



## **The IFT Approach**

The CTA IFT is attempting to bring a new approach to school change. Based on our work with the Gates and Packard Foundations, the IFT determined that school change must include two key factors: (1) It needs to be teacher-driven and (2) It should be based on what is working and successful in our schools and classrooms.

By focusing on what works in our schools, the IFT believes strength-based models for school change add a new dimension to school improvement. Strength-based models provide an asset-based approach that teachers can use to emphasize talents over weaknesses and strengths over deficits to create a learning environment that supports and encourages every student to do their best. What makes strengths-based approaches particularly important is they provide a clear focus and direction for teacher driven change. These changes can be incorporated into a plan of future action.

IFT discovered a new sense of optimism and accomplishment when teachers were given the responsibility for describing what makes the teaching and learning process most successful. As a result, the CTA IFT is now helping our chapters and members become experts on solutions, as they begin to change educational policy from the local level.

## **Current IFT Projects**

- ***IFT Grant Program***

Beginning in the 2010-11 school year, a dozen CTA members and chapters with ideas about improving student achievement are receiving funding to turn those ideas into reality. That's because the first-ever IFT Grant program has selected twelve mini grant recipients from among nearly fifty applications. Designed to support the belief that the most effective reform proceeds from the bottom up, rather than the top down; eight individual mini grants were awarded to teams of educators in amounts up to \$5,000. In addition, four local/affiliates were selected for chapter grants in amounts up to \$20,000. All pertinent information regarding the IFT Grant program can be found on the IFT website- [www.teacherdrivenchange.org](http://www.teacherdrivenchange.org). Applications for the 2011-12 school year are due by April 30, 2011.

Acknowledging CTA members' critical support for the CTA Foundation for Teaching and Learning through a portion of the \$20 annual reverse dues check off, the IFT Board of Directors strongly supported the creation of this grant program as a way for IFT to give something back to CTA members.

The grants are designed for K-12 teachers and certificated support staff, ESP members and community college instructors. All proposals are reviewed by an IFT Grant Selection committee composed of outstanding teachers from various grade levels throughout California, using a strength-based rubric.

- ***Merced High School Positive Deviance Project***

This project, in its second year at Merced High, is designed to reduce the dropout rate. Under a grant from The Hewlett Foundation, a team from the Merced UHSD attended the IFT Dropout Conference in 2008 and then applied for and was accepted for this program. The initial meeting of Merced High School stakeholders was held in late February 2009, with Mark T. Munger, who is associated with The Positive Deviance Initiative of Tufts University, serving as the consultant.

The project is based on a fundamental idea. In every high school there are students that are practicing behaviors that are keeping them in school. In every high school there are teachers, administrators, and parents practicing behaviors that are keeping students in school.

The Positive Deviance Approach is designed to identify behaviors and practices that keep students in school and encourages the rest of the student community to adopt them. The IFT believes the potential for the Positive Deviance Approach to reduce high school dropouts is vast and largely untapped.

- ***The Algebra Project Twin Rivers***

This project began with teachers from Allison Elementary School who were inspired by the work of Bob Moses and the Algebra Project. The project, in its second year of implementation, has grown to become a larger partnership involving the CTA IFT, the Twin Rivers United Educators, the Twin Rivers Unified School District, the UC Davis CRESS Center and the Sacramento Valley Organizing Community/IAF.

Recognizing that algebra is a gate-keeper course for higher mathematics, the purpose of the APTR is to support algebraic reasoning in the upper elementary grades; prepare students for middle grades mathematics and Algebra 1 by the eighth grade, thus, preparing students for college preparatory mathematics in high school, and the mathematical knowledge required for college entrance, success in college courses, and lifelong civic engagement.

The Algebra Project uses mathematics as an organizing tool to ensure quality public school education. As such, APTR brings together and engages families, students, teachers, administrators, and community members in ways that support student well-being and collaborative community school partnerships.

An evaluation of the program's first year by the *CRESS Center – UC Davis School of Education* indicates that the Algebra Project pilot is encouraging in terms of parent participation, student engagement, teachers' pedagogical learning, and student achievement.

The report also found general appreciation from the school principal, the associate superintendent and district staff for the increased resources made available by the project to enrich students' experiences through field trips and engage their families through events and other outreach events.

Student survey results indicate high levels of agreement that math is important, interesting, necessary for future success, and useful in everyday life. Students also expressed generally positive attitudes about math and found their experience in this school year's math lessons to be particularly engaging.

- **STEM Education**

Can California's K-14 students keep pace and adapt to a world that is being transformed by science and technology? What will it take to ensure that California students receive high quality instruction in Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics-related subjects? These questions are critical in an educational environment in which standardized test results are in danger of becoming the only accepted unit of measurement.

