



WHAT iGNITES US

**Capturing Student Curiosity:
Curriculum Integration at Work**
Radnor Middle School: Radnor, PA

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Close to thirty years ago, Mark Springer initiated the principle of curriculum integration (CI) at Radnor Middle School. Driven by the desire to **honor student voice**, establish a connected, diverse learning environment, and implement a co-taught democratic classroom, Springer successfully changed the way teachers approach teaching and students approach learning. He envisioned students solving problems by exhibiting choice in their learning. Students design the curricula based on questions that they have about themselves and the world around them. Springer saw the value of teachers as facilitators and students as designers of curricula, creating a student-focused classroom environment. Students frequently self-evaluate by developing rubrics for their work and teachers use narrative statements for assessment rather than issuing letter grades. Ed Silcox and Springer's original seventh-grade program, Watershed, started in 1986, and continues, celebrating its 30th year next fall. Springer initiated the student-designed curriculum integration program, Soundings, in 1998, and it is in its 15th year. Radnor teachers added the sixth grade integrated program, Crossroads, and another eighth grade program, Gateways, more recently.

In the text, *Soundings*, by Mark Springer and *What Every Middle School Teacher Should Know* by Dave F. Brown and Trudy Knowles, the curriculum integration program is outlined, prescribed and encouraged. As a purely student-designed curriculum, students are empowered to take charge of their learning by determining what they will study through collaborative partnerships with peers. Students are afforded leadership opportunities in student-led conferences and in student-designed open house events. Student choice is exercised through student-designed rubrics and assessments. In response, teachers maintain anecdotal records and communicate expectations and performance evaluations through narratives and meaningful conversations. The student-teacher relationship is not only evident, but is flourishing in the CI setting.

A magnified look into Radnor Middle School's CI program reveals the details of its success. From a pool of approximately 120 applicants per program, 40 students (20 boys and 20 girls) are selected via lottery for each of the four curriculum integration programs. All students are eligible to apply. Field trips, community service projects/partnerships, hands-on activities, and

flexible grouping are a few of the features students experience throughout the year. Each day, students spend approximately three hours in a community of learning facilitated by two teachers, researching topics in social studies, science, and language arts. Leaving only for math and related arts courses, students develop a close rapport with one another and with their teachers.

The learning environment at Radnor Middle School genuinely meets the needs of middle level learners. Curriculum integration programs provide more significant learning opportunities that better improve cognitive growth versus traditional curricular delivery practices (Brown & Knowles, 2014). Through the incorporation of a curriculum integration program, students own their learning which is tailored specifically by them. Research with CI students at Radnor and other middle schools in the U.S. reveals that these students believe they develop better abilities in creative and critical thinking, problem solving, research skills, interpersonal relationships, and public presentation skills as a result of participating in curriculum integration experiences as opposed to their experiences in traditional curricular settings (Brown, 2011).

For more information on Curriculum Integration:

Brown, D.F. 2011. Curriculum Integration: Meaningful Learning Based on Students' Questions. *Middle Grades Research Journal*, 6(4), 193-206.

Brown, D.F. and T. Knowles. 2014. *What Every Middle School Teacher Should Know*. 3rd ed. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

<http://www.rtsd.org/Domain/918>

Springer, M. 2006. *Soundings: A Democratic Student-Centered Education*. Westerville, OH: Association for Middle Level Education.