

Centering Equity in Rhode Island's New Curriculum Frameworks By Georgia Bock

Statewide curricular-reform efforts are often intended to improve educational opportunities and achievement for every student. But, when educators are considering what every student should learn and be able to do, they have a responsibility to think deeply about who those students are and how their unique experiences and circumstances may affect their ability to learn.

Over the past year, the Region 2 Comprehensive Center (R2CC) supported the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) in developing new curriculum frameworks for mathematics, science, and English language arts (ELA). This partnership was formed because of [2019 legislation](#) that mandated new statewide academic standards as well as new curriculum frameworks to inform the teaching of those standards.

From the outset of this project, RIDE articulated to R2CC the importance of centering differently abled students and multilingual learners in the curriculum framework development process. To do this, R2CC facilitated conversations with the RIDE team to develop and integrate five high-quality instructional practices for all students—taking an asset-based stance, clarity of learning goals, student-centered engagement, academic discourse, and formative assessment—into the frameworks and then clearly spelled out how these practices could be used to support all students.

Why did RIDE and R2CC prioritize equity?

We wanted to center the needs of students from often-marginalized populations from the outset, rather than treating them as side groups for whom the content could be modified. We also were aware of research that shows designing content for these populations [actually benefits all learners](#).

[RIDE recently published the three curriculum frameworks](#), giving Rhode Island local education agencies (LEAs) an important tool to improve instruction. The process undertaken to develop these frameworks also offers some valuable lessons about how to prioritize equity in a curriculum reform effort. Specifically, three themes emerged:

1. Get the right people at the table

Developing the Rhode Island curriculum frameworks was an interdisciplinary effort. The team included content experts in mathematics, science, and ELA. It also included staff from the RIDE Office of Student, Community, and Academic Supports (OSCAS) who brought extensive expertise with multilingual learners and differently abled students. R2CC staff created a crosswalk of the 2019 legislation and RIDE's blueprints for student success and then used this crosswalk to design a process for RIDE staff to collaboratively develop the frameworks.

Once the framework drafts were developed, R2CC supported RIDE by organizing feedback sessions with educators and families. These sessions were primarily attended by RIDE's content advisory groups for mathematics, science, and ELA. Getting a broad group of experts

and educators on board was a step toward ensuring that the resulting curriculum frameworks reflected a commitment to excellence and equity.

2. Facilitate collaboration

Bringing these different voices and viewpoints together was a balancing act—one that required extensive and intentional collaboration. RIDE modeled good practice by assembling a cross-office team with staff from OSCAS and the Office of Instruction, Curriculum, and Assessment to coordinate the development of the frameworks. Leadership who oversaw the project also held regular meetings to ensure that collaboration occurred.

These tactics helped bring RIDE staff together, make connections across workstreams across the agency, and ensure coherence across the frameworks. Additionally, the cross-organizational focus R2CC facilitated helped to deepen RIDE staff's understanding of what equitable instruction practices looked like in the classroom.

3. Keep equity as a priority

RIDE has been consistent in its prioritization of equity. For example, the introduction to its [blueprint for success for multilingual learners](#) reads:

All multilingual learners come to our classrooms with tremendous cultural, linguistic, and intellectual resources, along with the right to high-quality education. **Our educational systems are responsible for supporting MLLs in cultivating these strengths** through integrated content and language instruction, enrichment opportunities, and a whole-child approach to teaching and learning. (Emphasis added.)

A commitment to equity was similarly a priority during the development of the new curriculum frameworks. Everyone on the team prioritized providing guidance on high-quality curriculum, instruction, and assessment to meet the needs of all students—and made sure to keep that focus throughout the process.

The process through which these new curriculum frameworks were written and reviewed built RIDE staff's capacity to collaborate across offices, collect and utilize feedback from educators, and create alignment across curriculum and instructional resources. In fact, RIDE and the R2CC are beginning to develop two more frameworks—one for early childhood and one for social studies—representing a big step toward improving instruction for all of Rhode Island's students.

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