



The Saskatchewan Way:

# Professionally Led Curriculum Development

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# Introduction

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“In education, ‘teacher voice’ is set to mute.”<sup>1</sup>

Durkacz, in a recent editorial for the *Hamilton Spectator*, claims that teachers were not included appropriately during Ontario’s complete overhaul of its “JK-12” curriculum. Durkacz offers that teachers were treated as a special interest group, that the new curriculum was not field-tested and that the material was not piloted. This has not, however, always been the case in Ontario.

“There was a time when teacher voice was well represented in the decision-making processes ... [with] teachers involved in curriculum writing teams ... [and in] piloting entire courses or course material ... in order to find any flaws or weaknesses so things could be altered as need be.”<sup>2</sup>

With the current expectation that the “pause” on curriculum development in Saskatchewan will soon be lifted, it is important that actions and advocacy be undertaken to ensure that the experience of Saskatchewan teachers (and the Saskatchewan public education system writ large) does not mirror the experience Durkacz articulated but, instead, is rooted in positive aspects of Saskatchewan’s educational policy history for laying a strong foundation for teaching and learning.

The Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation has consistently communicated clearly that teachers have a duty to students and society to accept the consensus that is reached through appropriate curriculum-development processes and to implement the resulting curricula.” The question becomes, then:

What does an appropriate “made in Saskatchewan” curriculum-development process look like?

Saskatchewan teachers believe that teaching and learning occurs within many different contexts. Teachers share the responsibility with students, parents, communities and partners in education to provide conditions that are necessary and appropriate for teaching and learning to be holistic, equitable and effective.<sup>3</sup>

Based upon these beliefs, STF Policy 2.9 (Teaching and Learning) calls on teachers individually and collectively to advocate for a central role for teachers and the profession (as represented by the Federation) in curriculum development, implementation and renewal in Saskatchewan.

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<sup>1</sup>Durkacz, K. (2016, May 2). In education, ‘teacher voice’ is set to mute. *The Hamilton Spectator*, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation. (2015). *Governance Handbook*, Policy 2.9 (Teaching and Learning). Saskatoon, SK: Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation.

# The Literature

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Despite Saskatchewan teachers' beliefs as expressed in the Federation's policy base, surprisingly little is contained in the literature about professionally led curriculum development. Most of what is found through library database searches is related to lesson planning or other pedagogical concerns of teachers and not the development or redevelopment of system-wide public education curricula.

The research that does exist, however, strongly supports Saskatchewan teachers' beliefs. For example, Huizinga et al. state that:

The success of curriculum reforms largely rests on the shoulders of teachers, since they are the ones who put reform ideas into practice ... [and] successful implementation of reforms depends on teachers' ownership of and their knowledge about reform ideas.<sup>4</sup>

Further, teachers' ownership is fostered by "involving teachers from the early stages of curriculum design."<sup>5</sup>

Fundamentally, therefore, the degree of success of curriculum reform and implementation depends upon the depth and genuineness of the involvement of teachers and, indeed, upon the level of leadership that teachers can assume.

This essential factor for successful curriculum reform is, notably, not only arrived at through theoretical or philosophical determinations. In fact, this "need to involve teachers in curriculum design was realized after failures to implement teacher-proof curricula during curriculum reforms in the 1940-70s."<sup>6</sup>

That era of curriculum reform, which was associated with a widespread program of so-called "scientific management" applied to education more broadly, is a reminder that the idea of curriculum, and the term itself, is contested. As Brennan puts it:

Unfortunately, the version of curriculum that most easily fits with a regulatory, accountability-driven, measurement-focused testing, policy regime is a return to the Tylerian (Tyler, 1949) model of objectives-based curriculum design.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Huizinga, T., Handelzalts, A., Nieveen, N., & Voogt, J. M. (2014). Teacher involvement in curriculum design: Need for support to enhance teachers' design expertise. *Curriculum Studies*, 46(1), p. 33.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, p. 34.

<sup>7</sup>Brennan, M. (2011). National curriculum: A political-educational tangle. *Australian Journal of Education*, 55(3), p. 275.

