

# Project CRISS Helps “Transition” Students To High School



*By Ken Miller*

## **Creation of Freshmen Center and Transitions Program**

In 1993, the Lake Central School Corporation in St. John, Indiana, opened the Freshmen Center in order to more effectively meet the needs of our growing population of ninth grade students. Today, the Freshmen Center serves nearly 900 students and provides our students with programs and services designed to ease the transition from middle school to high school.

During the 2004-2005 school year, our Freshmen Center staff began developing plans for a program that would provide greater opportunities for success within our at-risk student population. The freshmen Transitions program was developed to serve regular education freshmen who typically may be at risk of not graduating from high school. I selected a team of three freshmen-level teachers in language arts, algebra, and science to work with me on the development of our Transitions program.

Although the primary purpose of the program is instructional support in language arts, algebra, and science, we also decided that the students would be enrolled in “Career Planning and Success Skills.” This class would focus on career planning, in addition to effective study skills, learning strategies, and an introduction to high school. I decided I would teach this class to the freshmen in the Transitions program. As building principal, this would allow me to work more closely with our at-risk students and to better understand the issues encountered by our Transitions teachers during the first year of implementation.

## **Preparing Teachers for the Transitions Program**

To help prepare for the Transitions program, our team considered a wide range of staff development programs. At the time, our school district was not familiar with Project CRISS, but we received information about an upcoming Level I Project CRISS workshop at our area educational service center. We took a closer look at the philosophy

behind Project CRISS and determined it could help provide a foundation for achieving the goals of our Transitions program.

Our Transitions team attended the three-day Project CRISS workshop in February and March 2005. The team was extremely impressed with the presentation of the principles and philosophy of CRISS. We were also very enthusiastic about the prospect of utilizing the wide range of CRISS strategies with our incoming Transitions students.

## **CRISS Becomes a Part of Transitions**

As principal of the Freshmen Center, I could clearly see how Project CRISS would be very effective for our at-risk students, as well as our entire freshmen student population. In order to provide opportunities for more of our staff to receive Project CRISS training, I made a decision to become a Project CRISS District Trainer.

As the 2005-06 school year approached, our Transitions team began developing plans to utilize Project CRISS strategies throughout the four subject areas. Our focus was on helping our at-risk students to become more metacognitive, through regular utilization of the Project CRISS principles and strategies. Our team determined that we would utilize Project CRISS principles and strategies in our language arts, science, and algebra instruction. As a result of the Project CRISS training, our Transitions teachers would be very intentional about integrating background knowledge, purpose setting, and active learning into their daily instruction.

## **Getting Started with CRISS in the “Career Planning and Success Skills” Class**

As I developed plans for “Career Planning and Success Skills,” I incorporated the Project CRISS principles and strategies to help my students better organize, understand, and retain high school course information.

On the first day in my class, the students were paired with classmates and shown the use of Venn diagrams. The Venn diagrams were used to record personal similarities and differences. Student introductions were then made through use of the diagrams. This provided an excellent opportunity for the students from the various feeder schools to get to know each other.

During the first week of school, we focused on an introduction to high school. The students were given time

to individually review the Lake Central Student Handbook. Next, through selective underlining and instructional conversations, the students took time to become more familiar with the contents of the handbook. The students were then asked to complete a short, formative assessment by identifying key concepts in the handbook. Through the use of Think-Pair-Share, the students shared their results with the others in the class.

## Using CRISS to Engage Students in Counselor Presentations

During the second week of school, we invited the freshmen counselors to meet with our Transitions students. The counselors were asked to discuss a wide range of topics, including the guidance services, the four-year plan, college entrance requirements, and expectations in high school.

Prior to hearing the presentation from the freshmen guidance counselors, the students completed an anticipation guide related to high school expectations. Following the counselor presentation, the students were given three minutes to complete a free-write entry expressing thoughts, concerns, and issues related to their next four years in high school.

To conclude the orientation, the students were provided with information on the use of Two-Column Notes and were instructed to record main ideas and likes/dislikes about their first two weeks of high school. The Two-Column Notes were then used to construct RAFT papers. The students assumed the role of a ninth grade student writing a letter to an eighth grade friend. They shared their personal experiences during the beginning days of high school.

## CRISS Helps Students Become Strategic Learners

Throughout the first month of the school year, I also explained, modeled, and provided opportunities for

application of Project CRISS strategies such as Power Notes, Concept Mapping, and summarizing. The students' first practical application of Concept Maps was to create a simple map of five of their personal qualities. They used 8½ x 14 paper and colored markers to construct the Concept Maps.

As a formative assessment, the students completed a brief active reading activity that incorporated the Project CRISS strategies I presented. For the purpose of application, I gave them a short article on the Great Lakes and they (1) selectively highlighted the main ideas, (2) created summary note cards from the highlighting, (3) constructed Power Notes from the note cards, and (4) developed a Concept Map illustrating the unique features of each of the Great Lakes.

During the second semester, our focus in the class was on career planning activities. We continued to utilize numerous Project CRISS strategies, as we discussed job-seeking skills, career exploration, and career awareness.

Project CRISS has provided our Transitions teachers with the framework to help our students succeed in high school. Through the continued use of writing, discussion, and transformation activities, our at-risk students at the Lake Central Freshmen Center continue to become more active, self-directed learners.

## Involvement in CRISS Expands

Since the first group of Transitions teachers completed Level I Project CRISS training in 2005, an additional sixty-three teachers in the Lake Central School Corporation have voluntarily completed Project CRISS training! Twenty-six Lake Central teachers have also signed up to attend the upcoming Project CRISS training sessions in our district.

Our Project CRISS training began as a staff development program for teachers of ninth grade at-risk students. I am proud to say, it is quickly becoming a widely adopted philosophy in the Lake Central Freshmen Center and throughout the Lake Central School Corporation.

**About the Author**-Ken Miller is a Project CRISS District Trainer and Principal of the Freshmen Center in the Lake Central School Corporation in St. John, Indiana. The Freshmen Center is the first Project CRISS Demonstration Site in Indiana.

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