

Curriculum Innovation

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Across the world, education systems have been innovating and reforming education for hundreds of years. The approaches have been as different as there are countries in the world. And it seems that many politicians come to power offering the educational reform to end all educational reform. What seems to be consistent is the need to adapt curriculum innovation to local needs and population.

In the US and UK, education reform has paved the way for schools to design their own curricula whilst still receiving government funding. Charter schools, KIPP schools, Free schools, many are springing up in inner city lower socio economic areas, although they are found in different demographical areas too. Opinion is divided as to their potential for raising standards of achievement, but they are, nevertheless part of the choice for many families. Private and independent schools have often been at the forefront of curriculum innovation. They have been largely free of national and local education requirements for public or state schools and have been able to adopt and organize a curriculum that meets the needs of their students.

Given the immense diversity of schools around the world, curriculum framework designs have been labeled in many ways as educators decide what is needed for their population. Approaches such as topic based, standard based, skills based, knowledge based, and competency based and so on, fill the world of education curriculum design.

Core knowledge is a very important aspect of curriculum. Being able to understand information will depend on our core knowledge. For example, I may be an excellent reader, but if I read a passage on baseball, my understanding of what I read would be much less than a proficient American reader. E. D. Hirsch, an American educator and academic, formulated a list of information students need to know at each grade level. This of course, is fine for an American student, but what core knowledge should a child know in an international school such as ours with over 62 nationalities? This example highlights the complexity of curriculum innovation in an international setting and emphasizes the need for cultural knowledge.

Everyone involved in education research and reform agrees that it is crucial for all schools to design and deliver a curriculum that is motivating and raises achievement whilst preparing them for the world around them and beyond. The world around us is changing rapidly and most countries, educational systems and schools are focusing on how education should adapt to the surrounding and future world. Schools cannot afford to stay where they are relying on a model based on the past. They must be forward thinking. Here is what some leading thinkers are saying:

Andy Burnham, the present shadow education secretary in the UK, recently gave a speech in which he talked about the need for schools to focus on the essential skills students need “to navigate the modern world”.

The NAIS (National Association of Independent Schools) produced a document entitled “A Guide to Becoming a School of the Future”. They say, “(w)e believe that everyone has an obligation to examine the research, ask themselves what schools must do to prepare students for the future, and to adapt accordingly in ways that are consistent with the school’s mission”

At St. John’s we believe that our vision “St. John’s students live our values to impact the world” should be the starting point when researching and exploring curriculum changes, along with our mission, which focuses on personal excellence and individual responsibility.

A team of educators in the Middle School has spent the last year, researching, analyzing and redesigning the curriculum framework for grade 6- 8, drawing on the ideas from some of these leading educational thinkers, and the vision and mission of St. John’s. Our students need to be given the best chance to succeed academically and socially whilst understanding and experiencing the key skills, or competencies; they will need as they move through school and beyond. Three main aims emerged: **“Personal excellence, a thirst for knowledge and individual responsibility”**

The skills or competencies, which will be core to the curriculum and woven into their subjects and experiences at school, are:

Self-assessor: *in health, mind, spirituality and organization*

Contributor: *through empathy and understanding; making a difference to the surrounding world*

Creator: *being an innovator, designer and maker of new things*

Communicator: *with compassion through oral, written, visual, musical, non-verbal and dance.*

Collaborator: *team member; leading and negotiating; sharing*

Explorer: *showing curiosity, taking risks and experimenting*

Thinker: *creative, critical, analytical, broad-minded*

Personal excellence requires effort and support from students, teachers and parents. Students need to know what is expected of them, where they need to push themselves and how they can fulfill expectations.

This unique framework will enable students to transition smoothly from the PYP, through to the High School. It is based on standards and competencies that will enable our students to “Navigate the modern world”.

