



## Aligning Rich Educational Strategy with Effective Teaching & Leading for an Evolving Global Economy through Creative Learning, Thinking & Problem Solving™

*"...we did not want to create just another program and take the teachers away from their practice. You are weaving creativity within your work". Superintendent of Schools*

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A pilot initiative was implemented December 2010 through June 2011 in the Sharpsville Area School District. It focused on weaving deliberate creative thinking and problem solving into a teacher's practice, supporting educator's work with students and growing creative leadership capacity in the district. Two separate, yet interconnected programs tailored uniquely for district teachers and their leaders provided training to infuse rich strategies into a teacher's existing approach to instruction and develop creative leadership capacity to inspire and support educator's efforts.

### **Purpose and Aim**

While conventional instruction meets basic educational needs, it falls short of meeting the needs of an evolving society with complex challenges. Addressing the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) 2009 Conference, Secretary Duncan said, *"There's a lot I don't know about No Child Left Behind (NCLB), but I will always give it credit for exposing our nation's dreadful achievement gaps."* Secretary Duncan's recent focus on revising the 2014 law requiring 100% proficiency in Reading and Math he described as *"a slow-motion train wreck"* highlights the need to examine not only how we reach higher proficiency levels but also what is it that is central to an excellent education for each child.

Accountability, in the form of student achievement, will continue to be a driver of public education in the future. The Sharpsville Area School District (SASD) is working hard to achieve their proficiency rate status and engage in essential strategies for problem solving, deep thinking

and creative outcomes that take the student well beyond basic skills.

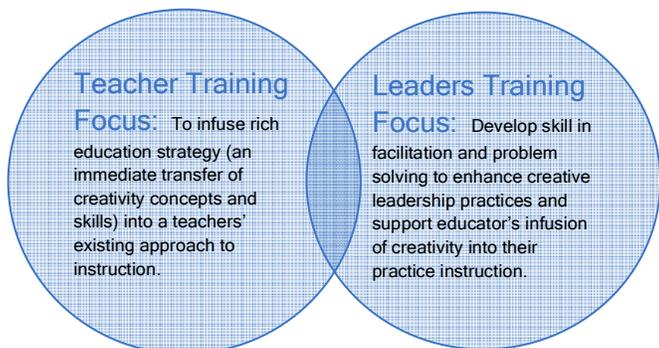
The aim of this initiative is creative learning strategies that provide educators and leaders additional tools to enhance current best practices that both refresh and engage educators and students in deeper thinking. Given that current educational practices will only make incremental changes in student achievement, more creative strategies are imperative for continued overall educational achievement in a full range of student outcomes for 21<sup>st</sup> century learning. This initiative takes a fresh approach to "doing things differently in the classroom" providing thinking skills, knowledge and processes that are essential, yet often very underdeveloped in our educational system. The already packed curriculum and fast paced day-to-day operations of the educational system don't allow for "more." Rather it requires strategies for educators to work smarter, not harder to achieve excellence in education.

The ideal program is organic in nature and in alignment with the district's existing culture. In this initiative learning creatively to add depth, rigor and richness into existing curriculum meant also reaching across all content areas and grade levels to examine children's learning needs. After a thoughtful and deliberate period of staying open, administrators decided to move forward with a novel approach presented to them: Rich Educational Strategy - RES™ PILOT Initiative using *Creative Learning, Thinking and Problem solving™*.

### **Overview of PILOT Initiative**

Two separate programs tailored for a teacher group and a leader group formed a Bright Lights™ Innovation team. Each program provided training to infuse rich strategies into a teacher's existing approach to instruction and

develop creative leadership capacity to inspire educators and support their efforts. The format for each meeting included individual training for each specific group and a joint meeting with report backs to the entire team. Initial training to kick off the program included consecutive days of training. Subsequently, each group met approximately one day per month with the trainers and additionally met with the entire team for a short meeting at the same time. The specific focus for each group is outlined below:



*"I finally have a way now to get the students to dig deeper into the curriculum and achieve richer outcomes from my students. I have been doing these things all along but you have reinforced my efforts by providing more knowledge, concepts and tools to allow me to reach for more depth" Participant*

**Research Questions**

Both quantitative and qualitative data was gathered throughout the pilot. Both groups completed a pre and post survey. Impact of the training was assessed through data gathered from multiple sources including individual reports of implementation and results of the training.

