

# Basic Data Sheet

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**Name of Nominee:** Heather Sparks **Home Phone Number:** (405) 341-8739

**Home Address:** 828 East Drive, Edmond, OK 73034

**Years in Present Position:** 2.5 years **Total Years of Experience:** 14.5 years

**Subject and Grade Level:** Algebra & Pre-Algebra, 8<sup>th</sup> Grade

**School District:** Oklahoma City Public Schools I-89 **School Building:** Taft Middle School

**School Address:** 2901 NW 23, OKC, OK 73107 **School Phone Number:** (405) 946-1431

**Email Address:** [hespark@okcps.org](mailto:hespark@okcps.org), [hespark@aol.com](mailto:hespark@aol.com)

**Superintendent:** Sandra Park, Acting Superintendent

**Education Preparation:**

<i>Dates Attended</i>	<i>Name of College or University</i>	<i>Degree Earned</i>
2002-2003	Oklahoma City Community College	
1995-1999	Oklahoma State University	
1991-1995	Oklahoma City University	M.S. in Elementary Education
1987-1991	Oklahoma City University	B.S. in Early Childhood Education

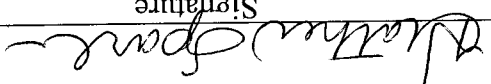
**Employment Record of Prior Service**

<i>Date</i>	<i>Name of School District</i>	<i>Position Held</i>
2005-present	Oklahoma City Public Schools	Math Enhancement, 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Math
2004-2005	Edmond Public Schools	5 <sup>th</sup> Grade
1993-2004	Oklahoma City Public Schools	1 <sup>st</sup> Grade, Curriculum & Technology Coordinator, Writing Workshop, 5 <sup>th</sup> Grade, 6 <sup>th</sup> Grade, 4/5 <sup>th</sup> Grade

**Additional Information: Publications, Honors, Special Assignments**

2007 State Finalist for the Presidential Award for Excellence in Math and Science Teaching (PAEMAST), Who's Who Among American Teachers 2006; National Board Certified Teacher, Middle Childhood Generalist 1999, Pearson National Science Teacher Advisory Board, Author of "Preparing to PASS: 5<sup>th</sup> Grade Math" and "Preparing to PASS: 5<sup>th</sup> Grade Science", and Oklahoma State Department of Education Master Teacher (Math & Science).

I hereby give my permission that any or all of the following materials may be shared with persons interested in promoting the Oklahoma Teacher of the Year program.

  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 Signature

# **Biographical Information**

I can't remember a time when I didn't love teaching. As a child, my best friend's mom was a first grade teacher, and I loved helping her with all the glamorous tasks of teaching including grading papers, cutting out decorations, and designing bulletin boards. Over the years, I found other outlets for teaching: Sunday school as a teenager, summer camp as a high school graduate, and struggling writers in college. I loved teaching young children once I became a *real* teacher too, but I didn't become passionate about teaching until two and a half years ago, when I was offered a Title I Math Enhancement position at Taft Middle School.

It was my first experience in a traditional middle school, and I was hooked the minute my first class began. Within a few weeks, I was reassigned to an eighth grade team to replace a transferring teacher. It was during that first semester with my eighth graders that I became passionate about teaching. I had an opportunity to make a real difference for students, especially those who struggled in math. After years of exposure to math from only basic textbooks and worksheets, most of my students lacked any appreciation of the subject. I embarked on a new teaching mission: to engage students in math, so they could experience the power it held and, yes, even the fun it could be!

I had not always appreciated math, although I had always loved the subject, and it came easily for me. I grew up enjoying puzzles and brain teasers, especially those that included numbers. I was always on the lookout for patterns in the world including numbers on license plates and repetition in phone numbers, and to this day have the freakish ability of recalling zip codes from around the city. My brain is naturally attuned to patterns in the world, so I eventually gravitated toward mathematics education.

In high school, several outstanding mathematics educators inspired me. One in particular, Alice Ward, was especially influential. She engaged my mathematical mind and pushed me to higher levels. I joined Math Club and was eventually invited to join Mu Alpha

Theta, a math honor society. Being surrounded by other students who saw math as I did encouraged me to take risks and attempt higher-level courses. As a result, I performed well on college entrance exams and headed to college, but I had no clear intention of becoming a teacher. Instead, I continued to develop another passion, music, which has deep roots in mathematics. Music performance was a love, but not an appropriate career choice, so my advisor encouraged me to consider music education instead. It was during my observations in American Education, an undergraduate course that led me to a new mentor, Hazel Gentry. Visiting her classroom at Sequoyah Elementary changed my entire focus on my future. Watching her interact with kindergartners made me realize the awesome responsibility she had in helping to shape the direction of the lives of the children in her charge. I returned to my university advisor that afternoon and changed my major to Early Childhood Education. I wanted to make a difference for young children, just like Mrs. Gentry.

In my first year teaching, my interest in math returned as I marveled at my first graders' ideas about numbers and how those ideas changed and developed with each lesson I taught. While I had the formal training about what to expect developmentally from my students, watching them in action gave me great appreciation for my role as an educator. I worked to develop games and activities that would challenge the young minds as they, too, looked for and found patterns in the world. I encouraged them to be on the lookout for patterns and they would gleefully bring them to class to share: color patterns in Christmas lights, number patterns in addresses, shape patterns in puzzles. I wanted to build on this enthusiasm, so I sought out professional development to learn additional strategies to assist my young apprentices.

