

How to Start, Build and Sustain a Multi-Credit Integrated Curriculum Package

By Andrew Kerr Wilson

Over the last 17 years, I have been asked many times for help starting Integrated Curriculum Programs (ICPs). Visiting teachers are instantly engaged and enthused by the possibilities they see in my program. I can't tell you how often I've heard the words, "I wish this program was at my school!" Others times, a teacher or principal will call and say, "I hear you're the guy to talk to about ICPs."

Unfortunately, I have found it hard to provide good practical advice. My own program was a product of circumstance—a set of conditions that existed in 1992 and doesn't today. I have tried to provide lots of encouragement, but I always felt I couldn't give them much practical advice—a "How to ..." for ICPs.

This article is an attempt to do just that: provide a step-by-step road map to a full ICP continuum. By distilling the lessons of almost 20 years of success and failure, of discussions and reflections, of forethought and hindsight, I hope to present a template on how to introduce, build and sustain an ICP program in a single school of moderate size (600–800 students). It is not a thorough discussion of all options; there isn't space for that here. Nor is it intended to be prescriptive. Consider it is a starting point for building your own plan.

It is also the product of an examination of not just my own program but also the but also the Community Environmental Leadership Program (CELP) in Guelph. The late Mike Elrick and I were to some extent fellow travellers, beginning our programs around the same time and challenged by the same changes in Ontario education. Mike was always positive and inspirational and his program was an exemplar for my own. I miss him and this article is partly a way to say good-bye.

How Do You Begin? By Building a Better Mousetrap

The place to start is in Grade 10! Senior optional credit programs are difficult to initiate from scratch in anything but the larger schools. The administration may block it because there is already too much choice or you won't reach the minimum class size threshold. There is simply too much competition for too few students. Instead, go to where the students are already (Grade 10 compulsory credits) and deliver it differently.

The models I recommend are the CELP in Guelph or our EPIC program. Both CELP and EPIC are built around a core of Grade 10 compulsory credits including science, English, civics and careers. Where EPIC and CELP differ is in the last credit. CELP includes a senior interdisciplinary credit. The interdisciplinary credit allows students to reach ahead and teachers to include unique and diverse curriculum elements. There are undoubtedly other benefits, and CELP staff would be the best source for that information. I also highly recommend the application process used at CELP. It allows a range of students to make a compelling case for inclusion in the program.

I opted for the Grade 10 physical education because, in combination with science, English and careers/civics, it represented a timetable that many of our students were already taking. Taking EPIC then meant no change in content, merely a change in method of delivery. Our school could advertise a Grade 10 program available in three different ways—academic, applied and integrated. Integration was presented as a way of providing both enrichment and accommodation. The additional programming (almost a month of extra instructional time provided by the out-trips) and diverse learning situations would be of benefit to a wide range of students. They could receive credits at either the academic

or applied level or a mix. In the interest of keeping things simple we went with academic credits. Prerequisites were an issue we solved on a case-by-case basis.

Another significant advantage of a Grade 10 program was that it was more of a draw on Parents' Night. The Grade 10 program prompted parents and students to choose our school much more readily than the senior program. Parents and their children had no trouble looking ahead to Grade 10, but a senior course that was years away was interesting but not compelling.

Building the Program: Add a "Step Up"

Plan ahead and, after two years of running the Grade 10 program, introduce a senior ICP. It should be available to students in Grades 11 and 12. Two years of students will have completed the Grade 10 program, and they will provide a core enrolment for your senior ICP. This core of veterans will help you get over that critical class size threshold and be assets to lean on in your first year delivering the senior program.

The senior ICP can be a three- or four-credit package. At Carlton Place High School (CPHS) we have done both. A four-credit package is my preference because it automatically means a second teacher involved in the program. This provided some relief for the main teacher (shoulder to cry on, coffee delivered, etc.) and for the students as well. It also provides a structure for mentoring and the evolution of staff. Turnover and/or burnout of teachers in ICPs is a problem and needs to be addressed from the beginning. The four-credit program also provides a more complete "immersion" experience for the student. Whether you opt for three or four credits, make one of them a co-op credit. This will be a key component of your community outreach.

Three-credit programs allow students to enter the program while still taking another credit they might need for their diploma. However, only certain courses are a reasonable choice for this option. Time away on extended trips (a common feature of ICPs)

seriously compromises a student's ability to complete a fourth credit. Correspondence style courses work better but still require above-average dedication. Better choices are courses with significant overlap in content so that ICP activities can count for both.

