized activities, not segregation of bodies
- ◆ MORE delivery of special help to students in regular classrooms
- ◆ MORE varied and cooperative roles for teachers, parents, and administrators
- ◆ MORE reliance on teachers' descriptive evaluations of student growth, including observational/anecdotal records, conference notes, and performance assessment rubrics*

Florida Blue Ribbon Schools that have also received School Recognition Awards

School Web Address	City	District	Blue Ribbon	Year(s) Recognized, Category(ies)
Cooper City High School	Cooper City	Broward	2001-2002	2001, Sustained
Cypress Lake Middle	Fort Myers	Lee	2001-2002	1999, 2001, 2002, Sustained
Douglas Anderson School of the Arts	Jacksonville	Duval	2001-2002	2001 & 2002, Sustained
Woodrow Wilson Middle School	Tampa	Hillsborough	1994-1996 2001-2002	1999,2001,2002, Improved, Sustained
Hawks Rise Elementary	Tallahassee	Leon	2000-2001	1998-2001, Sustained & Improved
Hunter's Green Elementary	Tampa	Hillsborough	2000-2001	2000 & 2001, Sustained & Improved
Interlachen Elementary	Interlachen	Putnam	2000-2001	2000, Improved
Kate Sullivan Elementary	Tallahassee	Leon	2000-2001	2000, Improved
Monsignor Edward Pace High School	Miami	Dade	2000-2001	
Sunrise Elementary	Deltona	Volusia	2000-2001	1998 & 1999, Sustained & Improved
Sweetwater Elementary	Port Orange	Volusia	2000-2001	1998-2001, Sustained & Improved
Tampa Palms Elementary	Tampa	Hillsborough	2000-2001	2000 & 2001, Sustained & Improved
Seminole Middle School	Seminole	Pinellas	1999-2000	1998, Sustained & Improved
New Smyrna Beach High School	New Smyrna Beach	Volusia	1999-2000	1998, Improved
C.W. Ruckel Middle School	Niceville	Okaloosa	1999-2000	1998 & 1999, Sustained & Improved
Henry Mitchell Elementary	Tampa	Hillsborough	1998-1999	1998 & 1999, Sustained & Improved
John B. Gorrie Elementary	Tampa	Hillsborough	1998-1999	1998 & 1999, Sustained & Improved
Henry B. Plant High School	Tampa	Hillsborough	1997-1998 1990-1991	1999, Improved
Arvida Middle School	Miami	Dade	1997-1998	1999, Sustained & Improved
Kendale Elementary	Miami	Dade	1996-1997	1999, Sustained
Sunset Elementary School	Miami	Dade	1996-1997	1998, Sustained
Design & Architecture High School	Miami	Dade	1994-1996	1998, Sustained
George Washington Carver Middle	Miami	Dade	1994-1996	1998, Sustained
Landrum Middle School	Ponte Vedra Beach	St. Johns	1994-1996	1998 & 1999, Sustained & Improved
Loggers Run Community Middle	Boca Raton	Palm Beach	1994-1996 1990-1991	1998 & 1999, Sustained & Improved
MAST Academy	Miami	Dade	1994-1996	1998, Sustained
Tequesta Trace Middle School	Ft. Lauderdale	Broward	1994-1996	1998 & 1999, Sustained
Hawkes Bluff Elementary School	Davie	Broward	1993-1994	1998, Sustained & Improved
New World School of the Arts	Miami	Dade	1992-1993	1998, Sustained & Improved
Ramblewood Middle School	Coral Springs	Broward	1992-1993	1999, Improved
Griffin Elementary School	Cooper City	Broward	1991-1992	1998, Sustained & Improved
N. Dade Center for Modern Languages	Miami	Dade	1991-1992	1998 & 1999, Sustained & Improved
Sanibel Elementary School	Sanibel	Lee	1991-1992	1999, Sustained
Westchester Elementary School	Coral Springs	Broward	1991-1992	1998, Sustained & Improved
Coral Springs Middle School	Coral Springs	Broward	1990-1991	1999, Improved
Bay Haven School of Basics Plus	Sarasota	Sarasota	1989-1990	1998 & 1999, Improved
Fairway Elementary School	Miramar	Broward	1989-1990	1998, Improved
Spessard Holland Elementary	Satellite Beach	Brevard	1989-1990	1998, Sustained & Improved
Conway Middle School	Orlando	Orange	1988-1989	1999, Improved
Greenwood Lakes Middle School	Lake Mary	Seminole	1988-1989	1999, Improved
Stanton College Preparatory School	Jacksonville	Duval	1986-1987	1998 & 1999, Sustained
Bayview Elementary School	Fort Lauderdale	Broward	1985-1986	1999, Improved
Caloosa Elementary School	Cape Coral	Lee	1985-1986	1999, Improved
Hendricks Avenue Elementary School	Jacksonville	Duval	1985-1986	1998, Sustained & Improved
Jackson Heights Middle School	Oviedo	Seminole	1985-1986	1999, Improved
John N.C. Stockton School	Jacksonville	Duval	1985-1986	1999, Sustained

Log on to our website at <http://osi.fsu.edu> for links to these schools.

**For more information contact the Florida Department of Education, Office of School Improvement
(850) 487-1023, SC 277-1023 or Curriculum Services (850) 488-1701, SC 278-1701.**

Information can also be obtained at <http://osi.fsu.edu>

**Resources and References are available on our
Web Site <http://osi.fsu.edu> or call (850) 414-9892, SC 994-9892.**

Bibliography

Resources

Florida Blue Ribbon Schools

Web Sites

Florida School Recognition Awardee School Sites

Office of School Improvement Information Wave Series #19

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