After some research, I located and participated in a series of workshops that helped me learn that math didn't need to be taught in isolation. It could be taught with real-life connections that helped kids understand and learn it more effectively. I became more confident in my

abilities to help students learn math effectively, and I was moved to higher grade levels, but I didn't stop developing lessons that connected students to the real world. I also continued to seek out educators who shared my love of learning and teaching.

As my career progressed, I longed for more resources and ideas. I participated in lesson studies, observed master teachers in action and longed for even more challenging assignments. So, in 2003, when Oklahoma City Public Schools began recruiting teachers interested in becoming middle level math certified, I begged for the opportunity to join the program. Although I taught fifth grade, and the Urban Systemic Program was for middle school teachers, an exception was made and I was allowed to participate.

I was overwhelmed by what I didn't know. Over the next fourteen months, I worked with math teachers across the district as we improved our upper level math content knowledge. The program's impact on my teaching was phenomenal. I was learning from some of the state's best mathematicians-- not only new math concepts, but also important math pedagogy. Over time, I was transformed into a teacher that didn't just teach math by modeling, but rather one who helped students discover and make sense of math concepts through engaging classroom experiences. This came, in part, from knowing the math students would learn in future courses. I could now help students make sense of lower level concepts, like equivalent fractions, so that they could apply those concepts to higher-level skills like applying ratios and proportional reasoning.

After completing the program, I did become certified in middle level math and felt confident in my abilities to help students. I dove into my first math teaching assignment with excitement and anticipation. I soon realized that my personal content knowledge did not always translate to my students' math knowledge. I immediately began searching for professional

opportunities that would help me to bring upper level math content alive for students as I had with my elementary level students.

I was fortunate to find several summer programs, one that guided me to support my honors-level Algebra I students and another that assisted me in engaging my Pre-Algebra students as well. After spending almost 200 additional hours learning, I began my second year of teaching math more prepared and empowered to assist my students. I knew the best ways to teach students math and I've been at it ever since, never overlooking opportunities to enhance my content knowledge and improve my pedagogical skills.

# Philosophy of Teaching



mathematical arguments. With the money they earn in salary, they pay expenses, including rent

ready to work as well as for exceptional work, assessment performance, and even good

classroom financial system. Each day, students earn a salary for coming to class prepared and

My third philosophy is to connect class work to real life. One way I do this is through a

abilities to tackle challenging curriculum that may face them in the future

in math until I made them! My hope is that students will leave my class more confident in their

my expectations. Each year, students tell me with pride that they have never earned above a "D"

school, after school, at lunch, or on Saturday. The result is that my students rise to the level of

the school year, their grade drops below that mark, they are required to attend tutoring before

year, my students sign a contract agreeing to keep their grades above 70%. If at any time during

My second philosophy is to maintain high expectations. At the beginning of each school

positive attitude, I set the stage for learning.

students in the future. When I greet them at the door each day with a welcoming smile and a

my goal is help every student make sense of math so they have the power to be successful

subject that I believe gives great power to students. "Math is POWER!" is my class slogan and

long to try new strategies, to build more engaging lessons, and to activate excitement for a

My first philosophy is to have a positive attitude. Each day, I look forward to work, and I

for students and my passion is what frames my philosophies of teaching.

vocation have been united. It is in my passion for my work that I can make the most difference

and the future's sakes." I am so thankful that as a middle school math teacher, my avocation and

need are one./And the work is play for mortal stakes,/Is the deed ever really done/For Heaven

to unite/My avocation and my vocation/As my two eyes make one in sight./Only where love and

poem *Two Tramps in Mud Time*: "But yield who will to their separation,/My object in living is

My overaching teaching philosophy is best illustrated in a stanza from Robert Frost's

on their chairs and taxes for the materials. Occasionally, they also pay fines for classroom infractions, such as disrupting instruction, failing to come prepared for class, or inappropriate language. Each student maintains his/her account, and an auction is held at the end of each quarter where students may bid on items with any discretionary income. By providing students with financial experiences, I am helping them prepare for the future.

