Planning for Curriculum Integration

Using the four-phase action plan described here, districts can effectively create multidisciplinary units and see them through to successful adoption.

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To develop an interdisciplinary curriculum, a district needs an action plan. Here is such a plan, based on extensive field work. The plan's four phases—conducting internal and external action research, developing a proposal, implementing and monitoring a pilot unit, and adopting the program—can be accomplished over a three-year period.

Phase I: Conducting Action Research

The time frame for carrying out research is six months to a year. During this phase, staff members concentrate on learning more about their current curriculum as well as about best practices from the field.

Internal research. Research is conducted internally by small groups of teachers assembled by grade levels, departments, or interdisciplinary teams. Using the school calendar, they plot month-by-month the units of study they teach. If each teacher comes prepared with his or her individual monthly outline, compiling the information takes only a few hours.

With information for an entire year at their fingertips, teachers can: (1) discover when students are studying various units in their subjects; (2) align subjects that would mutually benefit from concurrent teaching (Jacobs 1989); (3) eliminate repetition from year to year; (4) identify possibilities for multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary units of study (Jacobs 1989); and (5) target units that lend themselves to performance-based assessment of specific skills and concepts.

External research. External research extends staff members' awareness of relevant work in the larger education community. Through conferences, readings, site visits, inservice courses, and voluntary study groups, they study best practices and options for curriculum reform. Regional service centers, state education departments, national education organizations, and universities are excellent sources for learning about desirable practices.

Topics that teachers often choose for further research include team building, curriculum design, scheduling alternatives, evaluation approaches, and writing across the content areas. Investigation of these areas can be helpful to teachers as they develop interdisciplinary programs.

Phase II: Developing a Proposal

Phase two, proposal development, usually takes from two to four months during the first year of planning. One of the first tasks is to assess potential areas for multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary units.

For their first effort, most schools decide to upgrade an existing unit of study through collaboration between disciplines. The length of the pilot is usually from two to six weeks. If the proposal is to be effective, the most motivated and capable staff members should be involved in its design. Further, the proposal should specify evaluation procedures, budget, timelines, and teachers' responsibilities.

Two dangers inherent in a pilot are its experimental cast and its peripheral nature (Jacobs 1989). A strong long-term agenda can allay these problems. Creating an interdisciplinary proposal should not be seen as an enrichment event; ultimately, the goal is for the pilot to become part of the program, not a passing experience. As a middle school teacher put it, "We're going to try this science and English unit on the ethics of experimentation because we believe it's better than what we're doing now separately."

After the proposal has been written and reviewed at the building and district levels, it's time to try the unit in the classroom.

Phase III: Implementing and Monitoring the Pilot

The third phase, implementing and monitoring the pilot unit, takes place during the second year of the plan. Most units run from two to six weeks.

During the pilot, teachers evaluate decision-making procedures, relationships between team members, time allotted for implementation, adequacy of resource materials, and political considerations. A frequent outcome of their efforts, according to teachers, is the satisfaction of collegial collaboration. As Leiberman and Miller suggest, "it is the personal interaction rather than instructional interaction that is most valued" (1990, p. 159).

The group members also meet regularly to assess the impact of the pilot unit on students. If they have devised

outcome-based assessments for the pilot, they now have critical feedback about student growth.

The key to the pilot's success is the data collected through the monitoring procedures. From this wealth of information, the staff then plans revisions to the unit's design or to conditions that influence its effectiveness.

Phase IV: Adopting the Program

During the third year of the plan, staff members are prepared to make revisions to the program, based on the data collected in the pilot phase, and then adopt it as a permanent part of the curriculum. There is no time in a school year to add more curriculum. So, in order to adopt the pilot, they must replace whatever was offered previously. For example, the high school course guide will now state that there is a 9th grade Humanities course rather than separate English, social studies, and arts courses. A pilot can easily dissipate unless it is elevated to program status.

Looking Ahead

Eventually, staff members will want to examine the new unit for ways to expand it throughout the system. Over two to three years, schools can make steady and meaningful curriculum reform. A successful interdisciplinary pilot can spearhead systematic examination of scheduling, teaming, and evaluation procedures.

By following an action plan based on solid research, a powerful pilot, and thoughtful monitoring, district planners can guide a unit through to successful program adoption. □

References

Jacobs, H. H. (1989). "Design Options for an Integrated Curriculum." In *Interdisciplinary Curriculum: Design and Implementation*, edited by H. H. Jacobs, pp. 13-24. Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Leiberman A., and L. Miller. (1990). "The Social Realities of Teaching." In *Schools as Collaborative Cultures: Creating the Future Now*, edited by A. Leiberman. Bristol, Pa.: Falmer Press.

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FIGURE 1

EXAMPLE OF CALENDAR CURRICULUM MAPPING

Grade 6

	February	March	April	May	June
English/ Language Arts	*Sarah, Plain and Tall*	Wilson's Letter and Diaries of Immigrants		*Diary of Anne Frank*	
Social Studies	The Westward Movement	The Industrial Revolution; World War I		World War II	
Mathematics	Fractions Roman Numerals	Metrics Compare Bases		Percents Geometric Shapes	Scale Area
Science	Matter and Energy	Electricity ← Weather →		Magnetism	
Art	Color Western Landscapes	Shape; Cubists Picasso, Gris		Photography: Documentary Purposes	

A 6th grade team begins interdisciplinary planning by plotting the topics teachers teach month-by-month.