

Columbus Ledger-Enquirer

Posted on Mon, Jun. 21, 2004

Revamping instruction does add up

Alabama teachers aim for more collaborative learning

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OPELIKA, Ala. - Karen Brooks has been a part of the TEAM-Math collaborative for more than a year.

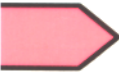
As the team leader for Phenix City Elementary School, the math teacher has been involved in curriculum planning, textbook selection and virtually every other aspect of the collaborative, which promises to change the way math is taught and learned in this region.

For the past two weeks, math teachers and principals from the 12 East Alabama school systems involved in TEAM-Math met at Opelika Middle School for training in new techniques to reach the students and the new textbooks that will be used.

It required a reversal in roles -- the teachers were taught. During the two weeks of professional development, teachers had to learn new classroom practices aligned with the new books, which emphasize collaborative learning by the students as opposed to rote learning.

Brooks and others from local systems involved in the training said the two weeks were a productive beginning of what they hope will enhance math education.

"It was exactly what I expected," Brooks said. "I've been involved in TEAM-Math for over a year and I knew what it would entail for our teachers when it came to the two-week cohort training. "A lot of the things (techniques) we have already been doing, but we have picked up new ideas along the way."



Gary Martin, an associate professor in Auburn University's College of Education and project director for TEAM-Math, said, "We can really see the teachers grasping the information. It's been a good two weeks." The collaborative -- which includes the Phenix City and Russell County school systems -- has a five-year, \$9 million grant from the National Science Foundation to fund its work.

Marceda Gordey, who is also a math teacher at Phenix City Elementary, got her first extensive exposure to the program during the two weeks of training. She said, "I think the TEAM-Math program is a good program. It focuses teachers' attention on teaching children strategies so they can become effective problem-solvers." Gordey said it's more important that students understand the process of getting a product than the product itself. "Once they understand the process, they are more likely to get the product. If you get an answer and don't know how you got there, you don't understand the concept."

Shavonniz Perkins of Russell Middle School said the shift from teachers asking students questions to students working in groups to come up with answers themselves will be interesting.

Carol Gaddy, a math teacher at Russell County Middle, said being put to the test every morning during the training was interesting. "They gave us a problem and instead of telling us what to do, how to do or anything, we had to solve it," she said. "Sometimes we didn't even know what they were asking. We had to come together to get the answer."

Hattie Nathan, the principal at Phenix City Elementary, believes getting the students to understand the real world application of math concepts is key.