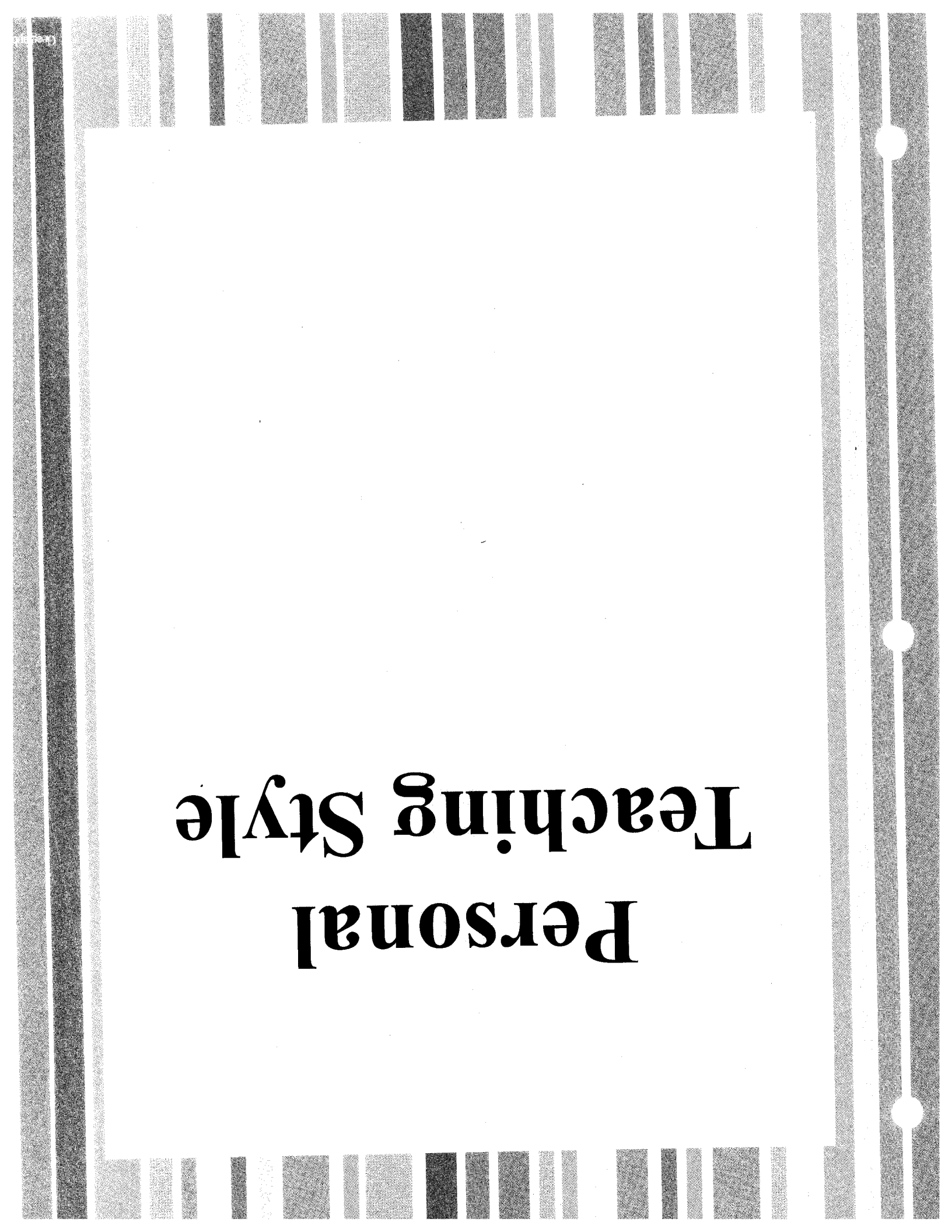
Future success is also dependent on the ability to communicate effectively, so my fourth philosophy promotes this ability. An outsider peeking in my classroom might be a bit surprised. They do not see desks in straight rows with students working robotically in textbooks. Instead they see students sitting in groups at tables, so that each day, when I ask my students to explain, evaluate, and consider other ideas that may be different from their own, they can do so effectively. Group members also learn from each other, especially when I encourage them to share answers and those answers don't match. They argue and work to convince others of their thinking. By doing this, students are preparing not just for high school, but for life.

My final philosophy of teaching is to engage students in meaningful tasks. My creativity and passion for my work help me seek out and design lessons and activities that will capture student interest while assisting them in learning new concepts. For example, I don't teach my students to calculate square footage and perimeter. Instead, I provide them the skills needed to design the "ultimate" apartment, where they are responsible for determining the appropriate measurements and related budgets. Students dive into their designs, selecting from tile and carpet samples and calculating costs.

Each of my philosophies is grounded in educational research, which I am constantly studying. As a life-long learner, I am continuously reading the latest research and considering its effects on my practice. For example, last summer, I was studying the latest brain research that indicates that learning occurs in cycles, usually lasting about twenty minutes. Scientists have

determined that learning that fits within these cycles allow students to retain more of what is being taught. As a result of this study, I shortened my class “warm-up” to introduce the day’s instructional focus during the prime learning cycle. I have found this to have a significant impact on the level of engagement of my students.

I also seek out the thoughts and opinions of other educators. I attend local, state, and national conferences in order to connect with my peers who are engaging in similar teaching practices. I garner ideas from them and share mine as well. I piggyback on ideas they share and create my own unique lessons. It is through these engaging lessons that my avocation and vocation unite as one enabling me to be the best teacher I can be.



# Personal Teaching Style

My personal teaching style is one I developed after nearly ten years of research. It is also one that tends to turn the stereotypical mathematics classroom on its head. I believe that the majority of Americans have one of two opinions of the subject of mathematics: either they love it or they hate it. I have found very few in between. The reason behind this dichotomy comes from mathematics classroom where the following sequence of events occurs: 1) Students take out their math homework. 2) Students either turn in or check their homework. 3) The teacher then models the new mathematical procedure. 4) The students practice the procedure while the teacher watches. 5) The teacher assigns forty or more problems for the students to try at home. This sequence is then repeated each day. Students who enjoy repetition and learn well with this approach are considered "good" at math and as a result, probably express positive attitudes toward the subject. The problem is, very few students learn math effectively with this approach. While they may perform well on a test over the content that week, very little of it remains long-term because the students have not developed a conceptual knowledge to support the procedure. As a result, American students learn the same math for four to five years and very few survive to attempt upper level courses in high school.