Sustaining the Program

Any ICP run within a single school has one thing going for it. Once you get it started, sustaining it is largely a matter of numbers. If enough students want the course, it should run. There is a lot you can do within the program to make this happen. I will quickly outline a few strategies. All of these have real benefits for the students enrolled by also significantly contribute to recruitment.

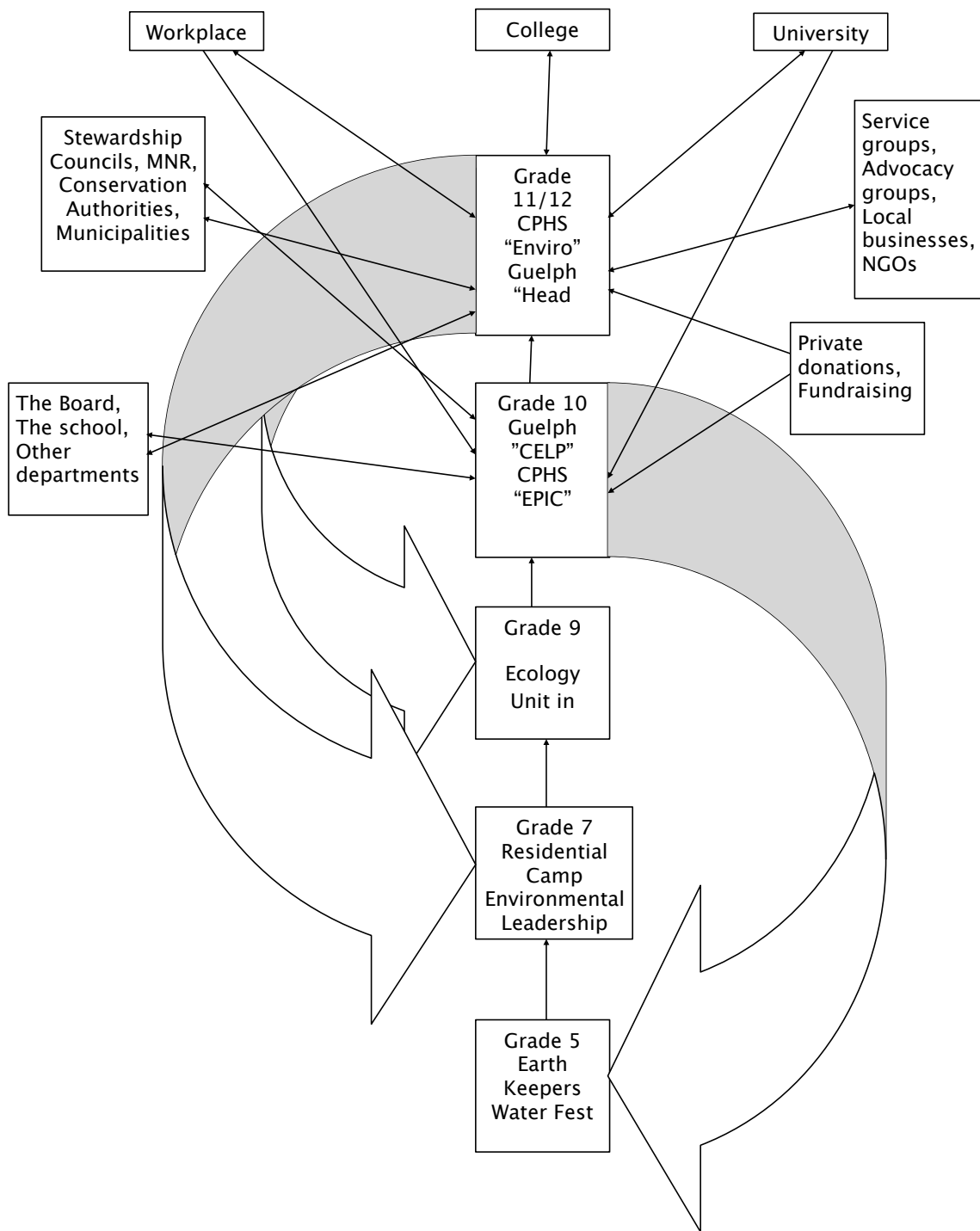
1. Reach back

A major component of the CELP program is the delivery of the Earth Keepers program to elementary students. Similarly, my Grade 12s delivered an environmental leadership program for Grade 7s and ran ecology field studies for Grade 9 science classes. I am sure that CELP teachers and students will tell you just how important Earth Keepers is to the student experience within CELP, but it also sells CELP to the elementary students and staff. Former participants in Earth Keepers will show up at high school with CELP in mind. Students in my senior program were quite clear about this. They took the "Enviro" program because they participated in the environmental leadership camp in Grade 7. There is real magic in reaching back to the earlier grades. Don't miss an opportunity to tap into it. It is also the key to creating a core of students that will track through your ICP program.

