Students and Teachers Embrace Positive Deviance as the Culture-Changing Reform Becomes Established at Merced H.S.

Merced High School students have assumed critical leadership roles at MHS as the school’s Positive Deviance program continues to permeate the culture of the 100-plus-year-old institution. As the 2010-11 school year draws to a close, activist staff and students have, once again, taken the strength-based Positive Deviance message out to a receptive audience in the school community. More than one thousand underclassmen filled the MHS gymnasium all day on May 20, 2011 to hear a half-dozen PD graduating seniors talk about how they succeeded in school and to make recommendations to those who remain to build on their various strengths in order to graduate on time.

According to IFT Program Consultant, Anita Benitas, the program appears to be gaining strength at the school due to a committed cadre of staff members, steadfast administrative support and strong word-of-mouth among the students themselves.

For the 2011-12 school year, six additional staff members have stepped up to serve as PD mentors and to meet weekly with a core group of students to discuss the behaviors they utilize to maintain their good standing at MHS.

At the core of the Positive deviance philosophy is the belief that the solutions to the intractable problem of student dropouts are already being practiced by members of the school community and are waiting to be uncovered for all.
With the strong advocacy of Beverly Bricker, President of the Riverside County-based Palm Springs Teachers Association, educators at one local school are being asked to join the CTA Institute for Teaching on a journey of change next year. Desert Springs Middle School, located in Desert Hot Springs, a community in the Coachella Valley, is one of the four middle schools in the Palm Springs USD. Desert Springs serves approximately 1,650 students in grades six through eight.

For those focused on such things, its “accountability” status is Program Improvement- Year 5. But, as one 19-year veteran teacher remarked, “If you’re here to focus on our test scores and tell us what we’re doing wrong, we’re not interested. Been there. Done that.” Newly-assigned Principal Kiela Bonelli, who helped guide a teacher-led transformation at PUSD’s Corsini Elementary over the past half-dozen years, is convinced the time is right and the commitment to teacher-driven change is real. With the opening of a new middle school, DSMS enrollment will drop to 900 and the staff will shrink by approximately 50%. Many of the veteran teachers at DSMS see this as a real opportunity to do something different and are willing to bring IFT on as a partner in 2011-2012. Stay tuned!

**Farewell to IFT Board Members, David Sanchez and Gail Mendes**

The Institute for Teaching salutes our two out-going Board Members, David Sanchez (left) and Gail Mendes (right, with John De Luca) as they leave the IFT Board.

As President, David’s strong support helped establish a stable funding source for IFT. During her two years on the Board, Gail was a staunch advocate for IFT’s programs.