

# NY New Beginnings Program Provides Supportive, Personalized Learning for At-Risk Learners while Promoting School Safety



## Overview

- The New Beginnings Program, a collaboration between New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg's office, the New York City Department of Education, and the School Safety and Planning commission, addresses school safety issues while providing education and support to disruptive students.
- New Beginnings schools are set up as satellites to New York City's 17 most troubled high schools. The program removes disruptive students from the high school and provides them with an opportunity to gain credit at community-based organizations.
- Each school has 2–3 teachers, along with professional staff from non-profit groups. The centers are created as a supportive, productive environment to educate chronically disruptive students who, because of discipline problems and in-school suspensions in a mainstream setting, continue to prevent their classmates from learning. More than 50 percent of the students transferred to the centers have attendance rates below 60 percent, over 90 percent cut more than 50 classes, and over 80 percent failed at least four subjects during one semester.

## Affecting Positive Change

Within the New Beginnings classrooms, students are under the close supervision of an instructor who uses a standards-based curriculum to help students earn credits towards the Regents Exams. The core instruction is intended to keep students motivated and engaged through a project-based approach. The hope is that disruptive students who have difficulty in regular classrooms will have a better chance to learn in these settings, thanks to a 2:20 student-teacher ratio.

The underlying objective of the centers is to provide the support services needed to affect positive change in student behavior, attitude, and academic progress. New Beginnings offers students a private, personalized education where they can work at their own pace to develop key academic skills while getting one-on-one counseling and support services.

## Partnering to Meet Academic Challenges

PLATO Learning partnered with many of the New Beginnings programs to help accomplish these goals. The centers utilize PLATO Assessment and Instructional Solutions for supplemental, remedial, and enrichment instruction in core subject areas including English, mathematics, literacy, science, and social studies.

One very successful program is the St. Mary's Recreation Center, which serves students from Taft and Roosevelt High Schools. Ollie Fields Thacker, a veteran teacher in the New York City Department of Education, became a math teacher and technology coordinator at St. Mary's upon introduction of the New Beginnings program.

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS:

"I lose myself in the assignments. It's fun and the time goes by really fast."

ST. MARY'S STUDENT

"I like computers a lot, so when I found out that I could work on the computer and get a grade for it, I was happy. I also work on PLATO at home."

NEW BEGINNINGS STUDENT

The St. Mary's site services 44 students removed from the mainstream high school. Ms. Thacker uses PLATO Instructional Solutions as the technology component of her instruction.

In addition to engaging disruptive learners and trying to diminish discipline problems, Ms. Thacker faces many academic challenges at the center. "The integration of technology in the curriculum, meeting NY State standards, and the mandates of NCLB present enormous and exciting challenges. The students must meet the same standards and assessment expectations as their peers in mainstream schools. We provide them with a Regents-based curriculum and test-preparation tools to prepare them to take the Regents Exam. For me, the tool that facilitates this process is PLATO Learning."

PLATO lessons are delivered via the web in St. Mary's computer lab. Ms. Thacker has found that students enjoy the convenience web delivery offers. "As long as they have access to technology, the students have access to a real learning experience, whether at the center or at home. Many students are now accessing PLATO instruction outside of the regular learning day," said Thacker.

Ms. Thacker uses the administrative features built into the PLATO system to assign both class and individual assignments. The students go through tutorials, practice applications, and then must pass a mastery test to complete each lesson. "PLATO has been an enriching asset to our site, enabling students to work both individually and collaboratively. In my classroom, it is important to meet the needs of all learners, and the PLATO Learning system affords me the opportunity to design curriculum and assignments specific to the individual student's needs. PLATO Learning has allowed me to address the Principles of Learning set forth by the Department of Education and support students in the ownership and responsibility for their learning."

To monitor student progress, Ms. Thacker uses assessments built into the PLATO program. "I am able to monitor their performance by mastery, time-on-task, attendance, and comparatives. If my students do not achieve 80 percent mastery, they are immediately returned to tutorials to remediate their skills." Ms. Thacker combines the computer-based instruction with other hands-on learning activities and supplements the computer-based assessments with authentic portfolio assessments.

## Achieving Dramatic Success

By providing differentiated instruction that motivates learning, St. Mary's is helping their students see dramatic results. "I work with disruptive students who are not reaching their potential in the traditional education setting," said Thacker. "They find PLATO lessons stimulating, challenging and exciting. Many are kinesthetic, visual learners who enjoy the interactivity provided in the computer-based instruction. We completed an entire session on multiple intelligences to determine learning strengths. PLATO Learning offers learning experiences that appeal to a number of these areas rather than just one."

Students who had reading comprehension and/or writing challenges in the past have steadily improved their test scores using the combined hands-on, in-class instruction and PLATO Learning computer-based instruction. Eighty-two percent of the students have shown significant improvement in reading comprehension and vocabulary development and 78–80 percent have shown dramatic improvement in mathematics.

Teachers also have really enjoyed the program. "Many of my colleagues who do not use technology on a regular basis, are enjoying using PLATO instruction and find that it is a welcome piece of instructional technology," Thacker said. "They can monitor students, and progress reports are represented graphically, which leads to good collegial talks about the progress of our students."

Based on successful results across many of the New Beginnings centers, the directors are considering expanding their use of PLATO Learning Assessment and Instruction Solutions to their 2nd Opportunity Schools and 30-60-90 day suspension programs in the coming year.

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OLLIE FIELDS THACKER,  
MATH TEACHER AND TECHNOLOGY  
COORDINATOR