In contrast to the traditional approach outlined above, my students experience the following: Students are greeted at the door and head to their tables where "warm-up" problems replace homework. Students work together to come to consensus about answers and then compare their answers to other groups. Then, I share a story or pose a question that engages students in a mathematical discussion or investigation. For example, "Dole Juice Company would like to begin using juice boxes instead of 8 ounce juice cans. What dimension must the box have in order to hold the same amount of juice as their original can? Students immediately set to work on the problem. They ask for supporting information: "How do we find the volume of a cylinder?" I engage them in a relevant mini-lesson that guides them to discover the formula

they will need. I then circle the room facilitating the learning process. Sometimes I redirect students who have gotten sidetracked or distracted. Other times, I challenge students who jump to quick conclusions but are unable to support their thinking. At all times, I am assessing student understanding through observations and questions.

Finally, after the designated work time, I bring the learning of the group together with a summarizing session where each group shares their work and thinking. As they present, we compare the ideas and discuss the reasonableness of their conclusions. Usually, there is no one "correct" answer, but rather several valid ideas. For closure, instead of homework, I ask students to find other examples of the day's work in real life and bring them back to class to share.

Sharing my approach to teaching across the state and country has brought responses of utter amazement from my peers. They can hardly believe I teach math without assigning homework, without using a textbook, and without formal tests (other than those mandated by the state). I assure them it can be done and that the National Standards actually call for this approach to teaching. But I also tell them it is not easy—it is risky and sometimes painful to teach in a way that is not traditionally accepted. I share my website and all the resources I have developed as well as my email and I tell them to start small and take it slow. Teachers cannot transform into constructivist math teachers overnight. I also encourage and welcome them into my classroom to observe. My students have become very accustomed to having visiting teachers and they willingly share their work and positive attitudes about my teaching approach with them. My teaching style may be unique, but it is one that I believe supports all learners at all levels. I expect each of my students, regardless of his/her previous experience or abilities, to fully participate and demonstrate knowledge daily. I offer support only if necessary. In this way, I help build the confidence my students need to find future success in mathematics.

# **Educational Issues & Trends**

In today's educational world, there are numerous issues and trends. Merit pay, teaching time, gender equity, recruiting and retaining teachers, and closing the achievement gap are just a few that garner headlines across the country on any given day. One issue that I feel especially zealous about is America's ability to staff high-need schools with highly qualified teachers. I believe that now is the time to put the best and the brightest of our profession with the students who have the most to gain. This action, I believe, would result in closing the achievement gap. In any given suburban school district in America, the number of teacher applicants far exceeds the number of vacancies, especially if the district has a good reputation. Rural and urban districts, however, are not so lucky. Rural schools that are geographically isolated face major challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified teachers. Few teachers live in those areas and fewer still are willing to commute. Urban districts face other challenges. Teacher shortages, especially in high need subjects like math, science, and special education, exist on a perennial basis. Sadly, it's generally the urban and rural schools that are most like to serve higher proportions of high-poverty students, the students who count on public schools the most for their learning. When few highly qualified teachers choose to work in high-need schools, the impact on students is significant.

So what can be done to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers for our high-need schools? Policy groups have been posing that same question for nearly a decade and some states and districts have made great progress on the issue. One solution is to specifically recruit future teachers for hard-to-staff subjects. In California, for example, special recruitment programs at state universities provide tuition-free programs for students who commit to become highly qualified in math, science, and special education.

Another solution is to create teacher preparation programs that prepare teachers for specific assignments in high-need schools. New York City created the NYC Teaching Fellows



to do just that. The program focuses on local teacher candidates who are much more likely to stay in the local classrooms once trained. Other districts are improving their recruitment and employment techniques. They hold annual job fairs and allow principals the latitude to hire preferred candidates on the spot. Also, they have a streamlined digital application process that allows candidates to check the status of their applications. Principals looking for prospective teachers can log on and select teachers in a timelier manner than with more traditional hiring practices.

Of course, once new teachers are hired, training and retaining of those teachers becomes a hurdle. Often, when a teacher reaches tenured status, he generally transfers out of the high-need schools and into the more desirable schools of the district. In response, some districts have now created incentives and policies to redistribute the teacher workforce. Highly qualified teachers who work in high-need schools are paid a salary bonus. Furthermore, all teachers want to work in a school that is safe, provides necessary resources, and has supportive administrators. Providing these conditions goes a long way toward retaining highly qualified staff. The Center for Teacher Quality (CTQ) has initiatives in seven states that are improving the working conditions of high-need schools and the results are promising.

Local and state officials must work to develop strategies that will support teachers who work in high-need schools. Pay must be competitive, working conditions must be safe, and schools must build communities of learners where teachers feel they are making a significant difference. Once schools are able to recruit and retain highly qualified staff, improved student achievement is sure to follow.

# Professional Development

Over my teaching career, several staff development opportunities have changed not only the direction of my career, but also my level of success. After my first year of teaching, I was accepted to the Oklahoma State University Writing Project. As a Writing Project fellow, I spent six weeks of the summer with nineteen other educators, writing and learning about the art of teaching writing from amazing people with diverse backgrounds. I learned that communicating through writing is universal for any subject. I also learned that the best teachers set goals, read research, and reflected on their practice. Twelve years after my initial summer with the Writing Project, I am still active in its community of learners. I read listserv posts and respond, I participate in book talks, and travel around the state helping teachers see the importance of writing through my workshop presentations hosted by the Project.