Brennan further states that:

This linear and predetermined characterization of curriculum does not take into account the need for a futures-orientation, nor provide space for appropriate negotiation of knowledge among teachers and students in an information-rich and changing world. Neither does it allow for an appropriate role for teacher judgment, for student, parent and community input, nor for the identification of other emergent issues.<sup>8</sup>

It is not enough, then, for teachers to be involved (early and often) in curriculum development. Rather, shared understandings among teachers and between teachers and other partners in public education around ideas about what “the curriculum” is, or ought to be, must be generated. These shared understandings don’t come easily.

Curriculum is complicated. At first glance, one might think that curriculum is just a set of documents to be taught to students. However, as you delve deeper and consider everything that is taught and learned in a classroom, curriculum becomes much more involved ... Curriculum is ‘a complicated system of interpretation, interactions, transmissions – planned and unplanned’. Curriculum is complicated – particularly when examined within its relationship with teaching.<sup>9</sup>

For teachers and teacher leaders looking for ideas about the curriculum that are in accordance with the beliefs of the profession in Saskatchewan, Connelly and Clandinin<sup>10</sup> and Walker<sup>11</sup> are two good places to start.

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<sup>8</sup>Brennan, M. (2011). National curriculum: A political-educational tangle. *Australian Journal of Education*, 55(3), p. 275.

<sup>9</sup>Bufalino, B. (Winter, 2013). Curriculum and teacher identity: Tangled vines. *Leadership in Focus*, 30, p. 10.

<sup>10</sup>Connelly, M., & Clandinin, J. (1988). *Teachers as curriculum planners: Narratives of Experience*. New York: Teachers College Press.

<sup>11</sup>Walker, D. (1971, November). A naturalistic model for curriculum development. *The School Review*, 80(1), p. 51-65.

# The Saskatchewan Way

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If we are no longer willing to accept prescribed courses of study as prepared by a remote authority, even though such might be made up by experts in the various disciplines, if we no longer believe in memorization of other person's thoughts and ideals to the point of restating them in examinations, but if we believe that true learning is geared to individual motivation in terms of goals, and that teachers, parents, the community, and the students have a share in planning the tasks of the school, then we must accept the wider definition of curriculum planning as a continuous process within the schools themselves.<sup>12</sup>

Henry Janzen, as illustrated by the above quotation, was a key figure in ushering in a new movement in curriculum development in response to the failed scientific management era. Janzen grew up in rural Saskatchewan and enjoyed a distinguished career in education in Saskatchewan that had far-reaching impacts.

One of the most salient features of the story around Janzen, for the purposes here, is that Saskatchewan – largely through the efforts of Janzen and the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation – engaged in collaborative and co-operative curriculum reform beginning as early as 1944 (i.e., during the 1940-70s period of scientific management-based curriculum reform experienced elsewhere).

In August 1944 the minister [of Education] called on Janzen to become the province's Director of Curriculum ... [largely because] Janzen had headed a committee that the Teacher's [sic] Federation had formed in 1942 when it called together '... a group of about 25 or 30 ... top teachers in the province ...' to discuss problems with the operation of the school system.<sup>13</sup>

Notably:

It soon became evident that, amongst teachers, there was widespread discontent ... The heart of teachers' discontent was the rigid system of testing and the lack of public and professional input into decisions about what should be taught.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Janzen, H. (1970). As cited in Lyons, J. (2006). The Saskatchewan Way: Henry Janzen and Curriculum Reform in Saskatchewan. In B. Noonan, D. Hallman, & M. Scharf (Eds.). *A History of Education in Saskatchewan: Selected Readings*. Regina, Saskatchewan: Canadian Plains Research Centre, p. 51.

