Merced High Staff Says that Positive Deviance Contributed to an Improved Graduation Rate and Higher Student Achievement

With the fourth anniversary of the Merced Positive Deviance project approaching in February 2013, high school teachers and administrators credit the program with helping MHS achieve a 25% reduction in the dropout rate. They believe that the program is a major factor in the dynamic transformation of the school culture. Merced High Principal John Olson unequivocally says, “Positive Deviance is part of the fabric of our school...PD is part of who we are.”

Positive Deviance is based on the observation that in every community there are certain individuals or groups whose uncommon behaviors and strategies enable them to find better solutions to problems than their peers, while having access to the same resources and facing similar or worse challenges. The Positive Deviance approach enables the community to discover these successful behaviors and strategies and develop a plan of action to promote their adoption by all.

Far from being a silver bullet, the Positive Deviance project has made its impact gradually over time. Since being invited by the Merced District Teachers Association in 2009, the IFT has partnered with the MHS core leadership team of educators to focus on discovering answers about how all students can succeed in school and graduate.

That student-centered process resulted in the creation of an evolving student-to-student mentoring program, as well as a strengthening of supportive relationships between teachers and students. It has enabled Merced High to become a real difference-maker for many. The District noticed, too, and it made the PD expansion to all District schools part of its recent Race to the Top (RTTT) application.

Mark Munger, a consultant from the Positive Deviance Initiative at Tufts University, has been with the project from the beginning. He believes that a group of committed and sympathetic teachers chose to address a seemingly intractable problem (dropouts and unacceptably low graduation rates) and set in motion a school wide evolution.

According to Munger, “they invested time, energy, empathic attention, and more informed learning to students who needed all of that, and perhaps more. Those teachers, and the students who reciprocated by starting to disclose what their problems and solutions were, invested trust and built relationships.”

(Above) Teachers from Merced High and several other District high schools focused intently on students’ responses during an interview that was part of a Positive Deviance training in November 2012. By volunteering to serve as PD mentors, they were able to practice listening and questioning skills designed to bring forth insights into how some students succeed in school despite facing the same obstacles as those at risk of dropping out.

(Below) Established more than a century ago, Merced High School is the oldest of five comprehensive high schools to be established in the Merced Union High School District. MHS continues to be a very diverse campus. In 2011-12, its 2,770 students included: 54% Hispanic, 20% White, 17% Asian, and 7% African American. Approximately 9.2% of the students were classified as English Learners, with Spanish and Hmong being the two most prevalent non-English languages.
Marin Teachers Tackling Professional Development

Can teachers and certificated support staff develop as professionals without being forced to participate in mind-numbing, one-size-fits-all professional development activities that may or may not have any relevance to their day-to-day responsibilities with students? Educators in Marin County believe the answer is absolutely “YES.”

An after-school meeting in San Rafael on December 10th attracted a dedicated and energetic group of professionals (above), including teachers from the Dixie, Lagunitas, Mill Valley and Ross Valley school districts. Led by 5th-grade teacher Michele Crncich Hodge (far right), the group included Mo Noyer, Laura Riley, Larry Niguo, Kim Suppes, Dee Kauer, Kim Munoz, Ali DeGuia-Bumgarner, Amy Faulkner, as well as former teacher Meredith Pike-Baky, now representing the respected Bay Area Writing Project. Their work was supported by Anita Benitas and Dick Gale of IFT, as well as local staffer, Ed Hasson.

The work of establishing the Marin Institute for Teaching Excellence (M.I.T.E.) exemplifies what strength-based teacher driven change is all about. IFT is supporting this county-wide effort to create a teacher-led organization that provides, teachers, students and parents a single place to find local master teachers, view best practices and connect with teachers for on-going ideas and support.

The web-based structure of the organization will showcase local teacher work and will be independent of school district administration for funding and direction. However, once-established, partnerships could be formed with school districts to expand the use of this teacher-run resource for district staff development and site-based professional learning community work.

In addition, conversations are being held with the active, local non-profit, the Marin Community Foundation, to explore ways to integrate the work of M.I.T.E. with the foundation’s efforts to close the achievement gap in the County. The work of collecting relevant data has already begun as part of the Marin “Collective Impact” effort. Dixie Teachers Assn. President Michele Crncich Hodge represents CTA and local teachers on this organization.