

COMMENTS From You

Santaluces High School in Palm Beach County, Florida, serves approximately 2,300 students with a demographic breakdown of 30% White, 33% Black, 29% Hispanic, and 8% other. As in most schools nationwide, reading has been, and continues to be, our greatest challenge. A little over three years ago, our District offered a CRISS Level I training during the summer. Although I received my initial training in CRISS in the mid-1990s and used many of the strategies in my own science class, I felt in my current role as administrator I needed the training again. Throughout the training the “aha’s” kept happening. The brain research and the Principles and Philosophy of CRISS made a powerful connection with me. Mr. Steve Ahern, a social studies teacher who attended with me, shared that he also felt the same connections, so he and I later attended a second CRISS Level I training and continued the process to become CRISS trainers.

In December of 2004, 25 of our teachers came (on a Saturday) to Steve’s and my first CRISS training. Teachers from every content area and several elective areas attended. Our principal and two other assistant principals also joined in the learning. As the training went on, Steve and I witnessed those same “aha’s” happening again, this time for those 25 attendees who soon became our greatest advocates. The word spread throughout the school, “this is a worthwhile and valuable training that will make a difference in the classroom.”

Over the next year and a half, Steve and I trained over 85% of our staff, including all of our Assistant Principals. Many of our teachers attended a second Level I training so they could really absorb the learning principles. We accepted the fact that bringing a new program into the school would take time, so I really was not surprised that our test scores did not improve during that first year, but actually went down. Even though they were disappointed with the test scores, the teachers knew what was happening in the classroom was positive and successful. We were all ecstatic when our state exam results came back in the spring of 2006. The percent of students that made learning gains in our lowest readers improved from 48% to 64%. Overall, as a school, our students improved in reading Learning Gains from 44% to 52%. The Learning Gains number,

developed by Florida, is used for the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). Learning Gain formulas are quite complex, but basically, there is a certain number of points that determine whether a student has made at least one year’s worth of growth from the previous year’s assessment. In addition, our scores include three components for reading. The three most significant categories are:

- raising the scores of students who are in the lowest 25% of a school’s population.
- making learning gains with the total population of students taking the test.
- making what is called “high standards,” which relates to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Annual Yearly Progress (AYP).

As I reflect over the past three years, I see a number of factors that have contributed to the success of Project CRISS. First of all, Steve and I are very passionate about teaching and about the CRISS Principles and Philosophy. Steve uses CRISS daily, and his classroom has become a model of exemplary CRISS instruction, always open for teachers to visit. As an administrator, I am able to observe effective teaching and active learning in the classroom. But more importantly, I now know why learning must happen this way. I suppose it is very unusual to have teachers actually invite an administrator in to observe a lesson, but now

it is not uncommon to be asked to watch a CRISS strategy that is being tried—sometimes for the first time. Our school has a positive climate of learning as well as a culture of collaboration between teachers—within the same content areas and throughout the various disciplines. At any given time, I can walk into a planning room and hear a common CRISS vocabulary being used when teachers are planning a lesson or unit. Also, teachers find it very helpful to have a CRISS trainer right on the school campus. By contacting Steve or me, they can get immediate assistance or feedback on their CRISS applications.

In addition to administrative support, we offer follow-up on a regular basis. Steve and I have continued to offer the Level I training to new teachers and/or to those who have not had the opportunity to attend as yet. We try to include some type of CRISS review at monthly learning team meetings. In the future, we will offer a follow-up training for those

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who have already attended a CRISS Level I session. We will revisit some of the content from the CRISS Level I training, share some new strategies we were not able to fully model from the first CRISS Level I, and provide sharing time for the teachers. Our next step is to encourage our “veteran” CRISS teachers to raise the bar and really work toward the ultimate CRISS mission, which is to turn over the principles and strategies ownership to the students. We’re not there yet, but we’re working on it.

Editor’s note: In the spring of 2007, students at Santaluces High School made a gain of 6% in the high standards portion of the reading category on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test.

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