

# Curriculum Leadership Institute E-Hint

## **Subject Integration Starts with Coherently Written Intentions, Not Just “Merged Activities”**

All teachers, particularly those working in self-contained classrooms (grades kindergarten through six) are experiencing a shortage of time and an overage of curriculum. That’s because of pressures to teach basic skills to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in specified categories, while trying to incorporate other subjects long considered important to quality student learning.

Many building and district leaders suggest that teachers integrate subject matter to kill two birds with one stone. Their argument is that merging elements of core areas such as mathematics and science, or social studies and language arts, will be a time-saving way to meet the expectations of standards and make classroom activities more interesting.

This e-hint isn’t meant to judge the credibility of that strategy’s assumptions about saving time. However, teachers left to make their own decisions about how to manage integration will likely pick elements of standards — or local curricular outcomes — and create classroom activities they believe “cover” all their elements. But using student activities without an outcome statement that drives instruction and student assessment can lead to vague results and the measured mastery of nothing.

A district using the CLI process, or something similar to it, will have a curriculum coordinating council (CCC), as well as a subject area committee (SAC) for each academic discipline. The result of these groups working together is solid curricula for all subjects. Each SAC must assure that locally determined outcomes align with state standards, and that scope and sequence considerations are met through the appropriate spiraling of curricular content and reinforcement of essential skills. The CCC monitors progress of the SAC, and addresses recommendations for major changes in a curriculum. Finally, through the CCC and in conjunction with the administrative team, there must be adequate faculty development to assure that the agreed-upon curriculum is both taught and learned.

So, in summary, a well managed curriculum will be: (1) focused on what is essential for students to know and do in the context of individual subjects, (2) aligned appropriately with state standards, benchmarks, and indicators, and (3) translated into teaching processes that assure the kind of student learning intended in the published curriculum. You’ll notice that at this point there is no consideration of instructional integration, primarily because we don’t want to diffuse or distort our subject-based intentions for student learning.

Let us begin the approach to integration by examining a subject’s basic structure. While we may be on thin ice with purists in some subjects, one can suggest that certain disciplines are primarily *tools* or *media* for gaining knowledge about other subjects. True, academic “tools” require scholarship and effort to learn, but they aren’t unto themselves the ultimate measure of human knowledge. That is why the *No Child Left Behind Act* focused on reading and mathematical computation, because skills in those two areas are essential if one is to be successful in other academic pursuits. That said, it doesn’t make sense to teach those skills in a climate that ignores the context in which they are and should be used.

Therefore, the “context” for communication skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing) has much to do with every other academic and vocational pursuit (literature, social studies, science, business, FACS, industrial/agricultural education, human fitness and wellness, journalism, and even mathematics). Basic mathematical skills also cut across those curricula in various ways, some more significantly than others.

When students are taught the skills of *how* to read, those skills need to be applied in some *context*— and that context could be literature, science, social studies, or any of the other subject areas. Likewise, computation and other mathematical skills make more sense to students when they are applied in a context, rather than just performed on worksheets or other generic practice papers.

Many math subject area committees try to fix this problem by writing outcomes to say “Students will (demonstrate a particular skill) and *apply it in a real-world situation.*” This suggests a context and is better than an outcome that requires no application. In fact, it is the *recommended* way to write a curriculum in the first cycle. However, since that approach doesn’t assure true integration, it’s important to modify those outcomes in the second cycle (the second time the curriculum is addressed). How is that done?

Once all curriculums have been written, the *real-world situation* phrase can be substituted with a specific topic in one of the outcomes for another discipline, such as in science or social studies. Likewise, a reading outcome can be rewritten to have students apply a particular *skill* when deciphering information required in another subject’s outcome. This kind of integration can be done in the second cycle because all curriculums have been prepared, and a subject area committee can easily locate a specific outcome where the application is appropriate.

Some teachers, particularly at the elementary level, may balk when asked to rewrite the first cycle curriculum in this way, because they say they are already doing this integration in their instructional planning. As suggested in the third paragraph of this E-hint, those teachers may prepare lesson plans for a reading or math outcome and then incorporate another subject as the vehicle for demonstrating skills. True, a kind of integration occurs but it doesn’t necessarily mean that outcomes are *fully met* for more than one subject. As mentioned earlier, classroom activities that simply *cover* multiple subjects provide no guarantee students will master concepts and skills in *each* subject.

The E-Hint “More About Curriculum Integration” gives specific examples of the problem just described, and offer a solution as to how one can integrate multiple outcomes (intended results), rather than plan activities that just address a subject’s *topic*.