

INSTRUCTIONAL CREATIVITY V. SCRIPTED CURRICULUM

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Guided by firsthand experiences with both exemplary and ineffective leadership, I developed a leadership philosophy rooted in ethical decision-making, support for instructional innovation, and a commitment to fostering meaningful student learning; however, these beliefs increasingly conflict with political movements toward scripted curriculum and legislative oversight, which have contributed to diminished instructional effectiveness, teacher demoralization, and reduced student engagement. These tensions are deeply connected to both my early experiences as an educator and my current reality as a school administrator.

ASPIRING ADMINISTRATOR

My understanding of effective leadership began to take shape in the summer of 2009, when I was seeking a position as a high school social studies teacher at a Florida high school. After submitting my application, I received a personal phone call within two weeks from the leader. During our conversation, she explained that she would like to hire me; however, I was not yet certified in Florida to teach at the high school level. She informed me that I would need to take and pass the Florida Certification Exam for high school social studies and then contact her once I had done so.

That evening, I immediately registered online to take the exam the following Saturday (in two days). After completing the online test, I received a printed letter indicating a tentative passing score before leaving the exam center. The following Monday, I called the leader to share the news. She invited me to meet with her the next day. During that brief meeting, she officially hired me as a full-time, 11th-grade American History teacher. This initial interaction demonstrated her responsiveness, decisiveness, and willingness to invest in her staff; all of these qualities would later influence my own leadership approach.

During my first few months in the classroom, I primarily relied on teacher-created materials and primary source documents because our textbooks were quite outdated. This was a change of teaching style, because in my previous district, I had successfully used the middle school *History Alive* textbooks and additional supplemental materials to support student learning and engagement. I appreciated their readability and engaging format, which helped students better comprehend historical content. This experience led me to research whether a high school version of *History Alive* existed. I discovered that they did offer a high school American History textbook covering the time-period I was teaching. I purchased a copy on my own to evaluate whether my students would respond more positively to the material compared to our existing textbook. In addition to improving student engagement and comprehension, adopting this resource would reduce the need for printing supplemental reading materials and better support my efforts to design meaningful, skills-based activities aligned to the readings. My students appreciated the organizational charts and critical thinking questions that aligned with the new materials rather than creating content from primary resources or our old textbooks.



For the next month, I selected passages from the new text and used them for in-class readings. Students consistently reported that they preferred these readings over the district-adopted textbook. Additionally, I collected data demonstrating improved performance on assignments that were more inquiry-based and engaging learning experiences when using the new material. With this feedback and data in hand, I approached the leader to request the purchase of a class set of the textbooks. I presented both student input and evidence of improved academic outcomes to support my recommendation. The leader approved the purchase of a class set of 35 textbooks for my American History course. This was an incredible sign of support and trust in my professional judgment (as a 28-year-old and fifth-year teacher), as well as a shared belief that student learning and engagement would improve with the new materials.

A few months later, some of my students shared their concerns about the state graduation assessment, particularly the reading portion, which several had not yet passed. I reassured them that the strategies we had been practicing would support their success, and I also committed to incorporating additional targeted skills and strategies to better prepare them. When they retook the assessment later that year, the results were incredibly rewarding. Many of the students who had previously struggled were able to pass. Their success reflected not only their hard work and perseverance but also our collaborative efforts with the 11th-grade English language arts teacher. We were extremely proud of their growth and determination. Additionally, the introduction of new reading materials played a significant role in their progress, as these resources helped strengthen both their engagement and overall reading comprehension in the classroom. This was all possible with the new materials to reference and our instructional knowledge on skills and reading comprehension, which further supports the need to support teachers' professional skills in creating lessons and activities that meet our students' needs.

The following year, we had a new principal who did not lead with the same style of leadership. During my time under their leadership, I observed a decline in school culture and professional trust. During those two years, I witnessed the stark contrast between the two principals' leadership styles. Observing my former principal build a strong staff and positive school culture and then seeing how quickly that foundation weakened solidified my desire to pursue leadership grounded in ethics, professionalism, and a commitment to people. As a result, I returned to Ohio to complete a two-year Educational Leadership program and earn my principal licensure. My decision was rooted in a desire to model the kind of courageous, student-centered leadership I had observed and to ensure that schools are led with integrity, consistency, and a clear moral compass.

