



PHOTO BY ALI MCCULLOUGH, STUDENT TEACHER FROM SAMFORD UNIVERSITY

Christy Christian, right, meets with teachers at Brookwood Forest Elementary School in Mountain Brook, Ala. They are Brittney Bowen, left, a student teacher from Samford University, and Karen Jackson, a 5th grade teacher at Brookwood Forest.

Reading coach greets her new class — of adults

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

Like most teachers, Christy Christian always saw the first day of school as a joyous new beginning.

But confronting the first day of school as a coach was a new kind of challenge, she said. “I always look forward to the first day of school. But I had major withdrawal on the first day of school (when I became a coach). That day was really hard for me. I’ve always wanted to teach or train teachers but I

didn’t really know what that was going to mean,” she said.

“My preparation for the first day of school is completely different. I knew what I had to do to prepare for my kids. It was almost innate! What I have to do to prepare to work with teachers is completely different,” she said.

Christian was tapped to become a reading coach at Brookwood Forest Elementary School in the Mountain Brook Schools in suburban

Birmingham. Mountain Brook is one of Alabama's highest performing districts and one that is widely respected for its professional development program. In 2000, Mountain Brook received the U.S. Dept. of Education's Model Professional Development Award. (Supt. Charles Mason also serves on the NSDC Board of Trustees.)

Because of the district's reputation, Mountain Brook has attracted some of the best teachers in the state, Christian said. That's a situation that presents its own challenges to a young coach. "I'm working with a lot of teachers who read professionally and some who present across the state," she said.

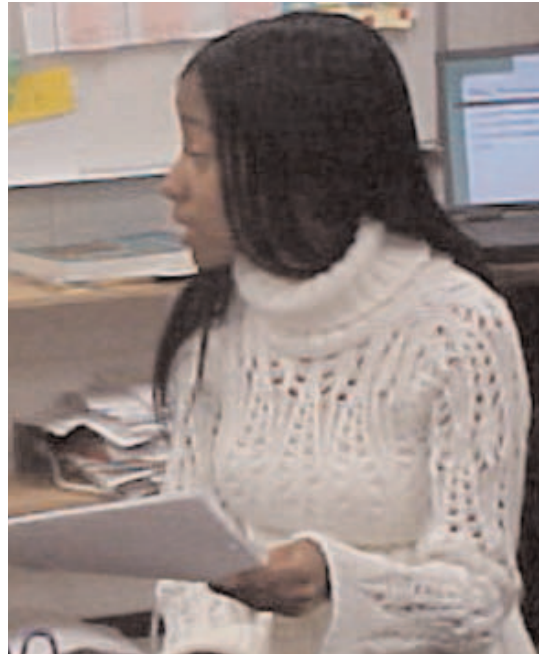
Christian is one of four coaches in Mountain Brook. Being able to connect with other reading coaches in her own district was essential during her first year as a coach, she said. In addition, she asked the district's staff development director to provide her with a mentor. Her assigned mentor had been a coach for several years and was able to provide immense support for her. Christian is now repaying that debt by mentoring the new reading coaches this year.

But Christian is also part of a cohort of 700 K-3 reading coaches supported by the Alabama Reading Initiative, a statewide program managed by the Alabama Department of Education. Its goal is to significantly improve reading instruction and ultimately achieve 100% literacy among public school students. ARI focus is on providing professional development to support teachers in integrating best practices into their reading instruction.

ARI, which was created through the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, requires participating schools to hire a fulltime reading coach, use a scientifically-based comprehensive reading program, buy scientifically-based assessments, and provide substantial professional development for teachers. ARI funds pay Christian's salary.

Christian said ARI provides a wealth of excellent, credible resources for teachers. "But it's a real challenge for teachers who teach traditionally and who still think traditionally," she said.

When she became an ARI reading coach, Christian began by attending a week-long sum-



mer professional development institute along with other teachers and administrators from her building. The summer program was held at a school outside her district where teachers could learn reading strategies and also teach students during a portion of the day.

During her first year as a coach, Christian attended monthly meetings with a small group of other novice coaches led by an ARI coach trainer. Those meetings focused on beefing up the content knowledge of the novice coaches, said Georgina Pipes, coordinator for elementary reading coaches for ARI.

