Teacher Think Tanks: Member Engagement & Collaboration
With a Local Focus on Strength-Based Education

The North Orange County Teacher Think Tank will continue to work toward providing Professional Learning experiences to teachers (with a specific focus on Early Career Educators in years 0-5) in collaboration with local unions, local universities, and work toward building relationships to gain the support of local service centers. We are looking at refining the promotion, recruitment, and delivery of our current model of professional learning experiences so that it can be replicated by other local associations. The goal of the Think Tank is to create cohorts of support for teachers, by teachers, with teachers to share best teaching practices.

The Moreno Valley Teacher Think Tank is exploring strength-based and restorative practices in the classroom. We are reading two books: Better Than Carrots or Sticks: Restorative Practices for Positive Classroom Management and Safe and Peaceful Schools. We will have a video conference session with one of the authors of Safe and Peaceful Schools, Dr. John Winslade at our next meeting. Members of the Think Tank are also presenting articles of interest at each meeting to generate more thought on Strength-Based Justice and related topics. We are also looking at creating a classroom management training along these lines.

The San Diego Teacher Think Tank will focus on Nature-Based Education. This is a new direction for us, but we are in consensus about the value, and the urgency of students (and teachers) connecting with the natural world. Our passion is school gardening and horticultural therapy; whether it be forestry, ocean studies, or the various methods of growing food (i.e. Hydroponics and Aquaponics). We urge all teachers to read the book Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder by Richard Louv. It tells a powerful story about the fate of a generation addicted to electronics and too much screen time. Our Think Tank began this Spring by visiting school sites with beautiful gardens and amazing aquaponics programs and will continue to examine ways that strength-based education is materialized in the form of Nature-Based Education.

The South Orange County Teacher Think Tank will be focusing on our strength-based work around IFT’s seven factors. Using our website, a podcast and a teacher-driven, web-based app (being piloted by the SOCTT), OnCore Classroom Interventions, we will be exploring strategies on how to increase student engagement, leveraging student strengths, and empowering teachers to provide interventions students need.

The Los Angeles Teacher Think Tank met for the first time over two days in late May. These CTA/UTLA members are working to determine what approach they want to take to promote strength-based education. Stay tuned!
Think Tank Research and Design Team Focuses on Strength-Based School Visits

Nearly a dozen CTA members from six different Southern California Teacher Think Tanks gathered in Orange County on Saturday, June 29th. Their common goal was to continue the growth of the strength-based education movement. Temecula Valley High School Science teacher Toby Brannon neatly summed up the gathering as “the crossroads of passion and opportunity.”

The group assessed the current educational environment as being open to teacher-driven, student-centered, locally focused solutions. They would like to expand Teacher Think Tank work to other parts of California by enhancing new teacher trainings with strength-based summits; supporting an intense focus on students’ passions; increasing parent and community engagement with strength-based approaches; creating and disseminating strength-based digital assets, as well as tangible grant funds to increase our union’s engagement with members around instructional support.

Research & Design participants include (front row, from left), Debbi Schroder (retired Anaheim educator); Judy Blakeney (Capistrano Unified EA); Beth Devakul (United Teachers Los Angeles); Emalyn Leppard (San Diego EA); Marie Germaine (United Teacher Los Angeles); Michelle Voye (Temecula Valley EA); Linda Buckly (Beaumont TA). The back-row features (from left), Tricia Hyun (Fullerton Elem. EA); Hiam Awai (Capistrano UEA); Michelle Ramos (Covina Unified EA) and Toby Brannon (Temecula Valley EA). The group would like to build on two successful school visits to IFT grant recipients at Parks Junior High in Orange County and Temecula Valley High School in Riverside County. These visits brought students, parents, teachers and school administrators together for a close-up look at these teacher-driven successes.

Thrively’s Strengths Assessment Provides a Roadmap to Each Student’s Talents

Thrively was founded on a core philosophy that every child has a genius and they deserve to “thrive.” Thrively believes that the journey to a thriving student has four steps: (1) Enhancing Self-Awareness, (2) Finding Purpose; (3) Building Skills & (4) Applying Learning to Solve Real World Problems.

The IFT encourages CTA members to try this tool in their classroom and find out what teachers in Fullerton are discovering as they utilize this resource districtwide. It helps to democratize the classroom and unlock the talent in every child. It provides students an identity, not just a letter grade. Thrively can help to enhance the emotional connection between teacher and student, and studies have shown that can significantly increase classroom engagement. Please contact the IFT if you’re interested in using Thrively.

Dr. Yale Wishnick, IFT Strength-based Guru (left) speaks with Thrively CEO, Girish Venkat about how knowing their students’ strengths hugely benefits their teachers.

IFT Institute for Teaching (IFT) is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization.
IFT supports strength-based teacher driven change in school communities across California.
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