



Cypress Elementary, Broward County Public Schools, Florida



SNAPSHOT

- 722 students PreK-5
- Full-school Title I
- ~50% English Learners
- Dual Language Program (English/Spanish)
- ESE/Autism Program

At Cypress Elementary School, students with diverse backgrounds and learning needs are maximizing their potential with Thinking Maps. This “visual language for learning” allows every student to be successful and make progress toward learning standards. Students are now more confident, engaged, and empowered to take ownership of their own learning.

MEETING THE NEEDS OF EVERY LEARNER

Principal Vanessa Schnur and her staff pride themselves on creating programs that meet the needs of their highly diverse student population. Cypress Elementary is located in a high-poverty neighborhood, and roughly 50% of students are classified as English Learners. They also have a large number of Exceptional Student Education (ESE) students. Their programs include a long-running Dual Language (Spanish/English) program and five classes for students with autism. Principal Vanessa Schnur says, “We have to always think of innovative ways to meet the needs of all the learners so that they can be successful.”

When Vanessa came on board in 2013, many students were struggling to make progress toward grade-level standards. She realized that her teachers needed new strategies to accelerate learning for all. In 2015, she saw Thinking Maps in action during a visit to another

“I see the impact of Thinking Maps on our kids: everyone feels empowered, everyone feels smart in the moment, everyone feels like they can. It’s a whole different culture now. And there are no behavior issues, because everyone is busy and focused on learning”

- Amy Senior, Fifth-Grade Teacher,
Cypress Elementary

school and knew she wanted to bring them to Cypress. “It was a real eye-opener to see how Thinking Maps really brought out the thinking in every child, no matter their level or language ability,” she says. “I thought that was a great way to engage students, because you have to get them engaged in order for them to have results.”

FOSTERING A GROWTH MINDSET

“When we walked into classrooms, I saw the kids doing the work. It was authentic. It wasn’t pretty, it wasn’t glamorous, it wasn’t fluff. It was just kids working and really thinking in a very authentic way.”

- Sharon Lopez, PE / ESOL Teacher,
Cypress Elementary

Thinking Maps was rolled out at Cypress Elementary in 2016 with an initial training for all teachers in the school. Vanessa and several teacher leaders also attended a multi-day Training of Trainers, which enabled them to act as Thinking Maps coaches, mentors and trainers for the school.

Teachers and school leaders noticed right away that students were more deeply engaged with learning when they used Thinking Maps—including their ESE students and students with limited English proficiency. Thinking

Maps have fostered a growth mindset at Cypress, where every student can start from their current level and find a path to success. Fifth-grade teacher Amy Senior says, “Some of my kids wouldn’t even think about picking up a grade-level text. But with Thinking Maps, they feel a different kind of confidence. Everyone is able to work on the same Thinking Map, and even kids who are behind grade level are able to do the same thing everyone else is doing and be successful.”

Sharon Lopez, who taught a sheltered instruction class for English Learners, says, “A lot of my ESOL kids were very shy about speaking in English. Thinking Maps are a great way for them to talk with their peers. It makes them feel more comfortable and successful. The best was when I saw my kids having conversations and using the Maps as references.”

Even the youngest learners are able to use Thinking Maps to activate higher-order thinking and engage with grade-level standards and content. First-grade teacher Regine Tertulien says that her students understand that each Map has a purpose and can use Thinking Maps in a variety of ways in the classroom, including writing off of the Maps.

Thinking Maps are now part of the school’s culture, used not just in core academics, but also in Specials like art and gym, and even in the cafeteria and school store. They are also used by teachers for collaboration and planning, and by school leadership



to communicate goals and priorities. Each year, Vanessa and the teacher leaders provide training for new teachers and coaching for the whole school. Every two weeks, teacher teams come together for “Chat and Chews” to discuss how they are using Thinking Maps in the classroom and share ideas for using the Thinking Map of the month.

“Thinking Maps are a great tool for collaboration, because they allow everyone to see your thinking at a glance. It’s just an easier way to organize information.”

- Vanessa Schnur, Principal,
Cypress Elementary

STUDENT-OWNED LEARNING LEADS TO SUCCESS



As a result of implementing Thinking Maps, there has been a shift in the school from teacher-directed experiences to student ownership of learning. Amy says, “With Thinking Maps, it’s not teacher talk. The Maps give students the tools they need to process information, understand directions, and solve problems. So, what happens in a Thinking Maps classroom is you become a facilitator, and the students are doing the work.”

As students took more ownership of their learning, teachers also noticed that behavioral problems melted away. Teachers noted that students working with Thinking Maps are highly engaged and focused on learning. If a few students do become disruptive, other students in the class tend to help redirect them to the learning task. Regine says, “They’ll say, ‘Oh no—we’re not doing that here, we’re learning.’”

The depth of student ownership can really be seen in the **Thinking Maps Student Ambassador** initiative. Thinking Maps Ambassadors are fourth and fifth-grade students who have demonstrated exceptional proficiency with Thinking Maps. Each month, they evaluate student-created Thinking Maps nominated by teachers. The best—evaluated based on correct use of the Maps, creativity, and the thinking process—are displayed in the Hall of Fame. “Students are so excited to see their work in the Hall of Fame, so they really want to do their best,” says Sharon. “The Thinking Maps Ambassadors take their leadership role so seriously. I see so much ownership there.”

Seeing student success is what keeps teachers on board. Amy says, “The proof was watching the kids work and execute this. When you see the student evidence, it’s easy to get teachers on board. Thinking Maps is part of our culture now, and it is so special.”

The Impact of the Thinking Maps Student Ambassador Program at Cypress Elementary