IFT has joined with others (colleges & universities, science museums & libraries, businesses, science and technology companies and philanthropic organizations) to become part of a statewide STEM network that will develop and advocate for a cohesive STEM education agenda for California. Among the goals are: (1) increase high quality STEM learning opportunities for all K-14 students both in and out of school; and (2) build students' enthusiasm for STEM, and their knowledge and capacity to apply STEM to address real world challenges facing their daily lives.

IFT is willing to work with foundations and the business community on common goals, but we acknowledge significant obstacles, including: continuing budget cuts that have decimated CA school districts; shortages of qualified STEM educators confident in their STEM teaching abilities; fragmented and shrinking professional and career development opportunities; time constraints during the regular school day, especially in the early grades; limited funding for hands-on science materials and technology resources, tools and support; and significant inequities in students' access to in-school and out-of-school STEM learning opportunities.

Currently, IFT is developing a partnership with the Level Playing Field Institute to support the expansion of their SMASH program, the *Summer Math & Science Honors Academy*. This one to three-year program for high-achieving, low-income high school students of color provides a 5-week college residential enrichment program. Courses are taught by local STEM high school teachers.

- **Early Childhood Education Alliance**

This project was established with the support of the Packard Foundation to train and inform CTA members, leaders and staff on strength-based models in Early Childhood Education. The IFT, in partnership with iCohere Inc., designed a virtual conference entitled ***What Works: Strengths-Based Approaches to Early Childhood Education***. The goal was to provide support to preschool teachers and other ECE professionals by encouraging them to apply these strengths in new ways in their classrooms.

Nearly 700 ECE practitioners registered for the online conference during the three weeks from October 27 - November 13, 2009. The conference resembled a typical face-to-face conference, with featured speakers, panelists and case studies of shining examples. Response from participants was enthusiastic. Said one, *"Thank you for your interest in children and helping us all see that by looking at strengths, we can often help children more than looking at the problems."* IFT will continue to examine ways to use technology to bring educators together and to support quality early childhood education programs.

In addition, IFT continues to work closely with the leadership of the CTA Early Childhood Education Committee of State Council to explore other opportunities to enhance preschool education. The passage of the Kindergarten Readiness Act was a significant long-term achievement in this vital area and IFT supports efforts to involve our teachers and other members in the critical details of implementation.

- **California School Garden Network**

Recognizing that many CTA members are already supporting school garden projects at their local school sites, the IFT Board voted in December 2009 to become a California School Garden Network Partner.

The Institute for Teaching recognizes and applauds the work of the California School Garden Network (CSGN) to create and sustain school gardens throughout the state. The IFT agrees with CSGN's mission to promote school gardens as a means "to enhance academic achievement, a healthy lifestyle, environmental stewardship, and community and social development."

Teachers have told us that their gardens offer a wide variety of benefits to their students. They are enthusiastic that the lessons taught in school gardens apply to such a wide range of disciplines. The CSGN's 2006 book, Gardens for Learning: Creating & Sustaining Your School Garden is available free as a download from their website: <http://www.csgn.org/images/pdf/GFLBook.pdf>

- **Parent-Teacher Home Visit Project**

IFT is an active supporter of the Sacramento-based *Parent-Teacher Home Visit Project*. Home visits work and teachers have always done them. That practice has been enhanced with a strategic focus and collaboration dedicated to this proven strategy with positive outcomes for families, staff, and most importantly, students of all grade levels. During the past three years, IFT and CTA formally partnered with the Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project to help their expansion to new school communities.

The concept behind the Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project is simple. Rather than blaming each other, teachers and parents come together, in a unique setting, as equal partners, to build trust and form a relationship where they can take the time to share dreams, expectations, experiences, and tools regarding the child's academic success. Once a relationship is formed, the partners are empowered, finding accountability with each other to make the necessary changes to insure that students experience academic and social success. Independent evaluations of our home visit efforts show increased student attendance rates, increased student test scores, decreased suspension and expulsion rates, and decreased vandalism at sites.

- **IFT Learning & Resource Centers**

The CTA Institute for Teaching has joined *Amazon.com's Associates Program* to form Learning & Resource Centers in support of teacher-driven change. Hundreds of books, materials, and classroom supplies have been selected and grouped in three Learning & Resource Centers: *Professional Development, Elementary Education, and Secondary Education*. Within these Centers there are also a variety of resources on student services, the fine arts, and the community college.

These resources will help CTA members develop lesson plans, strategic goals for their classroom, and align their curriculum to state standards. The IFT Learning & Resource Centers provide one-stop, just-in-time support for members' everyday teaching needs. By using the Learning & Resource Center links to make a purchase, the IFT receives a referral fee for sales of qualifying books and products.