

Florida alternative school students make giant strides toward success with Inspiration®

When students arrive at Crossroads Center, part of the New Beginnings Educational Complex in Kissimmee, Fla., they're sorely in need of a second chance. An alternative school in The School District of Osceola County, Crossroads serves more than 500 "at risk" students with behavioral problems in kindergarten through grade 12. They attend in lieu of expulsion from their home-zone schools. Some stay for just a semester, and others as long as two years, to get themselves back on track.

"These are kids who have never felt they could excel at anything – students who are viewed as 'bad kids at the bad school,'" says Terri Inwood, business-education teacher of Crossroads' middle and high school students. "My goal is to show them that they can succeed."

It is no small feat for Inwood. She must teach her students what they need to know to pass the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) and to graduate. In addition to behavioral issues, many students at Crossroads come with language barriers and/or from low-income homes.

Inwood integrates core subjects into her business-ed curriculum, demonstrating math, reading and writing in "real world form."

The most difficult subject for her students is writing – or at least it was until she started using Inspiration®. The essential tool to visualize, think, organize and learn, Inspiration provides powerful support for critical thinking, comprehension and writing in all curriculum areas.

Bringing Inspiration to her students

Eleven years ago, Inwood taught at a school for students with severe disabilities. It was there she discovered Inspiration could help students find their voices in writing, and she has been "hooked" ever since. "It was a very easy way for them to put their thoughts down on paper," she says.

When she arrived at Crossroads six years ago, she was tasked with bringing up failing writing scores on the FCAT. "My students just didn't understand how to write, and I thought, 'Bingo! I can teach them with Inspiration,'" she says.

With funding from two grants, Inwood secured 20 computers for her classroom and 13 more for the New Beginnings media center, which Crossroads shares with another campus. Inspiration is installed on every computer.

Putting Inspiration to work

Inwood introduces Inspiration to her students every fall by having them write "All About Me" essays. "Inspiration gives them an enjoyable way to write—without feeling like they're writing," she says. She points out that the most essential skill she can teach is brainstorming. "If you can't brainstorm, you're never going to get it. Inspiration makes learning so easy."

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Every day for the first nine weeks of school, Inwood's students write a new essay in preparation for the FCAT. She begins by creating a web in Inspiration, giving students a prompt and a topic, such as "What if the state of Florida mandated that students wear uniforms to school?" She asks them to type their

responses in the provided symbol in the web, revise as they go and critique each other's work.

After the FCAT is behind them, students begin a long-term project of researching and writing about a randomly selected U.S. state. "I teach them how to use the Internet properly – they learn it's not just for games and MySpace," says Inwood. She requires research in at least 20 different areas about their chosen state, including its capital, history, flag, bird, flower, motto, history, population, climate and economy. The students illustrate their graphic organizers with photos or graphics from the more than one million symbols available from Inspiration's Web Resources or from the

Internet. "My students put the information they find into a format they feel proud of," she says.

Inwood's students also use Inspiration to write about everything from famous people who have inspired them to their favorite jungle animals. Seniors at Crossroads are required to create a portfolio project, and many choose to plan it using Inspiration. Those who do, she says, typically receive A grades because they're so well organized. "From day one when you show them how to use it, they are off and running," she says.

With nine of the 12 teachers new to the campus this year, many of them have not yet had a chance to learn about Inspiration, so Inwood is planning a workshop to show them what the visual learning software can do. "The teachers are excited to learn about it," she says. "We all want to use everything we have to reach these kids."

Building writing skills in leaps and bounds

Inwood's students are making incredible strides. Every one of the 150 students she teaches is now earning at least the minimum passing grade of 4 out of 6 in writing on the FCAT. "These are kids who didn't know how to write at all – who previously were at a 1 or a 2," she says. Two of her students, including one who "hated to write," scored 5.5 in writing on the last FCAT. Inwood gives them certificates that show their scores and encourages them to share them with their teachers when they return to their old schools. "I tell them it proves they can do it, that they are not a failure – they are a success!" she says.

Crossroads is now ranked 16th in the state of Florida for writing and was recently recognized by the state for its gains. "Now every year we surpass our previous year's achievements," she says.



Students use Inspiration to create graphic organizers illustrating the various aspects of different U.S. states, as in this one about North Carolina.

Inwood says she sees every day at Crossroads as an adventure, and while her days are never easy, when something good happens, she is grateful for the experience. "Kids come here feeling bad about themselves and leave here feeling good," she says. "And Inspiration is a big part of their success." themselves and leave here feeling good," she says. "And Inspiration is a big part of their success."



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