



# Jay School Department Curriculum Bulletin

Does not meet  
Partially meets  
Meets Standards  
Exceeds

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## Essential Questions and the Unit Template...

A revised version of the *unit template* for Jay is available on the district web site. (Click *curriculum, teacher resources*.) There are also many instructional units developed at Jay using this template. It's a great tool with specific elements designed to increase student understanding... *essential questions*, for instance. The power of these guiding questions should not be underestimated. Quoting directly from McTighe and Wiggins's book, *Understanding by Design*:

*Essential questions:*

1. Go to the heart of a discipline [example: What does it mean to be human?]
2. Recur naturally through one's learning and in the history of a field
3. Raise other important questions

The authors also caution that some of these questions may be too abstract for young learners and so subcategorize as *Unit Questions* those with the following characteristics:

1. No one obvious "right" or self evident answer
2. Deliberately framed to provoke and sustain student interest

Consider the following example from McTighe: A health teacher decides her essential question for a nutrition unit is: "What is healthy eating?" After teaching this unit, she realizes that it isn't engaging her kids very much, so she switches it to "Can food that is good for you also taste good?" That's the point with these questions. You are supposed to try different versions until you get the one that hooks the students' interest.

While many teachers have made agile use of the template, some have questioned its purpose, seeing it as just a "required format." I would urge anyone who feels this way to get the "UBD" book. You'll see the reason for each unit component, and how they work together to improve student understanding. *Essential questions* are awesome!

JM



*The Unit Template was developed between 1998 and 2003 by Jay staff, with leadership from Rob Taylor and Karen Mitchell. It was revised slightly in 2004 by the curriculum office.*



"The best reference book on Unit design with these templates is *Understanding by Design*, by Jay McTighe and Grant Wiggins. (ASCD) Not familiar? You can borrow a copy from the curriculum office.

Next week:

*Enduring Understandings*

"If the student cannot produce a word problem for the algorithm, it has been taught out of sequence." (Madeline Hunter, on conceptual understanding in mathematics)