

Curriculum Leadership Institute E-Hint

BIGGER IS NOT ALWAYS BETTER

Regardless of the curriculum model or processes used, school districts must regularly appoint committees to address particular subjects in the district's curriculum. Most districts have some type of plan outlining which subjects will be addressed when. Contributing to this plan is the decision of just what must be done to "address a particular subject." Some districts have had little or no formal curriculum in the past, and now realize it's better to have a local curriculum that is aligned with state standards, so they're writing original documents. In districts that have had curriculum for a while, some can do simple updates each year, while others find they must address major overhauls. In almost all districts, once the curriculum is approved, assessments must be prepared to align with that curriculum. Regardless of the task to be completed, it is always necessary to appoint a committee to actually get the work done. And often-times, not a lot of forethought is given to who should be on the committee.

Before district leaders can decide who should serve on a Subject Area Committee (SAC), they must know how many committees they will need at any given time. This is determined when creating the "plan" mentioned above. Too often, districts don't look ahead. Instead, they *react* to the latest mandate, quickly appointing whichever and however many committees they think they need to satisfy the latest directive. In the long run, this can short-circuit the entire process. If too many committees are appointed at the same time, small districts run out of personnel, and districts of all sizes run into problems when the new curriculums or assessments need to be *implemented*. Trying to implement too many new things at one time is a recipe for disaster.

Obviously, the number of people appointed to any one SAC is dictated by the size of the district. Large districts can appoint larger committees, because they have more people available. However, *even the largest districts should keep committee size to a manageable number*, keeping in mind that bigger is not always better. Here are the main variables that impact committee size.

- Total number of staff to serve on committees
- Size of meeting room available
- Availability of laptops or computer lab and internet connections
- Availability of substitute teachers for school-year meetings
- Budget

Several problems occur when group sizes go beyond 20 members or even the upper teens. One very important problem has to do with communication and decision making. Writing curriculum or assessments involves making some tough decisions. SAC members must not only express their own opinions, they need to listen with an open

mind to the opinions of their colleagues. As CLI consultants have worked with numerous SACs, we have found that the larger the group, the more likely that sidebar conversations occur. Small groups begin discussing issues or debating points among themselves, and the focus of the large group is temporarily abandoned. While a good leader can get everyone back on track, repeated instances cause valuable time to be lost. Even without sidebar conversations, the larger the group – the longer it will take to work through various issues where everyone’s point of view needs to be heard.

Next, many districts are unable to provide a meeting room large enough to comfortably accommodate groups of 15-20 or more. Committee members need to have worktables where they can spread out their materials, and chairs comfortable enough for a full day of sitting. They need wall space for hanging chart papers, and sometimes they need extra space for technical equipment, such as an overhead or LCD projector. And if you want the committee to be really productive, there needs to be a “food area” stocked with coffee or tea, cold drinks, and snacks. The room selected needs to be available the entire day. Asking the committee to pack up everything and switch places in the middle of the day results in less productivity. So... keeping all these things in mind, finding a suitable room is more feasible when the number of people involved is reasonable.

Related to room size is the need for internet access and computers – especially if the SAC is working on assessments. There are so many good rubrics, maps, pictures and other instruction/assessment tools available online that it’s really a disservice to expect SACs to produce quality products without them.

Another major problem for districts that do curriculum work during the school year is trying to find enough substitute teachers to cover the classes of teachers attending SAC meetings. This can be a real challenge, especially when it comes to higher level courses requiring more specialized credentials. Some districts are getting around this problem by doing the majority of their committee work in the summer, when classes are not in session and subs are not needed. But budget considerations affect both of these options. Money must be allocated for substitute pay or for the even higher pay of out-of-contract time for teachers.

So, taking all these variables into consideration, just how many members should we have on each SAC? Ideally, districts not limited by a small staff should consider appointing *one teacher from every grade level* on the SAC, for a total of 13 members, representing grades K-12. There should be a little bit of flexibility here. If limiting membership to only one per grade level means someone with sincere interest and enthusiasm must be left out (and therefore disappointed), by all means add that person, but try to keep the numbers in the mid-teens.

Smaller districts cannot appoint that many to a SAC without having some teachers serve on multiple committees, which can lead to burnout, or at the very least, less enthusiasm or productivity. These districts should plan to have as many grade levels as possible represented on each SAC, so long as no one has to serve on more than one committee *consecutively*. Thus, districts that have only one or two sections of each elementary grade should alternate grade levels represented, i.e. grades K, 2, & 4 on one SAC and grades 1, 3, and 5 on another.

Large districts that have many different sites need also to keep in mind which buildings are represented on each SAC, and spread out that representation as much as possible. Any building not represented on one SAC must definitely have representatives on the next. And regardless of size of district, when deciding who should be appointed to each committee, it is important to consider teacher strengths and personalities. It is not advisable to put all the “quiet” people on one SAC and all the “very verbal” on another. Likewise, amount of experience of teachers should be considered and spread as evenly as possible among the committees.

The bottom line is, careful thought must be given when appointing people to Subject Area Committees. It is not appropriate simply to accept anyone who volunteers, nor does a “bigger” committee necessarily mean a better one.