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TEACHERS HEADING BACK TO SCHOOL SAY GEORGIA SCIENCE AND MATH PROGRAM MAKING HUGE DIFFERENCE IN LEARNING, ENTHUSIASM

PRISM keeps K-12 teachers sharp, motivated, plugged in

ATLANTA, August 9, 2007 – Georgia families know that preparing for a new school year goes beyond taking inventory of children’s wardrobes, restocking basic supplies and coordinating schedules. Shifting gears from the summer break to a more regimented school routine requires mental preparation as well.

The same holds true for Georgia’s 100,000 classroom teachers, who look to enter the new school year motivated, confident and optimistic. For the last four years, an innovative \$35 million educational initiative has helped Georgia K-12 teachers do just that.

The Partnership for Reform in Science and Mathematics (PRISM) is aimed at improving student achievement in science and math by better meeting the needs of teachers. Teachers working in one of the 15 participating PRISM school districts say the program has significantly improved not only their teaching skills, but also increased their enthusiasm for the classroom.

“Teaching science and math occasionally can be challenging, even for bright, experienced teachers,” said Rosalind Barnes, PRISM Public Awareness Director. “It requires figuring out the best way to present to students at their learning level new concepts that can easily be understood and remembered.”

Now in its final year, PRISM has helped Georgia’s science and math teachers:

- pursue opportunities for professional development
- network with both one another and college professors
- identify and implement effective lesson plans covering specific curricula

One key PRISM strategy involves the facilitation of “Learning Communities.” Evening meetings held quarterly over pizza, Learning Communities give participating teachers a chance to share first-hand challenges with colleagues and come away with specific, practical teaching solutions.

Teachers come prepared for the meetings, in some cases bringing data identifying specific test questions with which their students have struggled. The group then may decide whether the wording of a test confused students or if an improved teaching approach is needed.

While the concept of Learning Communities is not new, PRISM is using the tool in an innovative way — to build a bridge between K-16 classroom teachers and faculty members at participating Georgia colleges and universities. Getting teachers and professors together in the same room has proven valuable to both groups of educators, especially in the development of effective differentiated teaching styles.

Patia Roundtree, a sixth-grade science teacher at Southeast Bulloch Middle School in Statesboro, said PRISM helped her more effectively teach students how to measure the volume of a cylinder, a common mathematical challenge. During a Learning Community session, one teacher shared her hands-on approach using an empty oatmeal container to demonstrate how a cylinder is made of two circles and a rolled-up rectangle, Roundtree said.

“Teachers have learned through PRISM how to make their teaching [approach], exciting for students,” Roundtree said, and that is important because enthusiasm for learning often originates with the teacher.

Celeta Thomas, a veteran math teacher now working as a facilitator at Sylvan Hills Middle School in Atlanta, said PRISM led her to an “aha!” moment when a teacher new to mathematics struggled to teach a particular lesson. The problem was resolved by videotaping an experienced teacher instructing students in the same lesson. After studying the videotape, the new teacher saw 85 percent of her students master the lesson, Thomas said.

Julee Torrence, a 14-year veteran teacher now working at J.R. Trippe Middle School in Vidalia, said her participation in a Learning Community meant driving two hours round-trip from Vidalia to Statesboro for the four-hour sessions. Torrence said she was willing to put in the extra effort at the end of an already long school day because she knew her time would not be wasted.

“If you get too isolated, you can begin to think this job is too big,” said Torrence, who teaches at a school where 62 percent of the sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders meet the state’s criterion for classification as economically disadvantaged.

Through PRISM, Torrence identified and qualified for a grant funding participation by her seventh-grade science class in a study of mistletoe. The “Under the Mistletoe” study, led by Georgia Southern University Associate Professor of Biology Lissa M. Leege, tapped Torrence’s students to identify mistletoe, take measurements and collect data using global positioning system (GPS) equipment.

“Were PRISM not available, there’s no doubt in my mind we would not have been able to do this,” Torrence said.

While only a portion of all Georgia teachers, spread among more than 2,000 schools in nearly 200 school districts, have taken part in PRISM, state education officials believe the initiative’s impact will be felt far beyond those directly participating. Best practices identified through PRISM easily may be shared with teachers and administrators from outside PRISM districts, and the mechanisms PRISM has put in place to elevate science and math learning in Georgia are easily duplicated.

Peggy Bailey, a 28-year veteran science teacher now teaching at Clarke Middle School in Athens, learned through PRISM a teaching technique using journaling to better assess student learning and improve writing skills.

“Within three weeks [of launching] this curriculum, my students were performing at a level of writing I had not seen regularly all year,” Bailey said.

While PRISM doesn’t supply equipment directly, the initiative works to link teachers with potential funding resources. Often, grants are available to fund equipment, but teachers don’t have time to run

down the grants. Bailey said the PRISM coordinator in her district identified a grant that eventually helped fund microscopes, balances, hotplates and thermometers.

“As teachers, we live for being in the classroom with our students,” Bailey said. “The flip side of that is that we rarely get out of the classroom to be with other educators where we can talk pure science education. Imagine being a doctor and not being able to consult with other physicians. Teachers face that all too often. PRISM invites us out of the classroom to work on what we need in the classroom.”

About PRISM

Partnership for Reform in Science and Mathematics (PRISM) is a five-year initiative funded by the National Science Foundation and administered by the University System of Georgia with the primary purpose of improving student achievement in science and mathematics at all levels of education throughout Georgia. PRISM is working actively in four diverse regions of the state with partners at the university and P-12 level in each region. For more information about PRISM, visit www.gaprisim.org.

This press release is based on work supported by the National Science Foundation under Cooperative Agreement Number: EHR-0314953. Any opinions, findings and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.