

Math coaching, squared

PAIR MAKES A DIFFERENCE WITH MODEL CLASSROOMS IN GEORGIA SCHOOL



BY JOAN RICHARDSON

Christy LeMaster and Kathy Spruiell are a dynamic duo.

At Simonton Elementary School in suburban Atlanta, the pair manages 13 Math Model Classrooms (MMCs) in their building. These classrooms — at least one for each grade level — are demonstration sites for the 134 teachers at Simonton. The MMC teachers have volunteered to open their classrooms to observations by other teachers. Some of the MMC teachers are novice teachers, some veterans.

The MMCs are open for observation at the same time every week. Sometimes, LeMaster or Spruiell co-teaches with the teacher; sometimes, the regular teacher goes it alone. Teachers can volunteer to visit an MMC whenever they're interested, but the principal, Dot Schoeller, requires every classroom teacher to visit an MMC at least once each year. She hires 12 substitutes for a day and releases classroom teachers in two-hour blocks. Because of the size of the staff, it takes weeks to ensure that every teacher

has released time for the observations. Simonton has four such observation periods during the school year.

The observations follow the same pattern each time. The coaches, working in consultation with grade-level teachers, identify a math strategy for the focus of the observation. The strategy may be new or it may be one that challenges many of the teachers. Classroom teachers will visit one of the MMCs, typically in their grade level, for the observation.

Following the observation, the classroom teacher has a conversation with one of the coaches about how he or she could use the same strategy. The teacher will commit to practicing the strategy and schedule a time when the coach will observe the teacher using the strategy with his or her own students. Sometimes, the classroom teacher will ask the coach to do another demo lesson before trying it independently. Then the coach observes the teacher using the strategy with his or her own students. Finally, the coach reflects with the teacher about the experience.

This year, LeMaster and Spruiell also have created a learning community of the MMC teach-

Kathy Spruiell, left, and Christy LeMaster

Read more about the principal's support for coaching in this school in the December/January 2007 issue of *The Learning Principal*.

KATHY SPRUIELL

Position: Math coach, Simonton Elementary School, Lawrenceville, Ga.

School district: Gwinnett County Public Schools

Professional history: Taught 6th grade for six years in Jefferson County, Ala. Became math specialist at Simonton Elementary School in 2001 and later was named math coach.

Education: Earned her bachelor's degree in elementary education from Birmingham-Southern College and is working on her master's degree in elementary math education from Walden University.

Honors/accomplishments: 1995 Second Mile Teacher Award (Teacher of the Year) in Jefferson County, Ala.

Professional service: Has been a team leader and grade chair.

Has presented numerous times at the Georgia and National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. Presents frequently to the math specialists and coaches in her district. Serves as math leader for the cluster of Gwinnett schools that includes Simonton.

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ers. Those 13 teachers meet regularly to share their experiences and inevitably spin off more ideas. "Our first meeting with them was excellent. So many ideas came out of that meeting," Spruiell said.

Both LeMaster and Spruiell express a great deal of admiration for the teachers who volunteered for the MMCs. "The teachers who volunteered to be in the math model classrooms had to be willing to be disturbed. That's hard. It was hard for them to say 'I don't know and I want help.' Teachers usually don't do that," LeMaster said.

LeMaster, who was a math coach in another building before coming to Simonton, believes the MMCs offer greater opportunities for conferencing and reflection than having a coach do model lessons in a single classroom. "When I did model lessons, I was seen as the expert, someone who

would come in and do something for them. This is more reflective and collaborative.

"To be a coach, you have to build trust, no matter how much expertise you have. That takes time. Teachers have to know that you're on their side and that you understand their frustrations," LeMaster said.

Offering opportunities to observe a regular classroom teacher from the same grade level is part of the power of the MMC, LeMaster said. Coaches who don't have classroom responsibilities can quickly lose credibility with teachers, she said. "Teachers think you may know the math but you don't have the same responsibilities that I have every day in my classroom. You don't have to worry about the lunch count, you don't have to teach language arts and science and math. Regular classroom teachers have much more credibility with other classroom teachers,"

CHRISTY COTHAM LeMASTER

Position: Math coach, Simonton Elementary School, Lawrenceville, Ga.

School district: Gwinnett County Public Schools

Professional history: Taught 4th and 5th grade at Rock Bridge Elementary School in Gwinnett County for four years before becoming math specialist at the same school. She was math specialist at Rock Bridge

for six years before becoming math coach at Simonton.

Education: Earned her bachelor's degree in educational studies from Vanderbilt University and her master's degree and education specialist's certificate in middle grade math from Mercer University, Atlanta. She also holds a leadership certificate from Mercer University.

Professional service: Founder and president (2006) of

Gwinnett County Council of Teachers of Mathematics. Has presented numerous times at the Georgia and National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. Presents frequently to the math specialists and coaches in her district. PBS Mathline participant

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The MMCs help bridge that gap, LeMaster said. “When someone asks us to model a lesson, we encourage them to visit the MMC. That way, they will learn from another teacher and not totally rely on Kathy and me,” she said.

LeMaster and Spruiell share a vision for the role that the MMCs teachers will play in their school. They agree that they are grooming these teachers to be teacher leaders.

“If we grow them as leaders, they can go back into their grade levels and be leaders among those other teachers,” Spruiell said.

LeMaster agrees. “Success breeds success. When those MMC teachers were having success, they became storytellers. They were very vocal about getting the word out. They were telling other teachers, ‘This is great. My teaching is get-

ting better. You can do this too.’ That encouraged more teachers to get involved.

LeMaster embraces the concept of coaching as a way to build teaching capacity in more than just one school. “To me, an instructional coach has to maximize the talent and potential of every teacher. If I go in and fix something, that’s short term. This is not just about the 24 kids they have today. If a teacher changes for the better and they have a teaching career for 10 to 15 years, they can impact 240, 250 students. I want to provide them with the tools they need for the long range. I want them to be successful no matter where they’re teaching. I want them to be successful so they don’t burn out. I want them all to become teacher leaders within their grade levels, their schools, their county. There’s a ripple effect every time a teacher improves,” she said. ◆

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