School Improvement Project Engages Educators Around Strengths

Desert Springs MS Staff Begins a Conversation Guided by Students’ Survey Results

Take a group of experienced middle school teachers and place them in the economically-challenged, emotionally-charged environment with NCLB Program Improvement sanctions hanging over the school year-after-year. Factor in a new school principal mid-year and a 50% drop in enrollment and staffing due to the opening of a new middle school nearby. Sounds like a recipe for educational chaos? Far from it. In fact, with the cooperation of the Palm Springs Teachers Association, this school has become the improbable location of an IFT-sponsored School Improvement project that is engaging staff and students in a joint exploration of how to build a program around what is going right on campus.

Utilizing student survey data, as well as candid staff assessments of the school’s strengths and challenges, a core team of DSMS educators has begun to craft a locally-designed program to improve outcomes at Desert Springs Middle School. Located in the Coachella Valley community of Desert Hot Springs, California, DSMS is one of five middle schools in the Palm Springs Unified District and serves approximately 800 students in grades six through eight. With the assistance of Anita Benitas, IFT Program Consultant, teachers, certificated support staff, classified staff and administrators are striving to enhance academic achievement by providing quality instructional programs to students and expanding the Intramural Program to provide more opportunities for after-school enrichment.

Despite the distraction of a midday lockdown due to a potential campus threat, the school staff gathered for an after-school meeting in February to hear Vivian Hernandez (RSP Math), Andrea Pascal (Language Arts), Steve Syfert (P.E.) and Amy Lont (Counseling) review the student survey questions and explain how the 150 responses were analyzed using IFT’s Galileo System. The system identifies the most important words and determines patterns of similarity. From this information, main concepts are identified and follow-up questions are developed.

(At left), Palm Springs TA President Beverly Bricker joins with the staff to analyze the students’ responses and to brainstorm possible actions that the educators can take to build on perceived strengths at the school. (At right), core leadership team members Amy Lont and Steve Syfert discuss the reasons for their involvement in the program and attempt to inspire their colleagues to invest time and energy in the locally-created school improvement project.
2012-2013 **IFT GRANT APPLICATIONS ARE AVAILABLE NOW ONLINE**

The 2012-2013 Grant Program is open and IFT eagerly awaits applications from CTA members and chapters for projects and programs that demonstrate the efficacy of the strength-based, teacher driven approach to school change.

Individual grants up to $5,000 and Chapter grants up to $20,000 are available for the next school year. Applications and information are available on-line at the IFT website [www.teacherdrivenchange.org](http://www.teacherdrivenchange.org). **The deadline to submit a grant application is April 30, 2012.**

Applications will be reviewed in May by the IFT Grant Selection Committee, composed of teachers from around the state. Awards will be announced in June. In the fall (and again in the spring), members of the Grant Selection Committee will join IFT staff to visit each project location and to meet with team members to discover their learnings.

Project grants are awarded directly to CTA members, although the funds are administered by their local Associations in order to avoid any tax liability to the grant recipients.

Grant proposals are judged based on a strength-based matrix (below) that includes seven factors. A Strength-Based Primer and Frequently-Asked Grant Questions can be found on the IFT website.

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**Student Centered**
Emphasis is placed on learning over teaching.

**Future Oriented**
Students have a dramatic, positive image of the future.

**School Family Relations**
Parents as a strong partner in the teaching and learning process are encouraged to be involved in their child’s education.

**Work Oriented**
Work is valued, purposeful, and relevant to students.

**Results Oriented**
Students understand strength-based thinking increases capacity and resilience to achieve goals.

**School-Wide Relations**
All school stakeholders are responsible for the education of each student.

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**Creating a School Community Culture of Success Through a Teacher Driven Strength-Based Framework**

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IFT Presentation to High School Restructuring Task Force- March 24, 2012- Los Angeles
Algebra Success Academy Presentation to AERA Conference- April 14, 2012- Vancouver