The next summer, Christian attended an intensive two-week institute that included a coaching internship, Pipes said. This institute is also connected to a summer school for students. The internship enables coaches to practice their coaching skills with teachers who are not part of their regular schools. The coaches led content studies, did demonstration lessons, and offered feedback to teachers, all under the observant eye of their coach trainer.

Now in her second year as an ARI coach, Christian is in the advanced strand. She videotapes her coaching work at Brookwood and takes those tapes to the ARI coaches meetings where her work is critiqued by other coaches and her coach trainer.

"I'm working with a lot of teachers who read professionally and some who present across the state."

Alabama Reading Initiative is a statewide program managed by the Alabama Department of Education. It was created through the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

ARI also funds five days of professional development for teachers who are “faculty facilitators” at its partner schools. One of those faculty facilitators from Brookwood Forest accompanies Christian to each of her ARI coaches’ meetings. Each of those meetings is followed by what ARI calls “turnaround training” in which Christian and the faculty facilitator determine the best way to present what they have learned to other teachers at Brookwood Forest.

Finally, ARI coaches are expected to do walkthroughs in their buildings once a month. Typically, these involve Christian, her ARI coach trainer, the principal, and one other person. Sometimes, that is another teacher in the building, sometimes it’s another ARI coach. Hosting other ARI coaches at her school has been very well-received by Brookwood Forest teachers, she said. “They really feel empowered by the opportunity to show implementation of what was learned this summer,” she said.

Even with the enormous support from the district and from ARI, Christian acknowledges that there have been challenges in her new job.

She struggles with the never-ending nature of the work. “I was warned in advance that this job has many aspects and that I couldn’t be perfect at every aspect of the job. I have to pick and choose. And I didn’t expect all of the paperwork. I can’t keep up with that,” she laughs.

Initially, teachers found it difficult to understand that she was not an interventionist who would work with students who were struggling. “I spent my whole first year building rapport and answering their needs. I was really good at finding information for them and really good at teaching lessons for them,” she said.

By the second year, however, it was time for her to move more into encouraging them to change their practice. Christian views coaching as a “non-threatening staff development strategy.” Successful coaching requires a coach to develop a relationship with another teacher and to work one on one with that teacher. Inside that relationship, the teacher is allowed to become more trusting and to ask for the guidance that he or she needs.

Even though she was a classroom teacher for

CHRISTY CHRISTIAN

Position: Reading coach

School district: Mountain Brook Schools, Mountain Brook, Alabama

Professional history: Taught 2nd grade in Shelby County, Ala., for one year before moving to Mountain Brook as a 2nd grade teacher at Brookwood Forest Elementary School. Taught 2nd grade at Brookwood Forest for three years before becoming the school’s reading coach.

Education: Earned a bachelor’s degree in music from Converse College, Spartanburg, S.C. Earned a master’s of science in education and an education specialist’s DEGREE, both from Samford University, Birmingham, Alabama. Currently enrolled in a doctoral program at Samford University.

Professional service: Tutors kindergarten through 8th-grade students in Birmingham City Schools in math and science in Saturday tutoring program. Adjunct professor at Samford University in early childhood education.

To continue this conversation, e-mail Christian at ChristianC@mtnbrook.k12.al.us.

only four years, Christian said that experience equipped her to empathize with the challenges that teachers face. But understanding and respecting the challenges of classroom teachers doesn’t always mean that you’re accepted as a player on the same team.

“One of the things that changes is that teachers no longer see you in the trenches. You’re really in the middle when you’re a coach. Even socially, you’re in the middle. You’re not part of the administration but you’re not a classroom teacher. You really are in the middle.”

“Sometimes, I feel very alone. I didn’t expect to have as much withdrawal from working with kids and building my own community in my classroom.

“Working with adults is different. What helped me was starting to look at the teachers as my new class. I’m still building a community, except it’s with adults,” she said. ◆

“One of the things that changes is that teachers no longer see you in the trenches. You’re really in the middle when you’re a coach. Even socially, you’re in the middle.”