

Benefits of math method add up

High scores spur growth of teacher training group

By Sara Neufeld, Baltimore Sun reporter

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Four years ago, award-winning math teacher Linda Eberhart began gathering her colleagues in Baltimore schools to talk about what was working in their classrooms and what wasn't.

Now a new study shows that city students whose teachers participate in Eberhart's program - called MathWorks - post significantly higher test scores than their peers. Among sixth-graders whose teachers attended monthly Thursday night sessions last academic year, 70 percent passed the state's standardized math test. That compares with 39 percent of sixth-graders whose teachers did not attend the sessions.

"It is just beyond any dreams I ever had," said Eberhart, a fifth-grade teacher at Mount Royal Elementary/Middle who was Maryland's Teacher of the Year in 2002.

The results are so remarkable that city school officials say they're rethinking how they conduct teacher training systemwide.

"I think it needs to be how professional development is done," said Andres Alonso, the new chief executive officer of the city schools, at a school board meeting last week

Alonso said he had offered Eberhart a job as the school system's math director, but she turned him down, saying she does not want to leave the classroom.

School board member Kalman "Buzzy" Hettleman publicly asked Eberhart to help the system figure out how to expand her program so that all teachers, in all subject areas, can participate.

The concept behind the program is simple: Teachers are more likely to gain the ideas and skills they need to help their students by working together, rather than listening to experts lecture in professional development sessions.

Eberhart said she got great ideas by talking to her colleagues around the state when she was Teacher of the Year, and she wanted to keep that going.

When the program started in 2003, there were about 15 teachers. By last year, the number had expanded to 165. Last month, when the program held its first session of the school year, 420 teachers showed up.

In addition, MathWorks began working last school year with math teachers from a group of 12 low-performing schools. The school system paid the teachers stipends to attend nine sessions, mostly on Saturdays. The schools' math scores rose, on average, by 20 percentage points. For example, the pass rate on the fourth-grade math test rose from 46 percent to 69 percent.

About 145 teachers from those 12 schools are expected to participate in separate sessions again this year.

The program has expanded the grades it serves each year, starting with fifth-grade teachers only in 2003 and now serving grades two through seven. Participating teachers have a broad range of experience. Last year, about 10 percent were in their first year of teaching, while 12 percent had been in the classroom 30 years or more.

Teachers volunteer to meet one Thursday night a month with colleagues from their grade level. Every month, the group makes a CD of teachers' best material that gets distributed to everyone. The Abell Foundation has covered the cost of materials and a stipend for group facilitators.

With the skyrocketing interest in the program, Eberhart says she'll likely need to break the Thursday night group into two sessions. She also wants to add a monthly session where discussions will focus on specific topics, such as teaching math to special education students and integrating technology into math lessons. She says Abell won't be able to pay all the facilitators needed, so she's requesting extra funding from the school system.

Eberhart, who is in her 38th year of teaching, was featured in a televised campaign advertisement for Martin O'Malley when he was running for governor last year.

The review of MathWorks was conducted by the school system's research office. Teachers submitted their class lists so evaluators could compare the test scores of students whose teachers were participating with the scores of those whose teachers weren't. The review examined two years of test data.

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