Teacher Innovation Expo Helps Put the “Good Teaching” into the CTA Good Teaching Conference-South

The cream of IFT’s grant class of 2015-16 treated nearly 150 of their fellow educators to an inspirational look at their successful local grant projects. Expo participants found out how strength-based principles, coupled with resources from CTA members’ voluntary dues contributions, can yield dynamic new opportunities for learning and student engagement.

The Hyatt Regency Orange County was the site for the largest-ever IFT Teacher Innovation Expo. The March 17th event attracted dozens of educators (above) from around the state, including CTA President Eric Heins (lower right) who stopped by the Expo to show his support for this critical teacher leadership work.

Carol Ashdown, an Orange County participant who grudgingly attended at the request of her Association President, remarked afterwards, “I was beyond surprised that the conference actually offered valuable information. I couldn’t acquire enough. I left the day wanting the conference to continue. I wanted more.”

The Expo was organized to offer a glimpse into the programs that are funded totally, or in part, by IFT grants. Several of the projects have been so successful that they are included in district LCAP plans and funded with district resources. Strength-based teacher driven change.

Some recipients brought along students who have gone through the grant funded programs to speak about their experiences and showcase their work. (Dance students from Fontana’s A.B. Miller High (upper left) and Engineering students from Murdy Elementary in Garden Grove (upper right) provided participants with a clear example of how these projects are student-centered.

Presenters Lori Clock and Beth Micari and Spade Brigade student Wyatt Webb (lower left) found outlets for their interests in strength-based projects focused on gardens and horticulture. Clock’s project at Gardenhill Elementary has received grants for two consecutive years. She said she started the Spade Brigade as an intervention for socially and emotionally at-risk students, who comprise half the brigade. The other half are potential student leaders.

Please continue to page 2 to learn more about these wonderful grant projects in an article by Charles Kerchner of Claremont Graduate University. He has studied the work of teacher unions for decades.
Union Program Boosts Classroom Innovation
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By: Professor Charles Taylor Kerchner, Claremont Graduate University

“Want more innovative teaching? I know the secret sauce. Find teachers who already innovate, get out of their way, give them a little money, and invite them to share the results with other teachers. That's what I witnessed last week at a gathering of the Institute for Teaching. The IFT is a non-profit offshoot of the California Teachers Association, and since 2014 it has put nearly $1-million into assisting teachers with instructional projects of their devising.

In education budget terms, the grants the IFT distributes are tiny, from $5,000 to $20,000. But CTA members from around the state voluntarily add $20 to their annual dues to support the grants and other activities that the IFT calls strength-based teacher driven change. They build on what teachers are passionate about.

Presenters at the 2017 Teacher Innovation Expo included La Mirada elementary teacher Lori Clock. Lori started the Spade Brigade Garden as an intervention for socially and emotionally at-risk students, who comprise half the brigade. The other half are potential student leaders.

Dan and Dennis Gibbs, created the Imperial Valley Discovery Zone that brings sophisticated STEM lessons to elementary students in one of the state’s poorest counties. They transform high school students into lab-coat wearing Master Explainers, who build scientific apparatus in a high school maker space and present lessons to second graders.

Other teachers, sometimes with their students, presented their projects along with tips to other teachers about how to be successful in gaining an IFT grant.

Participants learned about Bill Shively from Willows, who takes intermediate school students on canoe trips, Nicole Robinson from Fontana, who started a dance collaborative, Shanan Spears from Clarksburg, who started a flower shop, and Beth Micari from Exeter, who pioneers ornamental horticulture at Kaweah High School.

Meanwhile, Camie Walker (above) from Garden Grove creates hands-on science with fifth graders, and Bridgette Kennedy and Phil Sanchez from Palm Springs inserted archery into adventure classes to give students who are not the tallest or fastest a way to build self-confidence and success. And Rosa Rivera Furumoto introduces science and art to low-income Latina/o students in Los Angeles as a way of studying climate change.

Is this stuff real unionism? For more than a quarter-century, I’ve advocated joining bread-and-butter unionism, political action, and organizing teaching as a profession. With organizations such as the IFT and the California Labor Management Initiative there’s a better chance that unions will initiate changes rather than block them.

I see points of light. David B Cohen, a Palo Alto High School teacher who spent a year looking at exemplary colleagues in classrooms throughout California sees them, too. Cohen, who wrote Capturing the Spark, is an active CTA member and was a featured guest at the IFT event. In his book, he ticks off a long list of large and small ways that education might be improved: from school designs to arts in the community, and peer review of teachers. Then he makes the point that all these activities have been carried out by teacher unions in California.

The CTA could do even more of this; building teacher leadership is good for teachers and kids alike. It buffs up the union's image, and broadens its political power. And, oh yes, CTA members like this work.”

The CTA Institute for Teaching (IFT) is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization. IFT supports strength-based teacher driven change in school communities across California. Please contact IFT at 619-683-3990 or at ift@teacherdrivenchange.org