

RIGOROUS & RELEVANT CURRICULUM

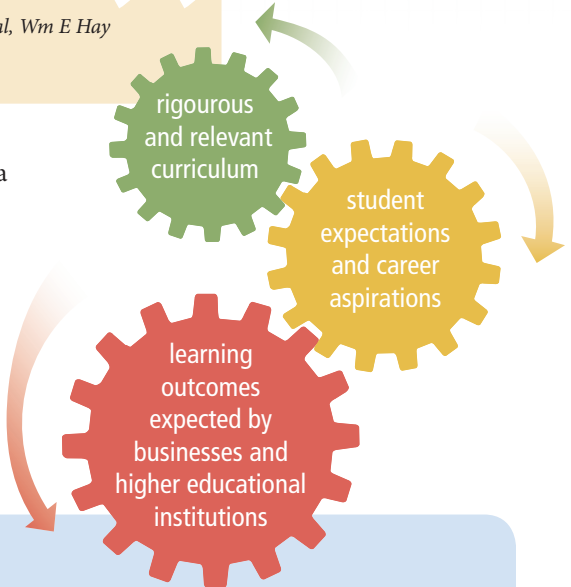
Rigorous and relevant curriculum meets not only the career aspirations for high school students but also the needs of the business community and post-secondary institutions.. Stimulating and inspiring curricula that sets appropriate learning objectives aimed at meeting these two purposes creates a meaningful, goal-oriented high school experience for students.

Mark Centazzo agrees, “as long as the individual curriculum are scrutinized for the factors described.” He notes that there is a perception out there that some curricula are content-heavy. He says one teacher put it well by saying, “We cover a hundred miles of content but it only goes inches deep.”

Rigorous and relevant curriculum challenges students to apply what they learn to real world situations. Students are required to use higher order thinking skills and to demonstrate mastery of discipline-specific concepts and skills. Norbert Baharally notes that students need to feel as though their learning is leading towards their future goals, and they need to feel that the learning is practical, with connections that can be made with the real world they are living in today. He says students “need to be challenged to think critically of the world around them.”

“Teachers are professionals. We must have confidence in [them] to assess the curriculum and modify it to fit the needs of the students in their classroom.”

Norbert Baharally, Principal, Wm E Hay



What is the impact on students?

Learning curriculum at school that is directly applicable to student life is highly motivating. Because the material is relevant, students use skills like active learning, problem solving, reasoning, and technology to demonstrate their grasp of the concepts. Students bring meaning to world issues through discussion, research, exploration, analysis, and relating the issues to their own worldviews. Being excited about the curriculum makes it easier to talk about with peers, which boosts exchanges of ideas and listening skills. When students and teachers collaborate on the investigations and discoveries, using technology together, the responsibility for learning the material is also shared. Mark Centazzo notes that “Part of the challenge here is making the set curriculum relevant to the wide spectrum of students. Relevance can be a very personal thing.”

A rigorous and relevant curriculum asks students to make connections between disciplines too. Using strategies learned in one discipline to tackle issues presented by another helps students understand complexities and solve issues in meaningful ways. This in turn raises expectations of students as the curriculum becomes increasingly complex, ever building on students’ prior knowledge.

When math or science curriculum pre-supposes familiarity with urban settings, the absence of prior knowledge for some rural students can be challenge enough. Trevor Mitchell explains, “We live in a rural, northern area. Many students have never been to the city, seen high rises or ridden in elevators. So the issue is how to make the math or science curriculum relevant to their daily lives.” Making the curriculum more relevant to students’ lives increases the success rate on Alberta’s diploma exam results, as Tom Christensen describes: “We partner with Olds College, so we have students that are in both high school and college at the same time. ... The most at-risk students can be the ones who just don’t see the relevance of the curriculum, but they do see the relevance of an apprenticeship in welding or carpentry.”

What is the impact on staff?

As teachers, we engage more with rigorous and relevant curricula by developing learning experiences that ask students to apply concepts and skills in the context of their real-world situation.

We also make sure that the learning experiences are appropriate, both developmentally and for the part of the world we live in. Using curriculum and developing it in this way, there is greater scope for bringing fresh ideas to the classroom and supporting students in their discovery of the personal relevance of these curricula. We try to get students to question the material, to interact with it, and to dig deeper into the issues, conducting research when sparked. As teachers, we can try to collaborate more often with each other to make the curriculum rigorous and relevant, and we want to make the connections between school and community/business more apparent. Collaborations with experts outside of the school also help provide another opportunity to connect learning to the real world. Using the curriculum in this way, we become facilitators and coaches too, inspiring students to use higher-order thinking skills and giving them the type of feedback that allows them to take the learning more into their own hands.

Norbert Baharally explains, “We are pushing our staff to focus on the ‘big pillars’ in their curriculum ... Each department worked through their curricular documents to sort through the ‘need to know’ and the ‘nice to know’ outcomes ... This was a practical and powerful activity [but] extremely time-consuming.” Teachers using their professional judgment to interpret the program of studies is critical in bringing rigour and relevance to learning activities.”

“Teachers strive to maintain rigour and relevance through sound teaching methods, which most in our profession continue to reflect on in order to better their craft, knowledge and practice.”

Norbert Baharally, Principal, Wm E Hay

“Develop a school-wide career planning model to help make the transition to post-secondary more seamless. Make the schedule similar to what it will be in post-secondary. Offer diverse choices.”

Tom Christensen, Principal, Olds

With a focus on rigorous and relevant curriculum:

- teaching materials and assessment strategies are aligned with the curriculum’s rigour and relevance
- assignments focus on the application of concepts and skills in a real-world context
- teachers support and encourage students meet the high standards set for them
- teachers keep track of and share strategies that work.