



# A Strategic Collaboration... *The Child First Team*

## SAINT CLEMENT SCHOOL

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### Project Summary

The *Child First Team* (CFT) was a project undertaken by a core team of faculty members at Saint Clement School and the focus of this year-long project. After much reflection, as Catholic school teachers and administrators, we were committed to the faith conviction that all God's children can learn, succeed, and should be actively involved in their own education. At Saint Clement School, teachers seek to meet students' diverse academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs - from those children who struggle to those who excel far beyond their grade level. The Child First Team works to meet our students' learning needs by utilizing data and best practices that identify, monitor, and support achievement.

#### *The goals for the Child First Team:*

- Provide an organized system for selecting, implementing, and monitoring appropriate classroom interventions.
- Provide on-going support for teachers as they address the needs of students with differing learning needs in the classroom (across the continuum of ability).
- Collaborate and communicate with families to ensure that all supporters of the student are "on the same page" with goals, interventions, and achievement expected.
- Make all decisions with the child's best interest in mind; putting the *child first*. We strive to work with families, students, and faculty to ensure we are best serving our students in the classroom.
- Follow practices that are grounded in the respect for the human person.

### Process

1. Selection of those faculty members that would serve as members of what we referred to as the "core team".
1. The CFT core team members were selected and met to solidify our goals, objectives, and challenges. Each member was clear on their role and the philosophical stance of the team.
2. Faculty education and presentation on the Child First Team and the goals and objectives for the core team. Teacher support was seen as an integral part of the success of the team.
3. Parent education and presentation on the Child First Team and how this team could partner with parents to better assist their child(ren) at Saint Clement School.
1. A letter was sent to all parents regarding the team and regular updates on the team were inserted in school newsletters/communication.
2. A referral process was developed. Parents or teachers could refer a student to the CFT by completing the referral form and emailing the faculty member who was named *Child First Team Coordinator*. A wiki/blog was developed with pertinent forms/resources.
3. The Child First Team met Tuesdays before school at 7:00 a.m. to discuss those students on our caseload and hold internal meetings.
4. The Child First Team scheduled meetings before school on Thursdays at 7:00 a.m. to meet with parents, teachers, clinicians, students (when applicable) to develop and/or review the plan for the child to allow them to be more successful.
5. The Child First Team would circle back each month and review the data and document or call another team meeting if necessary. The Child First Team Coordinator followed up on each students' progress and scheduled additional meetings when necessary. Parents or teachers would also reach out to the team if they needed further support or interventions.
6. The core team members often met informally after school or during lunch hours to discuss/reflect on student progress.

### Results

- This year our team has served 40 students and their families in coming up with plans to help better serve students in our classrooms. There has been a definite shift in how our teachers and community embrace children who learn differently.
- Ten students have received educational evaluations, and at least six students are moving along the process of receiving service plans through Chicago Public Schools Special Education Eligibility Process.
- The Archdiocese of Chicago has called upon our CFT to demonstrate our model and intervention model to other Catholic schools.
- After its successful implementation, the Child First Team was able to assist students, their families, and teachers in designing plans for success in the classroom. This is entirely attributable to Saint Clement School's hard-working and caring staff, who committed to take on this project and meet twice a week before school. We were overwhelmed with the openness of parents to play an active role in creating a unique plan for their child. Many of the parents felt relieved after feeling frustrated/isolated in dealing with their child's issues before on their own.

**Testimony from Parent:** *The Child First Team has provided us with a sense of relief and support knowing that a specialized support team is really working to help our child. We have found the collaborative approach working with all the members of the Team is the best way to reach solutions; our experience and insight to our child is used to leverage support the team can provide at school. When we meet with the team and a plan is developed and activated, we are gratified to see the same desire for our child to be successful in the Team that we feel for our child. We have been very impressed and grateful with the enthusiasm, expertise, and focus of the team in their efforts. The communication, the listening, the practical and tangible tactics provide the support and strategy to do our best to achieve success with our child.*

### What We Have Learned

**The children come first.** From the very beginning, this was an opportunity to change the preconceptions of families and faculty at Saint Clement School and a commitment to putting *every child first*. There is no room for egos or agendas when dealing with a child who has special needs. Time is of the essence.

**Good teaching and strategies benefit all students.** Frequently the suggestions/interventions we put in to place for a struggling student also benefitted the rest of the class as well.

**More ideas and support is needed** for parents and teachers. Teachers as well as parents were in need of more ideas and support (interventions and accommodations) to better serve students that are struggling.

**Reflection is critical** to the success of the team. As a school staff, we need more time to dialogue and reflect on our students, especially those with more significant needs. Through brainstorming, dialogue and reflection, we came up with new interventions that were successful. We must build in time to reflect together and step back to gain better insight.

**Strategic collaboration is key.** As Catholic Schools in the city of Chicago, we are all doing many things to support our learners, and we need to share these strategies with each other! Our Child First Team Coordinator started a Learning Resource Group that meets three times per year. Teachers, counselors, and administrators share ideas and resources. Together we are better!

### References

Scanlon, M. K. (2009) *All are welcome: Inclusive service delivery in catholic schools*. Notre Dame, IN: Alliance for Catholic Education Press.