

Math coach helps boost test scores

By Heather Rae Darval
Staff Writer

Issaquah middle schools have a new coach this year, but this coach is concerned with test scores instead game scores, guiding teachers instead of athletes, and giving pep talks in the back of the classroom instead of the locker room.

He's a math coach and he's there to help middle school math teachers move their students forward.

Jeff Smith is a former Issaquah High School Algebra and Calculus teacher who was hired as the new math coach thanks to a grant from Microsoft called the Microsoft Math Partnership, which aims at improving local math education, raising test scores and increasing the number of eighth grade students in Algebra I.

Though he's moved to the back of the classroom, Smith loves being at the forefront of a new focus on the needs of math teachers. "The most influential people in my life have been teachers. I can think of nothing more gratifying than seeing that light go on....It has been very rewarding to see the teachers get freed up to do what they really want to do and discover what they're passionate about," Smith said.

"This is all about working with teachers and supporting them. I'm not there to judge anyone's teaching style or fix a broken teacher. Last year, when I was in the classroom, if someone told me a math coach was coming in, my initial reaction would be, 'What's wrong with me?' That's not what I'm about. I'm an extra resource and I'm here to help."

The idea being that most math teachers don't have as much time as they'd like to to research new programs, learn from each other, bounce ideas around, look at what's going on in the other grades, tackle creative teaching methods, and tailor instruction to meet the needs of every student.

This is a brand new position for Issaquah School District and one Smith has only had a few months on the job. In many ways, he said, they are building the plane as they fly.

Each week Smith leaves his office and visits one of the district's four middle schools to spend time every day in the classroom with teachers talking about their plans, discussing teaching methods and challenges, offering advice, observing instruction, and allowing teachers to observe each other.

It may be a work in progress, but it is working. "It has been wonderful having Jeff around



Mark Lowry/Reporter

Jeff Smith uses his knowledge of math to help middle-school students in the Issaquah School District.

this year. Giving us the chance to reflect on our own practices and have the time to observe each other teaching is the best career development we could ask for. It's great to have a resource who sees what all our middle school math teachers are doing," said Rena Pitasky, sixth and seventh grade math teacher at Pine Lake Middle School and head of the math department.

"No matter what level you're at as a teacher, Jeff can help you. I was involved in the interviews for this position and Jeff has everything we wanted. He's got experience at different levels, he's passionate about math and teaching, and has the personality needed to connect with teachers at all dif-

ferent levels."

Microsoft started the Math Partnership in November last year, pouring money and resources into eight Puget Sound school districts to help them improve middle school math scores and raise the number of eighth grade students taking Algebra. After Microsoft learned Washington students struggle with the math portions of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning test, lag behind internationally in course rigor and college-readiness, and aren't recruited for high-tech jobs, the company decided it was time to invest in its own community.

Not only does the company want to be a part of building the next generation of math,

science, and information workers, it also wants local schools to remain competitive and attractive to employees. "More than ever before we live in a truly global market where our students are competing with students from all over the world.

"We need to make sure our children can compete and having advanced math skills is a big part of that. Math is needed in more jobs than ever. You find math in almost everything," Pitasky said.

Microsoft has given more than its money towards this problem. It has also given its voice. Public messaging about the importance and value of math education is a big part of the company's initiative.

"Getting that message across is something that every school district has needed help with for some time. I don't know why, but there seems to be something culturally going on where struggling math is almost a compliment. People at a cocktail party would never admit they can't read even if it's true, but it's almost a virtue to say, 'Yeah, I never got Algebra either' or 'I struggled with Geometry, too,'" Smith said.

Teachers will also have access to professional training and development through the grant, as well as resources like student data. Pitasky said the company is paying for middle school students to take Trends in International Mathematics and Science Studies, and then sending teachers the results.

"This will allow us to not only look at our students' strengths and weaknesses, but also compare them to students across the country and around the world.," Pitasky said.

The choice to focus on Algebra and eighth graders comes out of research stating eighth grade students who have taken Algebra are three-to-four times more likely to obtain a bachelor's degree. Algebra is also the foundation for advanced math skills necessary in the knowledge economy. "If you already have Algebra under your belt when you go up to high school so many more doors are open for you," Smith said.


Where many grant programs are prescriptive as to where money is spent, Smith said the Microsoft Math Partnership money is left largely to the district's discretion.

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