

# Are Schools Trying to Teach Too Much?



—Getty

## As educators get creative to address necessary skills, it's time to reevaluate the curricula

By David J. Ferrero

July 20, 2018

Standards and curricula in America's public schools are long overdue for an overhaul. Educators today face a dizzying array of new learning imperatives for students: engineering and design, computer science and computational thinking, media studies, ethnic and gender studies, and entrepreneurship, to name a few. These mandates come in response to accelerating economic, demographic, and social changes that are said to require students to have new labor-market skills and overall adaptability for what's ahead in the 21st century.





As a former program officer for two education foundations—the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Paul G. Allen Family Foundation—I've seen educators respond to these demands in creative ways. I work to support innovative curricula implementation in hundreds of schools around the country and watch teachers and administrators display impressive ingenuity in their efforts to incorporate 21st-century content into 19th-century course offerings.

Middle school teachers work computational thinking into their language arts courses, and high school teachers transform U.S. literature into race, ethnicity, and gender courses through the themes they emphasize and the texts they select. District officials label high school engineering courses "physics" and allow computer science to count as a foreign-language requisite.

This is all resourceful thinking, but educators can't keep stuffing new content into current curricula willy-nilly without thoughtful deliberation over what knowledge and skills to prioritize, how to organize them, and how legislatures, universities, and employers can validate them. Piecemeal shoehorning of content serves neither the old content nor the new. Despite a growing consensus about the need to include new knowledge, there seems to be little appetite for asking hard questions about what we need to let go of to make more room.

**"Piecemeal shoehorning of content serves neither the old content nor the new."**

In order for teachers to integrate new knowledge and skills thoughtfully and coherently, we have to be rethink and reduce the current courseloads schools require, including changing the names and shapes of the course "containers" themselves. For example, school districts still define a core high school science curriculum as a progression through biology, chemistry, and physics. The Next Generation Science Standards, which were released in 2013, could furnish some guidance for reorganizing the science curriculum by integrating engineering, design, and technology into K-12 science. But we still need to discuss how to integrate the growing salience of computer science, computational thinking, and statistical reasoning.

-  [Printer-Friendly](#)
-  [Email Article](#)
-  [Reprints](#)
-  [Comments](#)

Similarly, in the humanities, we have entire courses dedicated to print fiction and poetry while marginalizing the media students today consume for pleasure and information. Arts programs likewise favor traditional fine and performing arts over digital media and design thinking. And in social studies, U.S. history courses reflect an old, nationalistic mindset at a time when future citizens increasingly need to adopt transnational perspectives.

How might education leaders go about confronting what we might let go of? It won't be easy. Past efforts to reform standards and curricula—from the report of the **"Committee of 10"** and **"Eight Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education"** at the end of the 19th century to the subject-matter standards-setting efforts at the end of the 20th century to the Common Core State Standards—have triggered intense debates among the nation's diverse constituencies. But I believe it's better to face controversy than to continue the accretive overcrowding that characterize curricula today.

How best to organize and manage a hard, honest reconsideration of public school standards and curricula in light of 21st-century needs, values, and aspirations will require debate from education stakeholders on the local, state, and federal levels. Here's an opening suggestion: an expertly facilitated series of deliberations leading to a set of recommendations by an organization like the Convergence Center for Policy Resolution, which specializes in convening people with conflicting views to tackle critical national issues. Its final report would need to outline options for new curricular configurations along with a consideration of the state and federal policies needed to support them. It should also speak to the institutional implications for university admissions offices, teacher-training programs, curriculum and assessment providers, school districts, and others. It would ideally also include an honest estimate of the costs of such a fundamental institutional overhaul.

From there it would be up to political leaders, educators, commercial developers, and the engaged public to determine how or whether to build out the standards, flesh out the frameworks, and implement them. The outcome would no doubt be uneven and imperfect. But the effort, however painful, would force a sorely needed conversation about what knowledge and skills matter most for students in the world we live in today and aspire to tomorrow.

---

*David J. Ferrero is an independent education consultant based in Washington state. He has taught high school humanities and social studies, led the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's national science, technology, engineering, and math initiative, and directed the Allen Distinguished Educators teaching award.*

#### MORE OPINION

Keep up with the latest  
in education opinion.

Follow *Education Week*  
Commentary on Facebook.

[Follow Commentary here.](#)