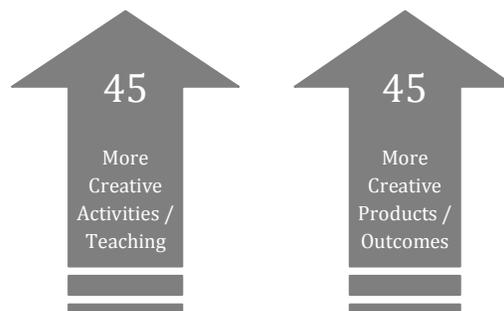
**Bright Lights™ Innovation Team**

Impact Questions: Teacher group
<b>To what degree does teacher instruction in creativity impact:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The educator's creative abilities/attitude toward creative learning?</li> <li>• The educator's use of varied approaches to teaching students?</li> <li>• The educator's classroom applications?</li> <li>• The originality and usefulness (including depth and complexity) of outcomes and products?</li> </ul>

Impact Questions: Leader group
<b>To what degree does Leadership Training in creativity impact:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Leaders creative abilities/attitude toward creative learning?</li> <li>• The Leaders use of varied approaches to problem solving and leading change?</li> <li>• The implementation of a creative learning environment?</li> <li>• Support of the classroom teacher's creative initiatives?</li> </ul>

**Educators Use Of Varied Approaches To Teaching Students and Report of Classroom Applications**

Prior to the training, two of the four teachers indicated they were able to bring some creativity into their teaching practice while two indicated they did not very much. They described nine activities as a group that they currently engage in and six examples of creative teaching for a total of fifteen activities / teaching prior to training. Eleven creative products or outcomes developed with colleagues and or students were described prior to training. After the training, teachers described sixty types of activities and creative teaching characteristics in the form of (creative problem solving) - CPS tools, aspects of process, creative teaching techniques and creativity skills they possess. Additionally, as a result of the training, they named fifty-six areas of outcomes, which include both general areas of outcomes and specific applications, products and outcomes they brought to their practice.



Category	Prior to Training	After Training
Creative Activities / Teaching	15	60
Creative Products / Outcomes	11	56

Most of the activities and outcomes were new techniques and enhancements of planned outcomes while some of the skills and tools described were ones they were now more aware of in their practice and they recognized that they were present to some

degree previous. All of the teachers indicated that the training provided them with valuable knowledge and tools for creative learning and teaching. They also described specific changes to their pedagogical practices including more deliberate thinking about creativity and looking for ways to allow students to be creative, listening intentionally to student ideas, being more flexible to allow for student ownership and taking a more facilitative role in the classroom. They all described aspects of student behavior that they'd observed including more excitement, engagement, involvement and commitment to a project and a greater willingness to try new ideas and techniques.

**Specifics of Creative Activities and Creative Teaching Described as Result of Training**

*“Something happened to the students. I can’t describe it exactly however they seemed much more engaged in the lessons” Participant*

As a result of the training, 22 tools for Creative Problem Solving (Keller-Mathers & Puccio, 2000; Foursight, 2010) were reported by at least one teacher to be brought into their teaching and/or personal practice. Additionally, five specific aspects of process (Puccio, Mance, & Murdock, 2010) were reported as brought into their practice and 16 specific creativity skills (Torrance & Safter, 1999). Teachers reported they more deliberately brought to their instructional design five aspects of instructional design (Keller-Mathers & Murdock, 2002) and were more aware of 17 specific aspects of their creative personality (Davis, 2004) that that possessed.