It took the serendipitous participation in one workshop to connect me to another significant professional development opportunity of my career. I was a first grade teacher attending a Marilyn Burns workshop when the Director of Mathematics for the State Department of Education stood to give a recruitment speech for a new state leadership program called "Master Teachers Project." She was looking for early elementary teachers who would be willing to join a cadre of science and math teachers of all levels from across the state who would learn the latest trends in math and science education. Over the four years that I was involved, I learned about the Japanese Lesson Study and participated in several of my own. I also learned about the most current forms of alternative assessments including project-based assessments and the rubrics that accompanied them. Most importantly, I built professional relationships with peers across the state from whom I have continued to learn, even after the end of the Project.

Participation in this group had significant impact on the teacher I am today.

My fourth year of teaching, I became one of the first teachers in Oklahoma City to pursue National Board Certification. I had initially learned about National Board Certification as a

college student when I traveled to the University of Oklahoma to attend a consortium on a new professional development opportunity that was being created by and for teachers. Although the Board was in its infancy then, I knew I would some day work to attain this distinction. Eight years later, I did just that. Through the certification process, I learned that good teaching was more than a delivery method; rather it is a way of seeing the bigger picture, including the delivery, the assessment, and the reflection on the process of teaching. Once certified, I continued to grow professionally by mentoring others, which I still do today. I am now able to explain what I do in the classroom, why I do what I do, and probably most importantly, why it matters. I mentor current and prospective candidates as they make professional choices that I know will impact them personally and professionally.

Schools Attuned is another professional development experience that has changed my teaching. After completing the Core Course in 2000, I returned to my classroom to find that my ability to help students who typically struggle in school improved significantly. I had new knowledge, strategies, and skills that assisted me as I worked with students each day. I changed some of my previous beliefs about students, e.g., those who doodled weren't paying attention, because I now knew that some students used doodling as a way to keep parts of their minds "busy" while they took in new learning. I also learned that traditional approaches to learning don't work with all students. I longed for more from Schools Attuned, so I accepted an invitation to become a course facilitator. I completed a grueling SAFDA (Schools Attuned Facilitator Development Academy) and in 2001, became a facilitator. I now travel through the state facilitating courses for teachers of all grade levels as they, too, quest for knowledge to assist students who approach learning differently. I am also active on the online "Community for Learning" which launched this year. As an experienced Schools Attuned educator, I post suggestions and resource ideas for teachers across the country in response to their questions.

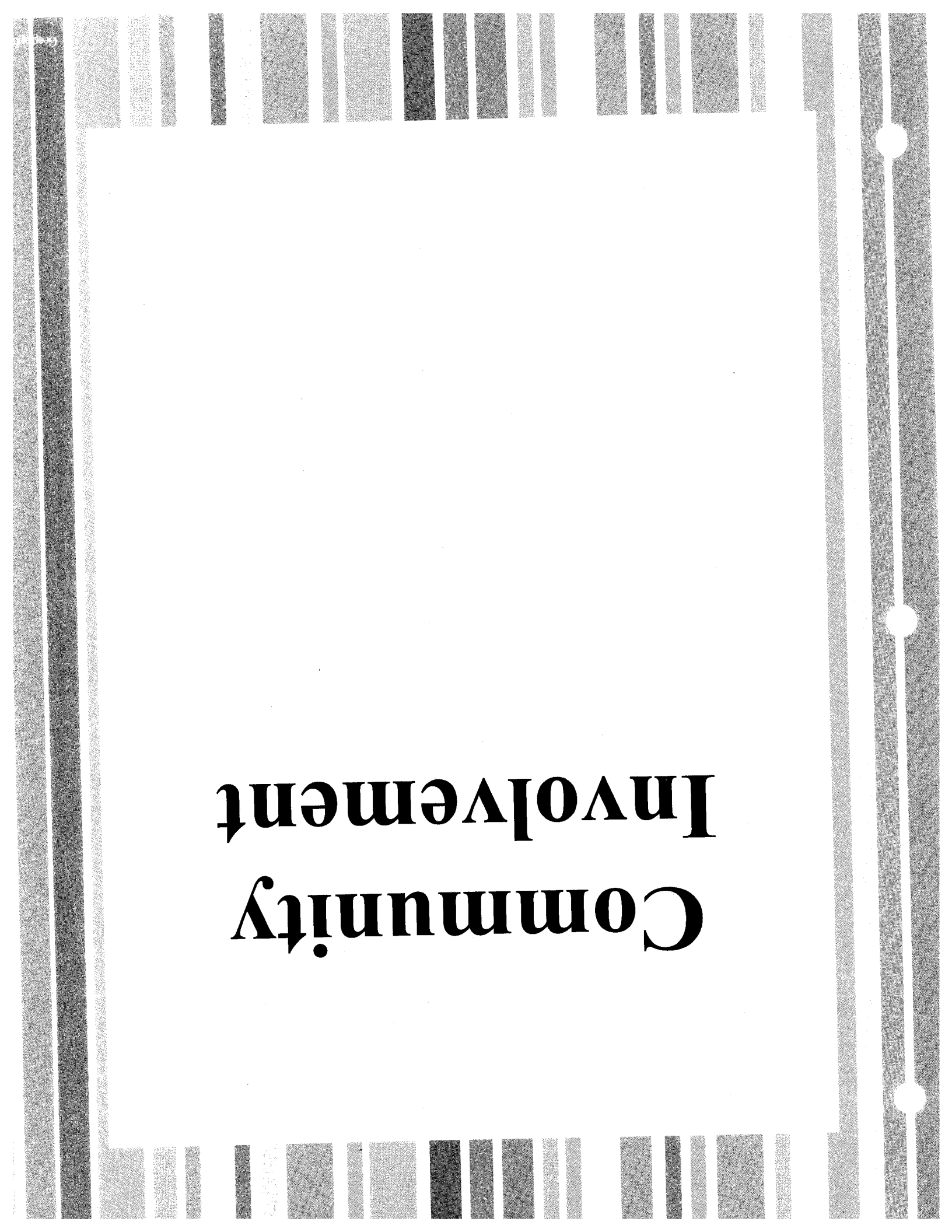
I credit my comfort with the latest tools of technology to my time spent with the Cal Hobson Teachers and Technology for Tomorrow Program. This professional development program hosted by the University of Central Oklahoma opened my eyes to the possibilities of a classroom filled with technology. Through curriculum provided by Intel, we learned how to integrate technology effectively including PowerPoint, scanned images, digital cameras, and web pages. I created my first web page as part of the program and have continued to expand and enhance it over time. In addition, because I have little apprehension of technology integration, I am the first to try all the new gadgets in my classroom. This year my students will use graphing calculators with probes and sensors, programmable robots, a classroom response system, and a SmartBoard to access knowledge and enhance their understanding.

