



Promoting a Culture of Success to Improve Student Engagement, Achievement and Retention

The California Teachers Association is committed to school reform. CTA has demonstrated this commitment by securing enactment of the Quality Education Investment Act to increase funding for low-performing schools and by creating and supporting teacher-driven, strength-based school reforms through its Institute for Teaching.

In 2007, the CTA took unprecedented action to redirect \$3 billion to help the state's lowest performing schools. In spite of vigorous opposition from members of the Education Coalition, CTA crafted an agreement with the Governor and the State Superintendent of Public Instruction that directed additional money to our schools of greatest need, money that would have otherwise been appropriated to the general fund. As the result, 487 schools are now guaranteed additional funding for seven years to reduce class size, reduce student counselor ratio, improve professional development and staffing distribution, and increase the quality of teachers and administrators.

Over the past several years, the CTA Institute for Teaching has received grants from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the California Endowment, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Hewlett Foundation, and the Irvine Foundation. In addition, over 90% of CTA members provide voluntary dues support to the CTA IFT. This demonstrates that IFT has the essential trust and confidence of California's public school teachers to build the school-community partnerships necessary for determining what needs to be maintained and what systemic changes need to take place in California's public schools.

CTA IFT Groundwork

The CTA IFT has found that school change is a dynamic and complex process. Through conversations, focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and surveys, the CTA IFT has discovered that teachers, administrators and other school-community stakeholders must be involved at every phase of school improvement initiatives. Teachers and students are likely to respond in a favorable way when: (1) change initiatives are stated in positive terms; (2) change initiatives are driven by internal rules and regulations; (3) change initiatives are tailored to specific teaching and learning conditions; and (4) change initiatives depend on school and community stakeholders for success.

The CTA IFT has developed teacher-driven, strength-based initiatives to improve student engagement, achievement and retention. Through strength-based approaches, teachers and other school-community stakeholders have been found to be more energized and interested in participating in the change process.

This conclusion is based on data the CTA IFT obtained from teachers, students and their parents. By conducting strength-based interviews, the CTA IFT heard wonderful stories from successful African American and Latino students and their parents. From this data, the CTA IFT identified seven factors that provide a foundation for school success – factors that can be applied throughout our school communities and classrooms. The seven factors are:

1. Focusing on the Future
2. Strengthening the Work Ethic
3. Expanding Family-School Relations
4. Strengthening the Social Ethic
5. Valuing Child Rearing Practices
6. Encouraging System-Wide Thinking
7. Moving to a Learning-Centered Environment

Focusing on School and Community Assets

Asset-based pedagogical models intentionally seek to discover the exceptionality of children by exploring their unique talents, strengths, and qualities. Asset-based or strength-based thinking actively explores and identifies students' positive interests and experiences, with the overarching goal of creating a classroom environment that increases student capacity and resiliency.

Framed around personal and social assets, strength-based strategies encourage teachers, students, and parents to play a major role in setting curriculum, instruction and assessment, while maintaining California's rigorous standards. Classroom teachers, with the support of staff and parents, develop age appropriate procedures and practices that involve their students in the teaching and learning process. By focusing on assets – what is working in our classrooms, schools, and communities – teachers, with the support of staff and parents, become more responsible and accountable for the social, emotional, and academic performance of students.

The CTA IFT supports change initiatives that create a student culture of success organized around school, community, and student assets. By creating teaching and learning relationships around talents, strengths, and positive experiences, school-community stakeholders can advance an academic and social environment to improve student engagement, achievement and retention.

Within this environment, student talents and strengths are aligned with standards that connect the curriculum to instructional strategies and assessment measures. In the context of the teacher-student relationship, the strength-based approach draws connections between a student's positive experiences, expertise, and interests and academic standards, curriculum, and assessment.

Building a Culture of Success

Strength-based school improvement represents a major shift from traditional school reform approaches where the responsibility for change lies in the hands of a few individuals. Fundamental to this approach is the assertion that meaningful and sustainable school improvement is more likely when school-community stakeholders are excited about the changes they want to make, have a clear plan for action, and the confidence that they can be successful. Strength based organizational development strategies have been used by many corporations, hospitals, and government agencies to improve performance and to solve intractable problems. These approaches have been used successfully in school settings as well.

The strength-based design uses both qualitative and quantitative methods to collect data on school, community, and student assets. Through strength-based interviews, affirmative assessments, surveys, audits, and focus groups, school-community stakeholders generate information on structures, procedures, and practices that support student success. What makes this data appropriate and useful for school improvement is that it can be easily tested for social validity and reliability.

The CTA IFT supports the view that student assets– not problems– should drive the teaching and learning process and that the acquisition of knowledge and skills around student talents forms the basis of a rigorous and relevant curriculum.

Through strength-based school improvement models, individuals share stories that reveal their deepest thoughts and insights that support a culture of success. School-community stakeholders, thinking together, describe themes, patterns, relationships, and connections in detail. The result is a comprehensive body of knowledge designed to improve student engagement, achievement and retention.

For more information, please visit www.teacherdrivenchange.org and www.cta.org.