**Outcomes of training/Use of Aspects of Training**

Themes - Data outcomes	Use / Enriched or Enhanced awareness
CPS Tools	22
Aspects of CPS process	5
Creativity skills	16
Creativity instructional design	5
Creative personality	17
General instructional practice	14
Problem Solving / attitude toward learning	7
Enhancement of Teacher (Personal / Professional)	9

Curriculum based changes	26
Overall quality improvement with students	5
Greater confidence in self / self-directed students	7
Students willingness to team / engage in creative process	3
Student flexible thinking / Original outcomes	8
Student richer critical thinking & overall analysis	3

*“Although I didn’t know what they were doing, I did see [the participants] doing things differently” Other administrator*

**Leaders Use Of Varied Approaches To Problem Solving, Leading Change and Supporting Teachers**

Leaders indicated on the post survey that the training assisted them with bringing more creativity into their educational leadership practices and that it provided them with valuable knowledge and tools for leading. They stated it’s long-term use and relevance, how it forced you to examine your own practices, gave new tools to use with staff and opened eyes to items not previously considered in leadership as valuable. It also enhanced team or relationships as leaders and gave an opportunity for personal reflection and the facilitation by presenters assisted with thinking about one’s own professional practice.

Leaders indicated as a result of the training they used 21 distinct aspects of (creative problem solving) - CPS and tools for clarifying, ideating, developing and implementing. Additionally they put 16 creativity skills into practice and were able to identify 19 aspects of their creative personality that they were more aware of in their practice. Leaders also indicated that they were aware of changes in teachers from the training, including a sincere willingness to try new things, and use of skills and tools.

*“This was really helpful as a team understanding our strengths because we certainly will need administrators to use their creative thinking and problem solving skills with the budget this year” Other Administrator*

Themes - Data outcomes	Uses / Enriched or Enhanced awareness
CPS Tools (Clarify, Ideating, Developing & Implementing)	17
Aspects of CPS process	4
Creativity skills	16
Creative Personality	19
Leadership practice in General & Specifics (Model the way, Inspire a shared vision, Challenge the process, Enable others to act, and encourage the heart)	27
Facilitating real problem solving	4
Keeping open / Change in attitude	7
Creative climate	5
Collaboration	6

*"[The participant] has become more flexible with staff... This is greatly appreciated by all." LPI Observer*

### **Conclusions: Indicators of Success**

Some outcomes of what was documented as result of training were not new. They were behaviors and skills the participant displayed, often times to a lesser degree. They were now named, understood, appreciated and brought to the forefront for further development. Other behaviors and skills were new indicating many new strategies and tools for educating and leading effectively and creatively.

Specific creative activities and outcomes described by teachers from the training included **over one hundred and forty-seven different results** from the training. Likewise, leaders described **one hundred and five different results** from the training. These changes were evident by colleagues who completed the LPI as observers as well as by other administrators and each other. A common language of creativity, understanding of ways to enhance and enrichment for thinking and growing and tools for planning and implementing rich creative learning, thinking and growing as a leader were put into place. Educators were not given specific lessons to teach and leaders were not given specific activities to change their schools. Rather, they were engaged in rich educational strategies to be able to diagnose their needs, plan appropriate for their students and/or staff and the culture of the building. They in a

sense were not given a fish, they "learned to fish" for themselves so that they could continue to use what they've learned in the most powerful way.

*"[We] established a goal that we would not add another program to an already full teacher's plate. Everything I have heard today shares that we met our goal and you are learning to weave creativity skills into existing curriculum or lesson plans". Superintendent speaking to participants after a share back training session.*

### **Final Thoughts**

In school districts, mandates, lack of time and money will always be there. These issues may even contribute to zapping a district's collective discretionary energy and paralyzing the district from its full potential. These are times for a district to call for creative action. At first, the pilot initiative training timeframe seemed daunting for a busy district. However, the pace and time away from the classrooms and building administration was worthwhile for the participants and allowed for some planning time to design lessons and collaborate with peers on delivery and facilitation practice. Giving teachers and leaders the knowledge, skills and tools for creative action empowers them to have the courage to create positive change and invites the community of learners to rich thinking, depth of learning and personal and professional creative growth.

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