

Math coach adds listening skills to her repertoire

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

When she applied to become a math coach, Linda Hostetler admits that she wasn't exactly certain what work she would be doing.

She had been teaching 5th grade for 24 years and was recommended for the job because her principal recognized her exemplary teaching of mathematics. Even from the initial description of the job, she believed being a coach was work that would benefit teachers. "As I began to think about it, I knew I would have enjoyed having a coach when I was teacher," she said.

Hostetler is in her second year as math coach at James M. Brown Elementary School in Walhalla, South Carolina, a largely rural area in the state's Piedmont region. Brown is a Title I school with about 570 students, including 70% who are free- or reduced-price lunch and nearly a quarter who are Hispanic. This year, Brown's rating moved up one level in the South Carolina accountability system "because of substantial improvement in the achievement of students belonging to historically underachieving groups."

She is one of four math coaches in the Oconee County district. Two of the four are supported by the South Carolina Department of Education's Math and Science Coaching Initiative. Each coach works exclusively as a coach in a South Carolina elementary school. The



goal of the coaching is to increase student achievement in mathematics and in science. The coaches work to improve instructional practices of teachers in their schools in the context of the teacher's own classroom.

Having support within her district, especially by having other coaches to work with, has proven to be a very helpful part of her experience, she said. "When you sit in your little office and don't have anybody to reflect with, that's very hard," she said.

Because she is part of the statewide initia-

Linda Hostetler (red vest) facilitates a discussion about math instruction during a monthly meeting with the 2nd grade team.

tive, however, Hostetler has had significant opportunities for professional development to support her work. She began her coaching career by attending an intensive six-day summer institute with her school's principal and also attends one day of training each month for coaches who are part of the statewide initiative.

One of the main objectives of the initial summer institute was to learn how to write a school improvement plan built around student learning goals appropriate for her school. Like many teachers, she'd had no prior experience writing goals or an improvement plan. She learned how to study the data about the performance of students at her school as well as how to share that data with teachers in her school so they could work together to draft a plan to impact student learning.

A second significant piece of work for her was learning how to have reflective conversations with teachers. That involved learning how to ask questions that would elicit thoughtful responses and how to listen deeply to the answers.

"I've found that this is one of the hardest things for me to do. When a teacher asks me a question, my first thought is to jump in and tell them what to do. It's difficult to sit back and learn to listen and not just solve their problems," Hostetler said.

Once on the job, she began in much the way that most coaches begin: by spending a lot of time organizing materials and ordering materials for teachers. "Doing this helped build trust with the teachers. They could see right away that I wasn't there to evaluate them," she said.

"You have to build rapport and trust with teachers before you can even think about making a difference. It's a very slow process," she said.

Now in her second year as a coach, Hostetler spends most of her time observing teachers teaching. "I try to get into two or three classrooms every day and then I try to spend some time reflecting with those teachers. Of course, sometimes that happens by chasing them down the hall!" she said.

She meets for 50 minutes each month with each grade-level to talk only about mathematics. Each meeting begins with teachers describing a

LINDA H. HOSTETLER**Position:** Math coach**School:** James M. Brown Elementary School, Walhalla, S.C.**District:** Oconee County Public Schools**Professional history:** Taught 5th grade in Oconee County Public Schools from 1980 to 2004. Became math coach at James M. Brown Elementary School in 2004.**Education:** Earned her bachelor's and master's degrees in elementary education from Clemson University.**Honors/accomplishments:** Twice recognized as a superior teacher in South Carolina's Teacher Incentive Program. Teacher of the year at her elementary school.**Professional service:** Supervised student teachers and served as the math lead teacher and grade-level chair before becoming math coach.**To continue** this conversation, e-mail Hostetler at is lhos@oconee.k12.sc.us.

success in their math instruction since the previous meeting. Because of the emphasis on assessment, some time in every meeting is also devoted to testing. She also helps teachers learn how they can add writing to their math instruction since writing across the curriculum is one of the school goals. For example, teachers can ask students to write a brief statement at the end of each week about what they have learned in math that week or what they want to learn during the next week.

Is she having an impact in her school?

"A lot has changed. They'll stop me in the hall and tell me what's going on in their math class and ask 'What do you think about this?' They're not looking for me to give them solutions, they're looking for a conversation about their math classes.

"What's been most effective in facilitating a change in teachers is having them reflect on their lessons, allowing them to bring up questions about what else they should think about. The difference is being able to draw them through a conversation so they can see for themselves how something else might be better. My favorite part is when they say, 'Next year, when I teach this, I'll know not to do that, I'll know how to do it better,' " she said. ♦

**THE REFLECTIVE
CONVERSATION**

It involves **asking** questions that will elicit thoughtful responses and **listening** deeply to the answers.

See **LISTEN FULLY** tool on p. 8.

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— *Linda Hostetler*