

# FOCAL POINTS



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TIPS FOR TEACHERS FROM CHAMPIONS OF ACTIVE LEARNING



Champions of Active Learning (CAL), a program funded by The J. P. Morgan Chase Foundation, is a national initiative designed to encourage and support innovative instructional programs that result in improved achievement for middle grades students.

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## The Impact of Active Learning: 2002–2003 Evaluation Findings

Since the inception of the CAL program in 1990, JP Morgan Chase, Public Education Network, and New Visions for Public Schools have provided grantees with various opportunities to share the knowledge they have gained, as well as the tools and methods they have developed during the creative active learning process. Although PEN and New Visions assess outcomes through self-reported grantee data and site visits to individual schools, an extensive external evaluation of the program was not conducted until the 2002–2003 grant year.

In the fall of 2002, PEN, with assistance from Policy Research Incorporated (PRI), a Maryland-based research firm, initiated a qualitative evaluation of the 54 grants awarded during the 2002–2003 academic year. The evaluation confirmed that active learning improves student achievement and enhances instructional practice.

### Lessons Learned

Grantees provided data via mid-year and final reports. Data was received from 22 (41 percent) of the 54 grantees. Of the 22 respondents, 45 percent said the greatest lesson learned from implementing CAL projects was that, by using active learning approaches, they were able to enhance teaching and learning experiences. In addition, 32 percent of the grantees cited better time management as a direct outcome of the CAL program.

Teachers measured the success of CAL activities in various ways: 41 percent of the respondents looked at student scores on standardized tests, while 31 percent administered survey questions to their students. Jodie Moorhead, a teacher at Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School in Monroe, LA, reported that more than 90 percent of the eighth-grade students passed the essay portion of the LEAP 21 test, thus achieving a school and school district goal.

### Improvements in Instructional Approach

In 2003, PEN surveyed 15 current and former CAL teachers with the following results:

- Every teacher indicated using a more creative instructional approach during the CAL grant year than in the year prior to the grant; 93 percent said that was directly attributable to the grant.
- Active learning techniques and exposure to new material are essential to the development of creative instructional approaches, according to 73 percent of those surveyed; 80 percent said they continue to use more creative teaching approaches since receiving a CAL grant.
- Students participating in CAL programs gained a better understanding of the subject matter than those in other classes, according to 87 percent of those surveyed.

## Community Engagement and Educational Reform

CAL teachers frequently engaged community and business partners as resources for CAL projects. Of the responding teachers, 27 percent engaged parents, administrators, and community members in CAL project activities; 68 percent said the most notable impact on educational reform was the enhanced and expanded curriculum the CAL grant allows teachers to explore. The teachers also viewed increased administrator, student, and teacher engagement and enthusiasm as additional benefits of the CAL program.

## Conclusions

The findings from the 2002–2003 evaluation suggest that CAL is a highly effective program that has helped schools and teachers bring active learning—creative, engaging, interdisciplinary projects—to thousands of students over the years. While a proven, powerful teaching approach in its own right, active learning also serves the broader goal of fostering fundamental change in the strategies employed by individual schools and school districts to deliver effective instruction.

Three attributes are key to the success of the CAL program:

- A focus on active learning
- Collaboration with other teachers, administrators, and outside partners
- Flexibility in terms of planned activities, expectations, and collaboration



## Discussion Questions

How has active learning changed your instructional practice and your relationship with your students?

What kinds of active learning projects support relationships with business and community partners that can be sustained beyond the grant year?

When you attain your goals for student learning, how do you share the information with school, district, and community leaders to promote the value of active learning?

What kind of professional development do teachers need to implement successful, sustainable active learning projects?

## Resources

Lee, Virginia. "Vees, Thinking Frames and Concept Maps: Supporting Student Thought and Inquiry." *National Teaching and Learning Forum* 12, no. 4 (2003).

Lowman, Joseph. *Mastering the Technique of Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1984.

Wassermann, Selma. *Serious Players in the Primary Classroom: Empowering Students Through Active Learning Experiences*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2000. An exploration of a holistic approach to fostering independent thinking, and to promoting children's active learning in cooperative groups.

Websites with information on active learning:

- Public Education Network: [www.PublicEducation.org/cal.asp](http://www.PublicEducation.org/cal.asp)
- National Teaching and Learning Forum: [www.ntlf.com](http://www.ntlf.com)
- Teacher Vision: [www.teachervision.com](http://www.teachervision.com)

Examples of active learning methods, such as collaborative teaching, case methods, course projects, simulations:

- Instructional Consulting/Community Outreach and Partnerships in Service Learning: [www.indiana.edu/~ict/grants\\_description.htm](http://www.indiana.edu/~ict/grants_description.htm)
- "Simulations Engage Schools in Active Learning" [www.education-world.com/a\\_curr/curr391.shtml](http://www.education-world.com/a_curr/curr391.shtml)

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