I have never shied away from new teaching techniques, but am always eager to try them out so I can evaluate their efficacy. One such technique that proved very successful for me came via professional development provided by Dr. Lee Jenkins. Through his workshop called "Data, Not Guesswork" I learned to utilize total quality tools in my classroom. One of my favorites (and most successful) has been the Continuous Improvement Model, which I still use today. The idea behind the model is to constantly expose students to the information they have learned and will be learning, thereby never giving them "permission to forget." After putting this model to use, I saw tremendous gains in student achievement, especially from my second-language learners. I discovered that the constant repetition and exposure to the academic language helped to successfully prepare my students for standardized testing. In fact, after implementing the Continuous Improvement (C.I.) model, my student test scores jumped nearly twenty percent in every subject. This achievement even got the attention of the Daily Oklahoman, which noted a "spotlight" in testing performance. Today, even my eighth graders work to achieve "All Time Best" on their weekly C.I. quizzes.

Although attending professional development is very important to me, I feel the greatest impact on my teaching has come from facilitating professional development for other teachers. Not only do I grow from the professional collaboration with teachers across the state and country, I am also challenged to be at the top of my game professionally. I must keep my content skills sharpened and my knowledge of research and pedagogical techniques current. Facilitating also enhances my knowledge of the state PASS skills for all levels as I assist teachers in making sound curriculum and instructional choices.

One example of my facilitating occurs each year at OTMMS (Oklahoma Teachers Improving Mathematics in Middle Schools) which is sponsored by the Oklahoma Commission for Teacher Preparation and funded by the State Department of Education. It was established to improve the content knowledge of middle level math teachers across the state. I helped to design the Leadership course component, which was created for teachers who had already attained middle level certification, but who wanted to improve their teaching. My focus is curriculum development and technology integration, both topics that overwhelm traditional teachers. I provide constant support when needed and have helped numerous teachers across the state overcome their fear of technology and build their confidence with lesson creation.

I have participated in literally thousands of hours of professional development over the course of my career and with each new experience I have improved my skills and effectiveness. Luckily, more opportunities for growth exist and I am committed to life-long learning. One of the beauties of the teaching profession is its state of constant change. Change comes often and only teachers who are prepared to embrace change survive with their passion intact. Professional growth prepares me for change and empowers me to adapt to best meet the needs of my students and my profession.

The page features a decorative border composed of vertical stripes of varying shades of gray. On the right side, there are three white circles arranged vertically, resembling punch holes. The text is centered in a large, bold, black serif font.

# Community Involvement

I was lucky enough to be born into a family that valued and modeled service, so from a very early age, I have given of my time and talents to improve life for others. Today, I serve in a variety of ways, always with the intent of leaving the world a better place.

In my building, I take on many volunteer roles. I serve as Eighth Grade Chair, Math Department Co-Chair and Team Chair. I serve on the Faculty Advisory Committee, represent math on the Teacher Academic Leadership Committee, and the Title I Committee, I am the faculty advisor for the Taft chapter of the Junior National Honor Society. Also, I write and design our *Taft Family News*, a quarterly newsletter created to keep families informed about news and important events occurring at school.

Locally, I mentor teachers, both new to the profession, those pursuing National Board Certification, and those preparing for state certification exams. I encourage them to seek outside my areas of professional strength, so instead, I give my time. I am an annual volunteer for the Friends of the Library and the Muscular Dystrophy Association.

Across the state, I also take on volunteer roles. I mentor teachers who hear about my teaching strategies and want to learn more or try them out in their own classrooms. I maintain my website, [www.hisparks.com](http://www.hisparks.com), as a clearinghouse to connect teachers to resources and tools that will make their jobs easier and more fulfilling. I also serve on the Oklahoma Schools Attuned Advisory Council. This is a group of professionals who support the implementation of Schools Attuned across Oklahoma. We provide assistance to schools and individuals who are working to improve their abilities to meet the needs of all learners.

