

# TEPSA News

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## Best Practices/Tom Many, EdD



### **A Guaranteed and Viable Curriculum is Not a Proper Noun**

**“One of the most powerful things a school can do to help enhance student achievement is to guarantee that specific content is taught in specific courses and grade levels.” -DuFour and Marzano (2011), pg. 89**

When Bob Marzano introduced the term ‘guaranteed and viable curriculum’ into the lexicon of educational best practice, he identified one of the most powerful ways to improve schools.

The ‘guaranteed’ dimension of a guaranteed and viable curriculum requires all students enrolled in the same class, course or grade level be exposed to the same rigorous curriculum regardless of the teacher to whom they are assigned. If what teachers teach is different from one classroom to the next, the curriculum is not guaranteed.

The ‘viable’ aspect of a guaranteed and viable curriculum recognizes that *teaching* the curriculum and *covering* the curriculum are two very different things. While teachers can ‘cover’ lots of content, to ‘teach’ the curriculum requires students learn what is taught. If the amount of content for which teachers are responsible exceeds what can reasonably be accomplished within the time allotted, the curriculum is not viable.

To establish a curriculum that is both guaranteed and viable, school leaders must engage teams of classroom teachers in a process to build a common understanding of what students should know and be able to do.

*“If schools are to establish a truly guaranteed and viable curriculum, those who are called upon to deliver it must have both a common understanding of the curriculum and a commitment to teach it.”*

*-DuFour and Marzano (2011), p 91*

Marzano recommends districts begin by providing, “clear guidance to teachers regarding the content to be addressed in specific courses and at specific grade levels.” (Marzano (2003), p. 24) The key word is “guidance” and the implication is teachers will work together in a collaborative process to identify the essential standards with the support of district level leaders and content area specialists.

This “guidance” might come in the form of training, coaching, and providing extended opportunities for in-depth analysis of the standards. As teachers work together to understand the essence of what teachers should teach and students must learn, they build the kind of shared knowledge and common understandings that are so essential to creating a guaranteed and viable curriculum.

Marzano maintains a guaranteed and viable curriculum also means, “Individual teachers do not have the option to disregard or replace assigned content.” (Marzano (2003), p. 24) Some districts; those where administrators contend that teachers are unwilling or unable to identify the essential standards, have used Marzano’s admonition to justify the publishing of curriculum documents filled with long lists of standards selected by content area specialists at the state and local level. Once published and distributed to teachers, these documents become *the* guaranteed and viable curriculum.

Unfortunately, the secret to creating a guaranteed and viable curriculum is not more lists or another document, and while schools and districts should never return to the days when what was taught depended upon an individual teacher’s interests, talents or expertise; mandating a specific set of standards absent any meaningful input by classroom teachers will prove to be an equally ineffective approach. Others would have us believe the key to a guaranteed and viable curriculum is as simple as holding teachers accountable for teaching their 1/13<sup>th</sup> of the curriculum. They believe publishing *the* guaranteed and viable curriculum ensures teachers will know what level of learning is expected, and maintain that if teachers would simply take responsibility for teaching the 1/13<sup>th</sup> of the curriculum designated for their class, course or grade level, there wouldn’t be a problem.

This 1/13<sup>th</sup> solution might be more reasonable if, and it’s a big if, all the students in the classroom were functioning at grade level and ready to learn. Obviously, that condition does not exist in most schools and when students are not ready to learn grade level content, teachers will go beyond, sometimes far beyond, the boundaries established by their 1/13<sup>th</sup> of the curriculum in order to meet the needs of their students. It makes no sense to deliver lesson to students who lack the prior knowledge or pre-requisite skills necessary to be successful in the unit. It makes far more sense to train teachers in a consistent and coherent process for identifying the most essential standards, guide them through the process, and insist they teach what they themselves have just identified as essential.

The most effective schools recognize the only way to develop a guaranteed and viable curriculum is to engage teachers—with the support of district level leaders and

content area specialists—in a collaborative process to identify what is essential for each class, course or grade level. It is the combination of the expertise provided by content area experts at the district level coupled with the building of shared knowledge among teachers at the classroom level that is essential to creating a guaranteed and viable curriculum. It is not one or the other; it’s both.

*“We have a problem when the guaranteed and viable curriculum is viewed as a proper noun.”*  
-Tanya Batzel (2016)

We have learned a guaranteed and viable curriculum is not a proper noun. For nearly two decades we have tried to achieve the goal of a guaranteed and viable curriculum by providing teachers with standards documents designed by content specialists at the state or local level. Too often, teachers have been left out of the conversation and while it may be efficient, this approach has been ineffective.

In order to be successful, districts need to recognize creating a guaranteed and viable curriculum is not a static, one-time event. It is a dynamic, ongoing process of building shared knowledge about what students should know and be able to do. In order to ensure a common understanding of, and a commitment to, a guaranteed and viable curriculum, district level leaders and content specialists must commit to training, coaching, and supporting teacher teams as they do the work.

The most effective leaders acknowledge that the only person who can ensure all children have access to a guaranteed and viable curriculum is the teacher who delivers the curriculum in the classroom. These leaders recognize engaging teacher teams in a process to identify what is essential for all students to learn is the best way, perhaps the only way, to establish a guaranteed and viable curriculum. ■

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**Resources**  
DuFour, R. & Marzano, R. (2011). *Leaders of Learning: How District, School, and Classroom Leaders Improve Student Learning*. Solution Tree Press, Bloomington, IN.  
Marzano, R. (2003). *What Works In Schools: Translating Research Into Action*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, VA.