

Curriculum Leadership Institute E-Hint

Teacher Professionalism Requires Intellectual Engagement

It has recently come to the attention of many educational leaders that the latest initiative created by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, otherwise known as No Child Left Behind, is creating a group of young and compliant teachers who have learned that good instruction is nothing more than teaching to the letter of the standards. In other words, a good percentage of elementary teachers produced since 2001 understand that the current emphasis on reading and mathematics dictates what they should do in the classroom, and that their most important responsibility is to interpret standards and accurately translate the intentions of those standards into classroom activities and assessments. Middle level and high school teachers of language arts and mathematics are receiving the same message, and operate under similar expectations.

Many school districts are eliminating the development of local curriculum and attempting to use state standards *as* the curriculum. To do so, they are making the process of interpreting standards as simple as possible, so they skip over the meaning of phrases labeled **standards** and **benchmarks**, and go directly to **tested indicators**. Tested indicators are supposed to be easier to decipher and apply to lesson plans; therefore, if students have mastered those stipulated indicators, teachers have a more comfortable expectation that students will perform effectively on the inevitable high stakes tests.

There is considerable evidence that such a narrow and piecemeal strategy is questionable in the context of real academic growth for students. However, another big concern is the possible impact teaching to tested indicators is having on teachers themselves. While suggesting that teachers are being reduced to the level of academic pawns might be a bit strong, there is the growing feeling that real intellectual engagement with subjects taught is being diminished to minimal levels.

The title of this E-Hint implies that intellectual engagement among teachers is essential to being an academic professional. That particular belief is central to those of us who advocate and apply the CLI Model. In our eyes, teachers are more than scholastic automatons or bureaucratic functionaries asked to fulfill goals established by those considered more attuned to the needs of public school students. That's why we promote solid teacher involvement and leadership at many levels in the academic decision-making and action-taking processes.

We also advocate the idea that *local curricula* must be created from the standards/benchmarks/indicators, since that is the only way: (1) teachers truly can interpret standards well, (2) the school or district can take into account scope and sequence, and (3) a teachable curriculum can be applied by teachers in a thorough and realistic fashion.

As you know, the CLI is located in Kansas, so examples will be used from that state’s standards in the remainder of this E-Hint. To demonstrate how using tested indicators as a local curriculum can present major problems, we are citing their use by a non-CLI district. Here are two of the state’s middle level language arts tested indicators that are used in that district:

- **The student uses the knowledge of sentence structure and conventions (e.g., question marks, exclamation points, commas, apostrophes, italics, graphics, hyphens) to read fluently at instructional or independent reading levels.**
- **The student compares and contrasts varying aspects (e.g., topics, characters' traits and motives, themes, problem-solution, cause-effect relationships, ideas and concepts, procedures, viewpoints) in one or more appropriate-level texts.**

Luckily, this district is quite affluent – thus it can give teachers plenty of support from central office supervisory personnel as they try to incorporate the above indicators and all like them into an instructional program. Teachers are given assistance in the development of daily lesson plans, instructional guides, and formative and summative classroom assessments. As you can see, that kind of assistance seems necessary because the first example tested indicator is much too vague. It has no specific information about the complexity of sentence structure expected. Additionally, the punctuation types follow “e.g.” within a parenthetical list, which makes them optional, so there is no consistency in terms of what students should be held accountable for at this level. The second tested indicator uses a good verb phrase (compare and contrast), but “varying aspects” is much too vague, and the long string of literary devices are in another parenthetical “e.g.” list, which again indicates “examples only” – nothing specific for student accountability

In a CLI process teachers – both individually and collectively – would be asked to become intellectually engaged with the intentions behind those tested indicators, and create and teach to a more clearly articulated set of high achievement unit outcomes with subordinate components that: (1) are stated in understandable terms, (2) use measurable verbs, and (3) are shown in a sequence that is teachable and based on good learning theory. Here is what a subject area committee in a CLI school or district might do with the two tested indicators:

Indicators Shown in the “Reading-Literature Indicators”	Conversion to Unit Outcomes and Components
<p>The student uses the knowledge of sentence structure and conventions (e.g., question marks, exclamation points, commas, apostrophes, italics, graphics, hyphens) to read fluently at instructional or independent reading levels.</p>	<p>UNIT OUTCOME: Students will recognize and apply proper sentence structure and conventions to read aloud with fluency.</p> <p>COMPONENTS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify periods, question marks, exclamation points, and italicized or bold print, and demonstrate how they affect inflection when reading sentences aloud. • Identify various ways commas are used in sentences and demonstrate how they affect pauses and pacing when reading sentences aloud. • Differentiate sentence fragments, run-on sentences, and complete sentences, and apply structure to establish rhythm and pace when reading. • Read multi-paragraph passages, applying rules of sentence structure and conventions to demonstrate fluency.

Indicators Shown in the "Reading-Literature Indicators"	Conversion to Unit Outcomes and Components
<p>The student compares and contrasts varying aspects (e.g., topics, characters' traits and motives, themes, problem-solution, cause-effect relationships, ideas and concepts, procedures, viewpoints) in one or more appropriate-level texts.</p>	<p>UNIT OUTCOME: Students will analyze a variety of texts to identify and compare structure and elements of fiction and nonfiction.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain the difference between theme and author's purpose. • Compare and contrast plot, setting, character traits/motives, and cause-effect relationships in two or more works of fiction. • Identify setting, character traits/motives, and cause-effect relationships in a biography or autobiography and compare them to those in a previously read selection of fiction. • Identify common organizational components of an informational text. • Explain the author's point of view, argument, or perspective in an informational text. • Compare and contrast the presentation of a theme or topic across genres and explain how the selection of genre affects the delivery of universal ideas about life and society.

In the academic world, professionalism must have a great deal to do with intellectual engagement. Therefore, in this era of imposed standards, intellectual engagement should have much to do with deciphering the *intent* of poorly written standards/benchmarks/tested indicators, and creating and teaching to a *local curriculum* that makes sense and actually stimulates student learning. With that notion in mind, and if your school or district is struggling with aligning a local curriculum with tested indicators, we encourage your subject area committees to use a process similar to the examples shown in this E-Hint.