Each year, I volunteer to present at conferences such as the State Technology Conference and the state Student Oklahoma Education Association Conferences. I share lessons, teaching strategies, and resources to enhance education across the state. In addition, each semester I give



a speech to the student teachers from the University of Central Oklahoma sharing tips I believe are necessary to be effective in urban classrooms.

I also volunteer outside the state, on the national Schools Attuned Facilitator Advisory Council. This is a group of School Attuned facilitators from across the country who meet every six weeks or so via the Internet to improve the support system of teachers who implement Schools Attuned in their own classrooms. We problem-solve specific issues, field-test curriculum, and act as a sounding board for any proposed changes to Schools Attuned.

Finally, I serve in other parts of the world through my work with ProGuate, a non-profit organization that works to improve the living and learning conditions of impoverished children in Guatemala. Our group travels to Guatemala to work with the most at-risk students and their families as we mentor, tutor, and support them in their pursuit to improve their standing in life. Through all my service works, my objective is to help others and make a true difference with the skills and abilities I have been given.

# Letters of Recommendation

WOW! AMAZING! SUPERB! ARTICULATE! PROFESSIONAL! HARDWORKING! I think you get my point about what an outstanding, can-do teacher Heather Sparks is. Unfortunately, these words still don't adequately capture the full essence of Heather's teaching. She is like that first warm day of spring after a long winter—just working with her makes you have a spring in your step. When we all get overwhelmed with our task, Heather can be counted on to cheer us all on to do more, faster, harder, and with more determination.

I must first commend Heather for her work ethic at Taft Middle School. Absolutely tireless describes Mrs. Sparks. She will do whatever needs to be done to make Taft a wonderful school. It does not matter if it is something as crucial as developing mathematics scope and sequence or cleaning up after a parent dinner. She does not have to be directed to assume leadership and is also a great worker willing to follow the directives of others. She is a regular at our school late in the evenings and on the weekends and will attend trainings all summer.

In addition to her work ethic, Heather Sparks displays the strong will and determination it takes to truly educate each and every child at Taft. She will absolutely do whatever it takes to ensure that all children experience a level of success. Heather is often the teacher who can take on our more challenging students and she has this amazing ability to really be able to reach them. Some would like to portray inner-city schools fraught with disobedient kids in classrooms that are loud and disorderly. I challenge them to visit Heather's class where students have clear expectations and take responsibility for their learning. The proof is in the results with 100% of Heather's 8<sup>th</sup> graders passing the high school Algebra End of Instruction Exam!

Lastly, I would like to commend Heather for her positive attitude. The Energizer Bunny has nothing on Heather. She is always genuinely cheerful and energetic no matter what kind of issues we are experiencing at the school. She is so kind and respectful to all of our parents no matter what their mood or temperament. Furthermore, her bright disposition makes everyone on the staff feel appreciated. Her emails always end with "Smiles" which is such an appropriate closing for her!

In closing, there is no one more capable or deserving of such a high honor as the Oklahoma City Public Schools Teacher of the Year. I look forward to hearing her name called at the Stars of Education Ceremony!!!

Respectfully,

Lisa R. Johnson

Principal, Taft Middle School

Dear TOY Committee,

December 20, 2007

Principal, Lisa Johnson

405.946.1437 X 106

Oklahoma City, OK 73107

December 20, 2007

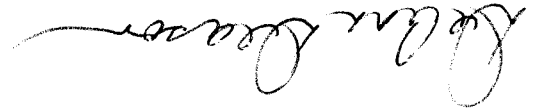
To the Oklahoma City Public Schools Teacher of the Year Committee,

It is with great joy that I write this letter of recommendation for Heather Sparks as she is being considered for Oklahoma City Teacher of the Year! I have experienced first hand her spectacular attributes which are documented in her students' performance and evidenced by her colleagues' confidence. To work beside Heather Sparks is a remarkable and unforgettable experience of a lifetime. Heather is the "365, Can Do, Marathon Educator".

Heather Sparks is the educator who works passionately 365 days a year. She turns mathematics into an art form. She truly brings all of her expertise in multiple learning styles to the table and provides fun and creative math for students. Her strong background in pedagogy allows her to bring her students into the learning process in such a way that they feel confident and passionate about math. It is inspiring to watch her students use math and apply it across the curriculum and in their daily lives. Her students' math scores of 100% pass rates in Algebra and extremely high Pre-Algebra is evidence of her inspiration passed on to the students. Not only is she an outstanding National Board Certified teacher, she is a mentor to other teachers, a trainer across the state of Oklahoma and is the type of person who in her off time of teaching is continuously searching and researching to increase and sharpen her personal skills which will improve her classroom effectiveness. Heather is always up to date on professional development being offered and has a knack for bringing others with her into the learning process. Her passion for continuous learning makes her an incredible 365 educator.

Heather Sparks is a "can do" teacher. While working with her I've never seen a situation arise that she does not address head on in such a positive manner. Heather will always look for a solution and move towards a positive result. Her smile, giggle and calming spirit is like a *breath of fresh air* for her colleagues. Any question that may arise concerning a student, Heather will pull the tools and skills from her vast teacher knowledge bank out and work towards a solution. Heather shares freely of her resources with teachers, whether it is available grants she has come across, Attuning of a student in need or interdisciplinary unit ideas she has discovered. Her innovative ideas have tripled the number of parents involved in their child's education at our school. She always has a 'jewel' tucked away and ready.

