



Fighting Rapidly Declining Youth Reasoning Skills

Center for BrainHealth receives \$6 million grant from Texas Legislature

The Center for BrainHealth has received a \$6 million grant from the Texas Legislature that will enable researchers to study ways to improve critical thinking skills in North Texas middle school students. The researchers will conduct Strategic Memory and Reasoning Training (SMART) on 2,000 middle school students in North Texas in the next two years. If evidence shows the program delivers a significant change, it may be implemented permanently in schools across Texas.

“Innovation and abstract thinking ability in today’s youth are at the lowest point in American history,” said Dr. Sandra Bond Chapman, founder and chief director of the Center for BrainHealth. “In the past decade, we’ve learned that our brains change more during the middle school years than at any other time in life except the first two months. We have an opportunity to change the course of these students’ lives and our nation’s future by teaching them not just what to memorize, but how to think.”

Reasoning and critical thinking skills are rapidly declining across the country. In 1983, the U.S. led all other developed countries in higher-order reasoning skills. By 2003, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, the U.S. ranked 24 out of 29. Dr. Chapman attributes the decline to a rising focus on standardized testing and an increased reliance on technology to find answers.

A pilot program conducted by the Center for BrainHealth in a Dallas ISD middle school last year showed promising results in the 54 participants. Students received 10 45-minute SMART training sessions over four weeks. The SMART participants had a 30 percent improvement in reasoning scores, while students in the control groups did not improve. Additionally, all students in the SMART group passed the TAKS reading test, and 30 percent were commended.

“We were heartened by the results of our pilot. There was significant progress in a short time,” said Dr. Jacquelyn Gamino, principal investigator on the Middle School Brain Years project at the Center for BrainHealth. “With this grant from the Texas Legislature, we’ll be able to learn whether it’s scalable. This lays the foundation for Texas to become a national leader in advancing critical thinking and teen brain development in our youth.”