



Measuring Success: Survey Shows How CPS Impacts Indiana

By Tamyra Freeman, Priscilla Wolfe, Bill Littlejohn, and Nancy Mayfield

When the Indiana agency responsible for providing family services throughout the state needed to develop a five-year plan for the federal government, it turned to Creative Problem Solving to help complete the colossal task.

The CPS process, according to an Indiana Family and Social Services Administration (FSSA) top executive, allowed a group of professionals to collaborate with impressive results:

“New, creative, imaginative ideas were generated with harmonious involvement among colleagues. The amount of time it took to develop the plan was cut in about half due to the structure and efficient use of time that CPS techniques promote. Participants had a positive feeling about their participation and the end product. Many were amazed and in awe of how the CPS process made group planning so painless.”

The CPS process empowered members of the organization to efficiently develop a practical plan that will impact the lives of Hoosier families in the 21st Century. Members of the FSSA staff are among the more than 600 people across Indiana who have attended CPS-B programs conducted by the Blumberg Center for Interdisciplinary Studies in Special Education at Indiana State University.

Our goal at the Blumberg Center is to enhance the creativity and problem-solving skills of those who provide support to children with special needs and their families. Our CPS network ranges from education administrators and government officials to teachers and non-profit agency employees.

Gauging Effectiveness Key to Improved Services and Support

The Indiana CPS Initiative was launched in response to challenges that surfaced in 1994 when Indiana participated in a White House initiative to redefine government services to families and children. CPS was suggested to meet the need for an immediately applicable training that could be used by participants to address a broad array of complex problems. The Blumberg Center project was first reported on by *Communiqué* in its 1996, Volume 2 issue. Based on the year-to-year successes of this initiative, the Indiana Department of Education, Division of Special Education, has continued to provide substantial funding for maintenance and growth. As we moved forward, we thought it was important to evaluate our impact in a more comprehensive manner.

The Blumberg Center recently completed a survey of persons trained in Indiana between 1994 and 1999 through the Creative Problem Solving Initiative. The study was conducted primarily to help evidence the impact of the CPS training, originally delivered by CPS-B personnel and then by an Indiana team trained and licensed by CPS-B. We also wanted to gather information that would allow us to continue to improve our training and support services.

Charting a Research Course

The CPS Impact Study collected information from former participants to determine the personal and professional impact of completing a Creative Problem Solving program. The study examined five main questions:

- What degree of success have participants experienced in applying CPS?
- How often are they using CPS?
- In what types of situations are they using CPS?
- What impact is their use of CPS having on them, their organizations, and the children and/or families their organizations serve?
- Was CPS worth the time, effort, and expense that they and/or their organization invested?

Following a review of literature, we drafted a survey and gave it to a panel of experts for validation. We made revisions and conducted field testing with a small group from our Indiana CPS Network. We mailed the final revised four-page survey, consisting of quantitative and qualitative questions, in January 2000 to all former CPS course participants active in our CPS Peer Network database. The study sample (n=457) represents 86% of the total population trained between 1994 and 1999.

Our two follow-up mailings and phone calls yielded an overall response rate of 49%. These 225 respondents were representative of the study sample in all ways, including gender (Female=76%, Males=24%), type of CPS program attended (Two-day Foundations in CPS=27%, Five-day Facilitating CPS=73%) and the year they were trained (1994=7%, 1995=35%, 1996=12%, 1997=11%, 1998=18%, 1999=17%).

Survey respondents represented Indiana school personnel (n=61), non-profit, disability, and social service agencies (n=47), state government (n=37), training and technical assistance providers (n= 25), higher education (n= 21), other (e.g., consultants, federal government, n=16), and not specified (n=18).

Examining the Results

The survey yielded a plethora of useful information that was compiled into a more than 50-page report. Below are some of the key findings grouped by survey question.

Question #1: How successful have CPS participants been in applying CPS?

Respondents reported strong success with the CPS language, process, and generating and focusing tools. A solid 88% of respondents said they used CPS language with either some success or high success, while 86% and 93% said the same about generating tools and focusing tools respectively.