<sup>13</sup>Lyons, J. (2006). The Saskatchewan way: Henry Janzen and curriculum reform in Saskatchewan. In B. Noonan, D. Hallman, & M. Scharf (Eds.), *A history of education in Saskatchewan: Selected readings*. p. 53.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

By the end of the year, Janzen had formed a broad-based general advisory committee to assist him with curricular reform. He also:

Continued to attend the Saturday meetings of one STF curriculum committee in Saskatoon. The members kept him in touch with the sentiment in the field, advised him in the formation of the advisory committee, assisted in drawing up departmental examinations, and suggested the formation of subject committees to focus on reforming the curriculum for each subject.<sup>15</sup>

Later, having found these Federation meetings so useful, he expanded the process (and the numbers of involved teachers) through a joint effort with the University of Saskatchewan College of Education that would allow practicing teachers to earn university credit while directly contributing to curriculum development efforts.<sup>16</sup>

Janzen continued the expansion of collaborative approaches to curriculum development through the 1950s and 1960s, which involved broad public consultation across the province. In the mid-1960s, despite a change in government, Janzen not only remained in his position but, instead:

Both he and the structures he had put in place were retained ... [and] the system of cooperation and involvement that Janzen had launched was an established way of functioning in educational circles.<sup>17</sup>

Reflecting the educational theory on curriculum cited in the previous section:

While teacher involvement was intended to assist in making the new curriculum acceptable to students in the schools, it also had another effect. It allowed teachers to see curriculum as something dynamic and relevant, not an immutable imposition from above. The curriculum committees provided teachers with a mechanism to alter the course of studies and gave them some confidence to undertake such changes.<sup>18</sup>

In other words, The Saskatchewan Way, led by Henry Janzen and the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, fostered teacher ownership of the curriculum (broadly understood) and its development processes, which were necessarily inclusive and collaborative in nature.

The Saskatchewan Way was the establishment of processes through which:

Teachers, trustees, administrators, university faculty, departmental officials, and, in some instances, other concerned parties learned to share their views on educational issues and, through the process, reach decisions which met common goals. This legacy of co-operation, unmatched elsewhere in the country, still stands over three decades later.<sup>19</sup>

It is important that now, four decades later, a reinvestment of energy and resources in The Saskatchewan Way of curriculum development be made in order that teaching and learning in Saskatchewan continues to be of a quality unmatched elsewhere.

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<sup>15</sup>Lyons, J. (2006). The Saskatchewan way: Henry Janzen and curriculum reform in Saskatchewan. In B. Noonan, D. Hallman, & M. Scharf (Eds.), *A history of education in Saskatchewan: Selected readings*. p. 54.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid, p. 56.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid, p. 57.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid, p. 58.

# Directions Curriculum Change in the 1980s

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The collaborative approach to curriculum development in Saskatchewan is not simply a relic of history. Saskatchewan was an early leader in this regard, as outlined above, but it carried through to its most recent major global curriculum and educational reform effort: *Directions*.

*Directions* was the final report of the Curriculum and Instruction Review Committee which Saskatchewan Education established in 1981 to rethink public education in order to ensure students were prepared for the 21st century.<sup>20</sup>

Huizinga et al., as previously noted, emphasized that the success of curricular reform depends upon teachers' ownership and deep involvement in the effort. *Directions* is an excellent example.

The impetus for this major curricular reform effort evolved in the late 1970s out of teachers' "general uneasiness that Saskatchewan Education was not doing enough to enhance schooling."<sup>21</sup>

As members of the Core Curriculum Advisory Committee would later claim, the existing policy for curriculum development was unclear, atheoretical, uncoordinated, and difficult to find or read. Change was needed, then, both from a practical perspective of an uncoordinated curriculum and a philosophical perspective of the need to upgrade the provincial education system.<sup>22</sup>

The review was faithful to the processes established by Henry Janzen. The Curriculum and Instruction Review Committee, which conducted the major review and set out the *Directions* that the Core Curriculum Advisory Committee would later carry out, was comprised of 24 members who were both educators and lay people. The Committee was chaired by Karen Rongve and an Executive Assistant with the Federation, Dr. Terry McKague, was seconded to be the project co-ordinator.<sup>23</sup> The Curriculum and Instruction Review Committee held wide public consultations "with thirty-four public meetings in February and March 1983 [and it] received 156 briefs ..."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Robinson, S. (2006). Curriculum change in the 1980s: *Directions* and the core curriculum. In B. Noonan, D. Hallman, & M. Scharf (Eds.), *A history of education in Saskatchewan: Selected readings*. p. 209.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid, pp. 209-210.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid, p. 210.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.