2. Reach out

All of the ICP programs I have visited are connected and supported by the communities around them. In my case, Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR), conservation authorities, stewardship councils, provincial parks and municipal councils all support and contribute to the delivery of the program. They provide

ICP "Tree of Life"



in-kind services, expertise, co-op placements, programming, mapping services and sometimes even money! Other sources of support are service clubs, local businesses, field naturalist groups, user and advocacy groups, Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters (OFAH) and River Keepers. Whatever the focus of your program, you are not alone and must connect with as many of these sources of support as you can.

Other major support groups are the community colleges and universities—particularly the ones your school normally graduates to. Apart from expertise, they can provide additional staffing

through teacher placements or co-op requirements. Many former students have come back to help out in the CPHS “Enviro” program as part of their own studies.

3. Build traditions

Each course must have some things that never completely change and are unique to it. At CPHS we are careful to keep our Grade 12 physical education canoe trip different from the canoe trip in the ICP course, from the route right down to the design on the souvenir T-shirt. It can be as simple as the room the course occupies and mementoes that adorn the walls. Have competitions (in class and interscholastic) and keep the results from year to year. Keep a photo archive that students can access. Indeed, implement anything that establishes a strong sense of history and a unique community. Consciously build and manage traditions.

If you are running both a Grade 10 and a senior program, maintain some distinction between the two. This will flow naturally from a different curriculum, but carry it over into the traditions of both programs. The senior program should be a “step up,” not just “more of the same.”

The most important thing to maintain is the out-trips. These will be the most memorable elements of your program. Modify, tune, improve, but avoid changing the basic concept if possible. Circumstances may force you to eliminate a specific out-trip or you may decide that it no longer meets your needs. Replace it with something as memorable.



4. Consider money

Students pay for the trips. My students pay \$250 up front to take the senior “Enviro” course. The money collected for EPIC goes entirely to cover the cost of the out-trips— food, fuel, transportation, rentals, etc.—not to equipment, class supplies or normal maintenance. This is consistent with existing policy on all field trips, whether in history or art or physical education—students pay the cost of the trip. Your ICP program should not be held to a different standard simply because you do more and collect it all in one payment.

Your community pays for equipment and resources. Expect the school to provide in-kind services (accounting, payment processes, etc.) and possibly a core budget. Our senior program has never had a budget from the school, partly because we are not a department. Traditionally, that is how monies are dispersed in schools and not by program or course. Instead, on a purchase-by-purchase basis, we partner with several departments on materials and equipment we share. The money the ICP puts in the pot comes from various sources outside the school. These can include direct donations by private individuals or businesses, board initiatives, non-governmental organization (NGO) projects and student fundraising. I have avoided student fundraising at CPHS because I feel the time spent does not match the funds raised and they learn as much planning the trips and working on community projects. This is a personal choice. If fundraising works for you, go for it.

Bottom line: They can’t cut a budget that doesn’t exist—be as independent as possible.

5. Mentor staff

I believe that, over the last 20 years, burnout and promotions have killed more ICPs than education reform or curriculum change. Most ICPs begin in the heart of one teacher who finds a way to make it happen. The program is very much a product of this teacher’s talents and

energy. They are probably the program’s greatest asset. They are also its greatest liability. Running an ICP takes more time out of a teacher’s life than regular classroom teaching— mostly because we are away from our families while on out-trips. Families and marriages can pay a price for this. Added to the time is the intensity of student interaction. Done right, ICPs build a real community, and everyone, students and teacher, is emotionally attached. Outcomes matter more. Character shows. I love June because of the canoe trip. I hate it because it is the month of good-byes. After a few years, ICP teachers can burn out and just walk away from the program.

ICPs can also be a victim of their success. Really good programs attract attention. Good teachers get noticed and then streamed into other duties. Many former ICP teachers are now in board support positions or administration. Try not to let an ICP course become too closely identified with a single teacher.

Use the fourth credit as a way of introducing a new teacher to the program, to its workload and its traditions. This person will make the course his or her own eventually, but it must be a gradual transition. Having two ICPs, one at the Grade 10 level and another at Grade 12, allows teacher transition much the same way coaches of junior and senior athletic teams move up with their players. Anticipate the need for some kind of break by the main teacher every three to four years.

So, you want to run an ICP in your school! It is a noble aspiration. It can be the most powerful educational experience available in a conventional high school, for both the teacher and the student. It comes with a price tag. Not just your money, but also your time and your heart will be used up. After almost 20 years, I feel it’s been worth every penny, second and tear. I think Mike did, too.

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