The six steps of curriculum design™

Designing a curriculum isn’t easy. It is a complicated process that needs to be carefully thought through and involves much strategic decision making. With 10 years’ experience supporting over 2000 primary schools, we have identified six crucial steps of effective curriculum design. Follow these steps to design your curriculum, whether you are starting from scratch or reviewing your existing curriculum.

Step 1: Principles and purpose

Set the intent of your curriculum

Begin by establishing your curriculum principles. Your curriculum principles need to reflect your school’s values, context, pedagogical approaches and needs. In essence, your principles should clarify the vision for your curriculum.

Tip: Discuss and define your curriculum principles, vision and intentions with all stakeholders.

Step 2: Entitlement and enrichment

Develop your pupil entitlement

After clarifying your principles and purpose, you should set out your pupil entitlement (sometimes known as pupil offer). Your pupil entitlement should explain how you intend to broaden your curriculum with educational visits, extracurricular activities and other curriculum enrichment experiences.

Tip: Consider what your pupils will experience as they move through school and map these out for each year group. Link your entitlement to your curriculum principles, where possible.

Step 3: Breadth and balance

Curate the content of your curriculum

You now need to arrange your curriculum content into subject schemes. Begin by looking at the programmes of study and make careful choices about what you will teach, when and why. Decide which concepts and subject aspects your curriculum will cover and how they interconnect with other subjects. You’ll then need to break these down into smaller component parts, which are the knowledge and skills objectives that provide building blocks for learning. These should be carefully sequenced, revisited and built upon through your curriculum. These decisions will eventually form your school’s long-term curriculum plan.

Tip: You should underpin each subject scheme with a sequenced skills and knowledge framework. You can do this by breaking the national curriculum programmes of study into progressive steps that provide subject endpoints. The aim is to help children build a deep body of knowledge that enables them to perform increasingly complex skills.

Step 4: Teaching narrative

Plan the delivery of your curriculum

After creating your long-term curriculum plan, you will need to provide contexts for delivering it. At Cornerstones, we do this using projects. For subjects like history, the national curriculum sets out various contexts that must be covered, such as the ancient Egyptians. However, for subjects like art and design, you can create your own engaging contexts. The teaching narrative within each project or unit should set out how learning will be delivered. It should be sequenced and cohesive, clearly showing the starting point and how the project develops. Crucially, your planning needs to show how the subject knowledge and skills outlined in your long-term plan will be taught, revisited and built upon. This process is very complex and takes time to perfect. However, when completed, it will set out your medium-term plan, which you can elaborate on in short-term plans if required.

Tip: Make the planning process easy so that teachers can create, adapt and share plans with others. Ideally, ensure that you have integrated, quick assessment for learning methods in place to support teachers as they deliver the curriculum.

Step 5: Resources

Source high-quality resources to deliver your curriculum

Your curriculum should not be let down by poor quality or ad-hoc resources. Inadequate resources will not only dilute the power of your curriculum but can also cause confusion and even misinform. Sourcing the best quality resources is vital if you want children’s learning to be factually correct and ambitious. To make your curriculum the best it can be, you must insist on high-quality resources and practical equipment.

Tip: Check that monitoring subject coverage and progression and assessment for learning are live, integral parts of your curriculum.

Step 6: Review and evaluate

Decide what works well and where there is room for improvement

You now have an established curriculum. The next step is to regularly review its impact on teaching and learning, making any adaptations or changes you need to improve it further. At this stage, you may also identify Continuing Professional Development (CPD) needs for your staff. For example, the knowledge of subject leaders might need to improve to make sure that each area of the curriculum is well taught and supported.

Tip: Create or source high-quality resources to support your lessons, rather than the other way around. Keep a schoolwide overview of resources to avoid unnecessary repetition and ensure that content builds in complexity.

Resource selection

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Do you want help to design your curriculum?

Since 2010, we have helped over 2000 schools in England and Wales to design, deliver and manage their curriculums. Contact us on 03333 20 8000 to book a free online meeting with a curriculum adviser.

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