With the overwhelming majority of respondents reporting successful application of CPS in their professional and personal lives, the impact of the Blumberg Center's CPS program is far-reaching on social and educational programs and policies. Respondents across the board reported the following benefits, among others:

- More focused and efficient meetings
- A greater feeling of ownership of ideas by staff
- Improved teamwork
- Generation of many good ideas
- A sense of empowerment

The CPS process is flexible, lending itself to all sorts of contexts. Said one special education services director, "I find myself using the strategies with as few as one other person as well as with large groups. It becomes interactive very quickly and people feel they have a stakehold in the strategic planning process of looking, listening, targeting, planning, acting, and measuring."

Digging into the CPS toolbox, Brainstorming with Post-Its and Brainstorming were the most widely used generating tools, with more than 90% of the respondents saying they employed both. Brainwriting and Brainstorming Enhancers were the next most frequently used tools, with Ladder of Abstraction, Morphological Matrix, Visually Identifying Relationships, and Imagery Treks following in descending order.

The focusing tools Hits and Highlighting, at 90% and 82%, were used most frequently. The other tools in order of usage were ALUo, Short/Medium/Long (SML), Must/Wants, Criteria, Evaluation Matrix, and Paired Comparison Analysis.

Question #2: How often is CPS being utilized?

At the weekly staff meetings in one Special Education Office, using Creative Problem Solving tools is part of the routine. The effect on the staff: "They now feel like part of a team, offer to assist one another and morale is good." Several respondents reported incorporating the process into regularly scheduled meetings with their colleagues and constituents, providing a framework for tackling all sorts of tasks.

More than 60% of survey respondents said they had utilized some aspect of CPS at least once a month during the previous quarter. Three-quarters of them said this was the typical rate of use, while 16% generally employed CPS more frequently. Some 27% reported using CPS about once a month. It's interesting to note that frequency of use remained relatively stable despite the number of years since the respondents had completed their CPS training.

Question #3: Where is CPS being utilized?

People are applying the CPS process in a variety of situations from staff meetings to long-range goal setting and from financial planning to civic organizations. One respondent even shared a story of how CPS was used during jury duty to help move the group toward consensus. Survey respondents shared stories of how they have used CPS to enhance their lives in the following areas:

- Organizational and professional problems both in group and individual settings
- Personal Problem Solving
- Family Problem Solving
- Community/Civic Problem Solving

Here are some examples offered:

- **"I facilitated a small human resources staff of a school district in assessing their current and future tasks. Result: This allowed staff to have the same baseline of information from which to plan future priorities /work scope."**
- **"I used CPS with a church congregation to help prioritize a building project. Result: It did become clear that no one wanted to move locations. Kitchen became the priority and it is now done."**

- **“I use CPS with my teenage children to help them decide what’s most important in life situations. Result: I don’t come off as ‘preaching’ and my children actually come up with their own answers.”**

Question #4a: What impact did CPS have on nine key areas of participants’ personal and professional success?

Ninety percent of respondents indicated that CPS had some, considerable, or a great impact on **all** nine key areas. CPS had a positive impact on their:

- Ability to run meetings/facilitate small groups effectively
- Experience with teamwork and positive relationships with colleagues
- Ability to solve professional problems
- Effectiveness
- Self-awareness and personal development
- Enjoyment and/or sense of accomplishment at work
- Productivity
- Efficiency
- Ability to solve personal problems

Again, the stories shared by respondents to the survey illustrate how CPS can be applied in diverse contexts.

- **“We used a variety of tools in developing the organization’s strategic plan. Result: Higher level of ownership in plan by people throughout the organization.”**
- **“I use CPS skills and tools for personal financial planning. Result: Now have a plan to be debt free in five years and plan for retirement in seven or eight years.”**
- **“Most Important: Instilled a ‘way of doing business’ that values different ideas and creates avenues for a wider audience to participate.”**

Question #4b: What impact did CPS have on participants’ organizations and the children and/or families their organizations serve?