*Directions: The Final Report* was released in February 1984 and contained 16 recommendations with seven major action statements. “In June 1984, the new Minister of Education from the Conservative Party, the Honourable Pat Smith, hosted a symposium in Regina to obtain the reactions of the various educational partners to *Directions* and its sixteen recommendations.”<sup>25</sup> *Directions* was endorsed and the government began implementing its action recommendations. For example, “In response to the recommendation to enhance educational practice, ... three units were established: SELU, ... SPDU, ... and SIDRU.”<sup>26</sup>

The core curriculum review was, according to Robinson, perhaps the most significant recommendation made in *Directions* as it set the policy framework for the revision and development of all provincial curricula (i.e., the “Evergreen” curriculum). The core curriculum review was carried out through the Core Curriculum Policy Advisory Committee, which was established in 1985 after Smith’s Regina symposium, and the change process lasted from 1987 to 1998.<sup>27</sup>

This committee was constituted, for the most part, of those actively involved in education: the Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation, the Saskatchewan Trustees Association, the League of Educational Administrators, teacher education faculties at Regina and Saskatoon, the Official Minority Language Office (OMLO), and representation from the Aboriginal community.<sup>28</sup>

Like with the release of the *Directions* report, the Core Curriculum Advisory Committee subjected its initial recommendations to broad professional and public scrutiny. The Committee heard the feedback and made noticeable changes as a result of the consultation process. For example, English teachers and social studies teachers believed more required credits were necessary than were proposed and argued successfully for these changes to be made.<sup>29</sup>

*Directions* is not without its limitations and shortcomings. After all, much has changed in the world since the mid-1980s and 1990s. It did, however, successfully result in numerous collaboratively arrived-at achievements.

It has provided a rationale for educational change in the province, based on sound, coordinated principles. It has given focus and purpose to curriculum development and inservice work. Evidence exists, too, that ... [it has] given coherence to the profession, providing educators with a common perspective and language to think about and consider educational policies and issues. Most significantly, *Directions* has contributed to Saskatchewan’s continued focus on student-centred education. While politicians and policy makers in many other provinces and countries were centralizing curriculum, with a concurrent stress on content and large-scale testing, Saskatchewan Education retained a policy that has invested in teachers as curriculum developers.<sup>30</sup>

Another indicator of the success of *Directions* and of the success of a collaborative, professionally led approach to curriculum development is highlighted by Robinson:

This education and curriculum review, oddly enough, survived three changes in government, and Saskatchewan has emerged as one of the Canadian prototypes for provincial curriculum reform.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Robinson, S. (2006). Curriculum change in the 1980s: *Directions* and the core curriculum. In B. Noonan, D. Hallman, & M. Scharf (Eds.), *A history of education in Saskatchewan: Selected readings*. p. 211.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid p. 209.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid, p. 212.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid, p. 214.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid, p. 209.

# Conclusion

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Saskatchewan has a long history of collaboration and co-operation among partners in education for curriculum review, revision, planning and implementation. What is relatively unique is that teachers, through their professional organization, have led the way – with the support of governments across the political spectrum since at least the early 1940s.

Both the literature and the practical experiences of leaders within Saskatchewan’s public education system reinforce the importance of teachers being deeply involved at all levels and in all aspects of curricular change if education is to change for the better and, ultimately, if students are to benefit.

Teachers believe that The Saskatchewan Way for curriculum renewal should:

- Be professionally led.
- Demonstrate collaboration and co-operation among educational partners.
- Be inclusive of parents, students, and others within the broader community.
- Be respectful.
- Be principles-based.
- Be informed by appropriate academic and professional literature and best practices.
- Be genuinely committed to listening to, and deliberating on, diverse perspectives.
- Be well-resourced across all facets of curriculum review, revision, planning and implementation.

Saskatchewan teachers, through their professional organization, have the experience, knowledge and capability to lead system-wide curriculum renewal efforts.

Saskatchewan teachers also have the professional desire and commitment to doing so based upon The Saskatchewan Way.





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