My initial leader's leadership style and unwavering support impacted me professionally well beyond my role as a classroom teacher. Her example inspired me to pursue school leadership myself. One of the most defining moments of her leadership was during a difficult situation involving an assistant principal who faced allegations of misconduct that were later determined to be unfounded. Despite pressure from the district office to terminate the assistant principal or risk losing her own position, the principal chose to stand by her colleague and advocate for what she believed was right. Ultimately, she was removed from her role. Watching her demonstrate integrity and moral courage, even at great personal cost, made a profound impression on me as a young educator.

This experience shaped my leadership philosophy. My leader's confidence in data-informed decision-making and her willingness to support instructional innovation reinforced my belief that effective leaders must trust and empower their teachers. Over the past thirteen years as an administrator, I have sought to embody these principles by remaining reflective, supporting



innovative instructional practices, and carefully considering teacher input when making decisions about curriculum and resources. I strive to be reflective and thoughtful in my decisions, always considering their potential impact on student learning. Additionally, I remain mindful of innovative instructional practices and carefully consider teachers' rationales when they request new materials, ensuring that decisions are grounded in what will best support student growth and engagement. This commitment is evident in the development of a strategic textbook and program rotation plan in each district where I have served. By proactively planning for resource updates, we have ensured that students and staff consistently have access to high-quality instructional materials that support effective teaching and maximize student learning outcomes.

REALITY V. CONVENIENCE

After serving two years as a secondary school principal in another district, I transitioned into the role of Director of Curriculum and Assessment. This was an exciting opportunity and a new challenge. Early on, I met with our elementary staff during their Teacher-Based Team meetings to understand the support they needed following their first diagnostic assessment of the year. These initial meetings were positive and forward-thinking, laying the groundwork for future conversations as we began analyzing data and planning Tier 1, 2, and 3 supports for students.

One grade level team demonstrated strong data practices, effectively using their results to group students across three classrooms during intervention time. Other grade levels, however, were more focused on upcoming assessments and addressing deficits within their individual classrooms rather than using a collective, data-driven approach. This led to a broader discussion during our September faculty meeting about what data teams were collecting and how it was being used. Together, we created three charts outlining Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 data. Through this process, we identified inconsistencies in assessments, data collection, and data usage across grade levels. It became clear that, while we were data-rich, we were action-poor.

As a staff, we agreed on the need for a more comprehensive, cohesive system, supported by only one or two programs as resources. We began by identifying the specific skills and standards that needed to be assessed, then evaluated what our existing tool, i-Ready, covered and where gaps remained. To address those gaps, we added Heggerty and a fluency assessment. Next, we reviewed curricula that were rated "green" on EdReports. After evaluating five programs, we selected two to pilot for the remainder of the year. Ultimately, teachers chose one program in particular due to its comprehensive design and the ability to deliver instruction without piecing together multiple resources. The staff expressed strong enthusiasm for having a cohesive program that streamlined planning and instruction. However, as we anticipated, with the loss of personalized learning and tailoring lessons to our community and students' needs, the interest and fidelity in utilizing the program wavered. As a team, we had to meet and relay expectations that the resources are just that, resources to help staff with teaching and to align terminology and expectations for students. This was not to replace the strong lessons and activities that had produced results. After our meeting, the staff was much more at ease, with some concerned about the use of the program with fidelity and not getting the results that they had desired. We reassured them that the program is there as a resource, but they are the professionals who can interpret the data to know what students need more than an external company's product.

These experiences are some of the reasons why I am wary of school districts being encouraged or required to adopt scripted programs that can limit a teacher's ability to adjust lessons



daily to meet students' needs. Over the years, I have witnessed some of the best teachers in our profession design engaging, responsive lesson plans that inspire even the most reluctant learners to trust their guidance and perform to their fullest potential. It would be a significant loss if this level of professional autonomy were diminished in favor of rigid programs that must be followed each day.

PROGRAM ADOPTION OR SUPPORT?