The power of participants’ stories most clearly articulated the impact their CPS knowledge and skills had on the children and families they serve. While their stories varied depending on the focus of their work, one theme remained the same. CPS increases the capacity of organizations to meet the needs of their customers. Some examples follow:

School personnel used CPS to:

- Improve instruction
- Improve morale among staff
- Enhance family/school communication
- Engage in continuous school improvement
- Improve special education case conferences, general education intervention team meetings, and other meetings focused on meeting the individual needs of students
- Keep students out of residential services

State government employees used CPS to:

- Write a five-year federal plan for family and children's services
- Improve the quality and timeliness of service delivery
- Gain broader input from meeting participants that resulted in better decision-making
- Teach "Person Centered Planning."

Training and Technical Assistance Providers used CPS to:

- Get services to community in a more timely manner
- Assist individuals with disabilities and their families to uncover alternatives and quality options
- Help parents generate ideas to meet their needs and the needs of their families

Higher Education Faculty and Professional Staff used CPS to:

- Teach collaboration strategies to future teachers
- Develop a more effective university division
- Do strategic planning with state police leadership
- Change service delivery

Non-profit, disability, and social service agencies used CPS to:

- Improve client programs. "...a better planned program, with higher levels of ownership means better service."
- Aid community committees to generate and select ideas
- Generate and focus on issues that help agencies know what exactly their clients need
- Provide staff with a better sense of working towards common goals
- Set an organizational culture where creativity is valued -- staff, parents, board, and especially children

Question #5: Is CPS worth the time, effort, and expense invested?

A resounding yes was the answer of 95% of the survey respondents. A sampling of their comments reflects the high value participants placed on their experience.

- "My training in CPS has had a more significant impact on the performance of my job than any other training."
- "This training was a highlight in my personal and professional life. While I don't have an opportunity to use a lot of the tools often -- how I think through issues and processes has been considerably enhanced. The trainers were superb!"
- "CPS has provided me with the confidence to address almost any situation with the belief I can provide options to improve this situation."

While the above examples are just a few of the comments we received, they clearly illustrate that CPS is a process that can be implemented, with great success, within the fields of education and human services.

The 5% reporting "no" to this item voiced some common themes about the obstacles they faced. Some of the barriers encountered in using CPS were a perceived lack of time to prepare, lack of authority to institute, lack of buy-in by co-workers, and irregular usage. In many of these cases, the respondents indicated that while they thought CPS was a good process, it wasn't being used in their organizations.

For example, one person said, "CPS has completely gone by the wayside. I personally have not used the techniques for over two years. I believe this is an excellent tool and hope to get back to it in the near future." Another noted, "Our organization has not used the process and, since I was trained, has become more hierarchical with decision-making concentrated at the top. I can't imagine why this organization paid for CPS training."

Interestingly, some indicated a desire to revisit CPS spurred by receiving and answering the survey. One respondent said, "I need to make time for a refresher course."

Using Information to Improve Services

The IDOE Division of Special Education has made a substantial investment in CPS. We now have clear study results to demonstrate the positive impact CPS is having on participants and their work. In addition to reporting these results to

our funder, we plan to use the information obtained from this study to enhance our pre-training materials and approach. For example, our data suggest the benefit of having more than one person from an organization attend a program. We will work with decision-makers sending staff to our workshops to aid them in selecting participants and to provide tips for supporting participants after they return to their organization.

We also plan to work with CPS-B to modify the design of our CPS programs to further increase impact. The CPS Impact Study produced pages of examples, many of which evidenced that our human services personnel, like persons in all sectors, must be effective group collaborators. We believe the inclusion of concrete examples of how others have used the CPS framework, language, and tools will inspire our participants to find additional opportunities for using CPS to enhance services to children with special needs and their families. One survey respondent succinctly summed up the driving force behind the Blumberg Center's delivery of CPS programs to people in all four corners of Indiana, "Efficiently solving organizational problems naturally leads to more efficient services to children and families."

It is with that goal in mind that we will use information obtained from the CPS Impact Study to fine tune our programs and services as we continue to introduce the CPS process to even more people across the state.