Heather Sparks is a *marathon teacher*. She arrives at school early, teaches her heart out all day, then stays at school late to grade papers, help other teachers and prepare her math activities for the next day. She squeezes in time to watch her students as they participate in their various sports activities, and manages to get home to her husband and sons for dinner or a family campout. Heather gets done in one day what some would need three to accomplish making her a real marathon teacher. Oklahoma City is most fortunate to have this amazing "365, Can Do, Marathon Educator" and any teacher of Oklahoma City Public Schools would be proud to have her as our teacher of the year.



DeAnn Deason

Taft Middle School / OKC Teacher of the Year Finalist, 2004

*From the Desk of Susan Styron*

Teacher of the Year Selection Committee  
Oklahoma City Public Schools  
900 N. Klein  
Oklahoma City, OK 73106

January 21, 2008

Dear Distinguished Committee Members,

It is with great pleasure and professional admiration that I submit this letter of reference in support of Heather Sparks. Heather Sparks is truly a conduit for excellence in education and an exceptional example of a "Master Educator". She is more than the "crème de la crème." She is the "crème!" Her approach to education is filled with the ingredients that make up the finest of our profession.

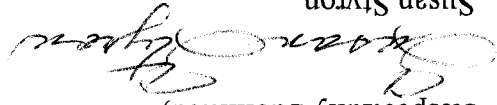
Heather has the utmost expectations for herself, her students, our faculty, and our school. Her classroom style allows children to ride the magic carpet into a mathematical land of fun and adventure, while learning life skills. She tirelessly sacrifices much of her personal time to support the necessary empowerment of mathematical abilities within her students. She offers herself before and after school, during her plan time and lunch, and on Saturdays to tutor struggling pupils while ensuring our gifted students' needs are also met. Heather would probably be in school on Sundays if the building were open! She always places students first.

Heather is also an integral part of our Taft school community. She willingly shares her expertise with her colleagues giving meaningful professional development activity in-services we might otherwise need to seek out for hire. I have yet to hear Heather say "no" to any school-related task. She takes on numerous responsibilities with both a smile and a readiness to find a solution and conquer the plight! She will never back down from a challenge and lives by the school mantra she created, "If at first you don't succeed, you're not a Taft Royal!" thus instilling pride and confidence in our students and our Taft community.

After thirty years of teaching, I have been blessed to have met, worked with, and been inspired by many dynamic educational professionals; Heather Sparks is the absolute best teacher and professional with whom I have ever worked! Had I had Mrs. Sparks, I might have liked and understood math!

In closing, Heather Sparks is the true definition of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century pedagogue. Despite her many accolades and job offers, she chooses to work with our OKCPS students. Heather is a consequential asset to our profession and the ultimate example for future educators. She is the consummate professional, an extraordinarily gifted talent, and a real Master Teacher who brings passion and commitment to her students and the profession. Heather Sparks is most deserving of being the OKCPS Teacher of the Year.

Respectfully Submitted,



Susan Styron  
Taft Middle School  
OKCPS Excellent Educator 2004

Oklahoma City Public Schools  
Oklahoma City, OK

Dear OKC Teacher of the Year Committee:

I first met Heather Sparks in 1991 and we have been close friends ever since. I was doing an internship at Rainbow Fleet for my Master's Degree in Child and Family Development where Heather worked as a Child Development Specialist and she welcomed me and taught me so much. Upon graduation I was hired as a Child Development Specialist and Heather and I often conducted training sessions together for early childhood educators and child care providers. When Heather left Rainbow Fleet to teach, the providers were quite disappointed and asked about her often, yet we all knew she would be an excellent teacher.

I have visited Heather at school several times over the years and can see how she is able to reach the

children. She has found a way to make learning fun and interesting, which in turn makes everyone want

to participate! Her enthusiasm is contagious which is why I often ask her to volunteer to work with

children at events that I coordinate. She also does a great job sharing her knowledge with adults. She's

taught several parent classes on helping children learn math and encouraging young readers.

Three years ago, I was kind of surprised when Heather told me she was going to teach Middle School. I

believe it has turned out to be a blessing for everyone. Heather understands the developmental level of

middle school kids completely. That doesn't mean she will put up with anything, but she knows how to

design the curriculum and organize the day so that it works best for that age group. I have a daughter in

7<sup>th</sup> grade, and for the past two years, I have hoped and prayed she would get at least one teacher that

cares about the kids as much as I know Heather cares about hers. It hasn't happened yet. Which brings

me to another great quality of Heather's – when I have a school emergency, I just leave her a message

and ask her to please call me back as soon as she can – it's a problem with my daughter's school.

Heather will always call me back that day and offer some helpful advice. She has also tutored my

daughter in Math several times over the summers.

It is my personal opinion that Heather is gifted when it comes to working with children and youth. She

understands that they have different ways of learning, different lifestyles, different wants and needs, yet

she wants to help them all learn and be successful at it, and even have a little fun in the process. I

definitely recommend Heather Sparks for the Oklahoma City Teacher of the Year!

Sincerely,

Peggy Byerly

Oklahoma State Department of Health, Early Childhood Coordinator

*Thank you for taking time to read my portfolio!*