One of my most memorable roles was being hired as a district leader to improve district performance and student learning. Coming off the fast pace of transitioning between schools, I entered the position energized and eager to begin. I vividly recall my first meeting with the building leaders. I was ready to collaborate to understand where we were and then to work together to determine where we needed to go. To support this, I scheduled a meeting with two of our leaders and prepared a set of guiding questions I would have wanted as a new leader. My goal was to gather meaningful insight into our diagnostic assessment data, as well as identify grade-level strengths and areas for growth. However, the meeting did not unfold as intended. When I raised the idea of revitalizing teacher-based and building-level teams to strengthen collaboration, one leader became visibly frustrated. I shared that I was told her staff was feeling somewhat isolated and that school pride had declined since returning from home instruction during COVID. In response, she left the room, immediately began texting staff, and later returned, accusing me of misrepresenting information. As a result, the meeting stalled, and we made little progress in understanding the school's needs or student outcomes.

I later adjusted my approach by meeting with each leader individually, which proved to be far more productive. These conversations gave me a deeper understanding of each building and its capacity to foster a strong educational environment. During one of these meetings, a leader shared that they had never been expected to serve as an instructional leader and had instead managed the building more like a small business. This insight was striking. It revealed both a significant gap and a meaningful opportunity for growth. I began to recognize the untapped potential within the staff and students, which challenged me to think more intentionally about how to support the development of the entire school community and strengthen its instructional focus.

Part of that support included implementing a streamlined diagnostic tool to monitor student growth over time across grades K–12. This goal progressed over the next two years with the adoption of the diagnostic in the secondary school first, then the following year in the primary grades. We also developed a curriculum rotation plan to accelerate getting high-quality instructional materials into teachers' hands. While this served as a secondary support, it played an important role in aligning instructional language and skills, helping ensure continuity for students as they progressed from one grade level to the next. While it is important to ensure that teachers have updated materials as resources for their daily instruction, please do not confuse this with a scripted curriculum. The state's requirement to implement a high-quality instructional program is important, but the level of usage of the program is what merits a teacher's skills and role in the classroom. Needless to say, we adopted an English language arts program first and followed the next year with the mathematics program. This rotation permitted our staff to all have access to the same materials that were aligned with progression and expectations. We then set time each year to have our teams meet to review the new materials and adapt their curriculum maps with that



alignment. The use of the model curriculum and grade level expectations really helped staff to determine what skills were required at each grade level and how to scaffold them accordingly.

This process further highlights the importance of curriculum alignment while also illustrating the slippery slope between adopting a program and relying on a fully scripted curriculum. In three different districts across Ohio, we used similar alignment processes to strengthen student learning progressions and improve coherence across grade levels. While I understand the rationale for curriculum alignment, I remain cautious about moving toward scripted curricula that reduce the teacher's role to that of a disseminator rather than an instructional professional.

The ongoing lack of coherence among curriculum, standards, and instructional practices reflects broader concerns that many state governments are attempting to address through the adoption of scripted programs. However, as Pinar (2012) argues that teachers are not technicians of curriculum implementation, but intellectuals engaged in ongoing interpretation. This perspective reinforces the idea that teachers are reflective practitioners who must be empowered to personalize learning in ways that meet the diverse needs of their students, while still being supported by effective leadership and meaningful accountability measures.

These concerns point toward a future for our schools that we may neither be fully prepared for nor willing to accept for our students. As Poetter (2025) notes, teachers must make sense of curriculum in ways that respond to their students and contexts. This perspective highlights the critical importance of teacher autonomy and professional judgment, both of which are elements that are increasingly constrained in today's educational landscape.

EXPECTATIONS MAY NOT BE FULLY REALIZED

At the beginning of the school year, our staff engaged in positive opening meetings that established an encouraging and collaborative tone. The first few weeks reflected this momentum, suggesting a strong and productive start. By mid-September, however, our focus shifted to organizing the first round of formal observations. I explained the evaluation process, including the requirements for new teachers, those rated ineffective, individuals on improvement plans, and teachers in the final year of their contracts. Teachers subsequently selected observation dates through a shared scheduling system.

