

Writing Works

The i-Team

By Clare Kruft, Ph.D.

Want to join the i-Team? Sound like a cross between a bad James Bond movie and the latest reality show for wanna-be news correspondents?

While not as glamorous as a new movie or TV show, joining the “i-Team” (the Instructional Innovation Team) did allow teachers within 25 elementary and middle schools in Baltimore County Public Schools (BCPS) to benefit from an ongoing professional learning community this year. With support from one another, the teachers engaged in vibrant action research in their own classrooms while analyzing and discussing the results across classrooms with their support group members conducting the same research in each of their classrooms. At the end of a year of professional growth, the i-Team members shared the “innovative instructional interventions” they discovered and refined at a day-long conference for other teachers and school leaders from the 25 schools involved in the project.

This model could be easily used or adapted to meet the needs of other single schools or groups of schools in various places—in fact we’ll be repeating and expanding it ourselves for the 2008–2009 school year!

So who was involved in this initiative, how did it work and what exactly did it accomplish? The way we configured our initial design for the i-Team this year and the way we envision expanding the initiative next year is described below. Each section also includes a “TIP for Others” reflection to provide key ideas about how others may want to implement a similar initiative for their own school or system.



Jean Satterfield (left), BCPS southeast area assistant superintendent, and Clare Kruft (author, right), instructional coach and i-Team leader offer greetings at the May 30 i-Team Conference.

Who?

The efforts were supported by BCPS Southeast Area Assistant Superintendent Jean Satterfield. This enabled multiple schools—25 in all—to be involved throughout the year. The work on this initiative was designed and led by me, Clare Kruft. I’ve been involved in education for over 20 years, as a teacher, staff developer, principal and college instructor. However, anyone with a good knowledge of action research could facilitate a similar initiative very effectively!

- The principals at each of the 25 elementary and middle schools involved in the project selected one innovative, respected teacher from their schools to serve on the i-Team this year. These were teachers who were good educators and open to trying new practices in their classrooms, then were willing to share their successes with others.
- We invited participants from appropriate curricular offices in BCPS to join our i-Team, and we encouraged principals to attend monthly meetings, as their schedules permitted.

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The i-Team *(continued)*

- Barbara Bass and Katie Hearn from the Maryland Writing Project joined the team and recommended a Teacher Research course for us to adapt so the participants could receive graduate credit for their efforts.
- Bev German and Karen Grannas from the Towson Learning Network at Towson University worked with the BCPS system to direct bill them for the reimbursement for graduate credit. The teachers in our i-Team had to pay only \$100 for their 3 graduate credits!

TIP for Others: Choosing dedicated teachers who aren't afraid to take a risk is key to this project. Also, the people from the MWP and Towson Learning Network with whom we worked were very cooperative in helping to adapt the course to create a hybrid one which included face-to-face meetings and time in online research and communication with the group to earn the graduate credit! Contact them if you're interested in starting a similar course on you!



Presenters from the "Motivating Students" workshop: Lori O'Connor, Patricia Angelini, and Courtney Warlick.

What?

- We began with an all-day retreat I led for the team on action research and professional learning communities. Throughout that day, we brainstormed and narrowed down possible topics important to our own classrooms to help increase student achievement. We agreed on three main focus areas and every participant signed up to work all year on one of them: motivating reluctant students, creating meaningful independent work for students, or improving oral and written communication for students, with a special emphasis on BCR (Brief Constructed Response) writing.
- We continued throughout the year, meeting each month for two hours at either a morning or afternoon time (with some released time from school and some time after school). During these monthly meetings, we always worked part of the time as a whole group to share information about the research process or topics of interest and some of the time in our three sub-teams to share and refine our progress through

the steps in action research:

- Establishing a question or hypothesis
 - Searching our practices and professional literature for possible interventions
 - Gathering baseline, ongoing and after-intervention data
 - Analyzing results
 - Designing ways to share and publish our findings
- We had a released-time day (covered by substitutes) so the i-Team members could share and refine the PowerPoint and workshop presentations they had designed for our professional conference with their peers on the i-Team for their peer response comments before presenting the actual conference to an audience.

TIP for Others: You could adapt the times your own team would meet, but it is critical to get buy-in from important stakeholders and leaders in your school or system. The basic progression from understanding the process of learning together in action research, allowing time to learn as teachers work during the year in teams, and ensuring time for teams investigating the same topic to share their classroom findings and questions with each other was critical to the project. Additionally, if the teachers are expected to present their findings to a larger audience at the end of their work together, it is really helpful to build in an extended time (half-day or all-day meeting) in a supportive atmosphere to practice and refine their presentations with one another first.

Why?

Sound expensive to implement? With only a few substitute days and two lunch orders for the group, teachers from the i-Team worked together all year long to refine their own instructional practices, then provided a free professional conference to share their findings with over 100 other educators. Benefits outweighed the costs:

Costs	Benefits
1. About four substitute days, spread apart over the year, for each i-Team member	1. Monthly collaboration for action research and professional learning discussions
2. i-Team members out of their classrooms for one or two hours most months, as well as three full days (one in fall and two in spring)	2. Improved student achievement based on ideas generated through collaboration in support groups every month
3. Substitute days (half or full day options) for teachers attending the i-Team conference held May 30	3. Professional Development I-Team Conference offered with no registration costs (other than substitute coverage) for over 100 educators in BCPS. Evaluations provided rave reviews of the research-based yet practical strategies the audience learned throughout the day.

TIP for Others: We made our work meaningful yet inexpensive by scheduling meetings for two-hour blocks most months with one hour before or after school and one hour of coverage during the school day. Additionally, we held our meetings and our professional conference at the end of the year at schools within our network area to provide comfortable space with shorter driving times for participants and no charge for any of the facilities.

When? Where? How?

The basic timeline we used to build success the initial year of the project is outlined below:

When?	Where?	How?
September 2007	Marshy Point (free to BCPS, but a lovely setting!)	All-day retreat to begin our work together.
October–February, 2007-2008	Various host school libraries from the project schools	Two-hour meetings to progress on our action research sharing together.
April 2008	Host school from the project (with a nice meeting room!)	All-day practice session where sub-teams ran through their presentations and we provided peer response to one another. We also got to learn all of the results and effective instructional practices from each of our three sub-teams this way.
May 2008	One host middle school from our project	Professional conference with open and free registration for schools in the project. Schools could opt to send teachers all day or share subs (if coverage was difficult) by sending one teacher for the morning session from 8:30–11 a.m. and sharing the same substitute for a different teacher to attend the afternoon session from 1–3:30 p.m.

TIP for Others: Feel free to change the times and dates to suit your needs, but the basic progression outlined in the chart worked well this year.

Next Steps for 2008–2009

For next year, we plan to begin a second cohort of the i-Team, following the same basic schedule as listed above. We’ll also be designing a second-year experience for our original i-Team cohort members who wish to remain together for more collaboration and additional graduate credit through MWP. We’ll be targeting new areas of research or applying our foci from this year to specific content areas as we continue our work together.

For teachers or schools interested in beginning their own “i-Team” initiative, please feel free to contact me, Clare Kruft, with questions at ckruft@bcps.org.



The presentation team for “Improving Oral and Written Communications” pose after their presentation. Presenters are: (standing) Sara Paul, Heather Insley, Lauren Jones and (seated) Mandy Shanks, Ashley Morin, Phaedra Avgerinos, Elizabeth DeVore, Susanne Skovira.