During this time, I met with the math department chair for her pre-conference. She outlined a structured lesson that included reviewing homework, addressing challenging problems, and introducing new content through modeled examples, followed by guided and independent practice. As we discussed, her students, she identified several who were struggling academically, including students with disabilities and those at risk due to attendance and performance concerns. She described her efforts to support them, including modifying assignments and planning small-group instruction, though she acknowledged that these strategies had not been as effective as she had hoped.

During the formal observation, I noticed a disconnect between her planned instruction and student engagement. A significant number of students had not completed the assigned homework, yet the lesson proceeded as scheduled without additional review or adjustment. While Mrs. Smith maintained the structure of the lesson, only a small group of students actively participated, and several others appeared disengaged or unable to follow along. This was uncharacteristic of her



typical teaching practice, which had previously demonstrated responsiveness and adaptability to student needs.

In our post-conference, I asked the teacher to reflect on the lesson and whether anything had impacted her instruction that day. As the conversation progressed, she became emotional and shared that the district's expectations to adhere closely to the scripted mathematics program had significantly affected her teaching. She explained that she no longer felt empowered to make instructional adjustments in the moment, even when she recognized that students were struggling or disengaged.

This revelation was deeply concerning. The teacher had consistently demonstrated strong instructional practices, including the use of engaging, student-centered strategies such as projects and hands-on learning experiences. These approaches had previously fostered meaningful connections and improved student understanding. However, the current expectations appeared to limit her ability to respond to her students, ultimately diminishing both her effectiveness and her enthusiasm for teaching.

This experience illustrates what Poetter (2025) describes when he notes that what is intended in curriculum policy is rarely what is experienced in classrooms. While the adoption of scripted curriculum is often intended to improve consistency and outcomes, its implementation in this context has constrained teacher agency and reduced the flexibility necessary to meet diverse student needs. As a result, the policy's intended benefits are undermined by its practical impact on classroom instruction.

At the core of this challenge are two competing interpretations of how instructional materials should be used, either as a supportive tool or as a strict guide. These differing approaches can significantly impact curriculum alignment. When used with flexibility and shared understanding, materials can promote consistent vocabulary and instructional strategies across grade levels, helping students experience a coherent progression of learning. However, when implemented rigidly or inconsistently, they can create confusion for students and limit opportunities for meaningful connections.

This tension also places teachers in a difficult position. On one hand, they are expected to follow structured and at times scripted programs with fidelity; on the other, they are tasked with being responsive, innovative, and engaging while addressing individual student needs. Balancing these expectations can be challenging, particularly when programs feel inflexible and limit opportunities to connect content to students' lived experiences.

Compounding this concern is the possibility of extending similar expectations to other content areas, such as mathematics. The prospect of adopting equally scripted programs raises additional anxiety among staff, as it may further restrict instructional autonomy. Moving forward, the challenge will be finding a balance that maintains coherence and alignment while still empowering teachers to exercise professional judgment and respond effectively to their students.

CONCLUSION

Today, as an administrator, I find that the leadership values shaped by these experiences are increasingly at odds with current policy trends. Instructional adaptation depends on teachers' ability to respond dynamically to student needs, as "instructional adaptations require teacher thinking in response to a student stimulus, which determines a teacher's subsequent action" (Vaughn et al., 2021, p. 187). However, the growing push for scripted curricula, often requiring



strict adherence with minimal deviation, undermines this essential professional capacity. Restricting teacher autonomy not only limits their ability to meet the diverse academic, social, and cultural needs of students but also diminishes opportunities for meaningful engagement. Research supports the importance of teacher flexibility, noting that empowering educators has “the potential to move policy away from restrictive, scripted curricula and toward the development of professional learning to support teacher adaptability and improve educational opportunities for those students in our most vulnerable communities” (Vaughn et al., 2021, p. 193). Similarly, culturally responsive instruction has been shown to enhance outcomes for underrepresented students (Powell, 2017).

Taken together, these experiences and research findings reinforce my belief that effective educational leadership must prioritize ethical decision-making, trust in teacher professionalism, and a commitment to instructional responsiveness. As policy environments continue to evolve, it is critical that school leaders advocate for practices that honor these principles and ultimately serve the best interests of students.

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