Infusing math with literacy

Susan Carter, Presidential Award winner, helps her students gain deeper understanding of both

Combining a passion for literacy and mathematics, kindergarten teacher Susan Carter makes every encounter with math an opportunity to engage in “wonderful conversations” with her students. Her efforts have earned her the prestigious Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching (PAEMST), and a week in Washington, DC, where she met President Barack Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan.

“Mathematics is not just computation; it is also conversation!” Carter said in a recent interview. She believes young children need practice verbalizing their mathematical ideas, and they need to begin as early as possible.

“Children are capable of deep mathematical thinking,” she said, “but they need a supportive place to struggle with concepts. In my classroom we have wonderful conversations because children are comfortable asking questions and taking risks with their ideas.”

A member of the International Reading Association (IRA), Carter teaches kindergarten at Glenridge Elementary School in the Clayton School District, St. Louis, Missouri. At the time she was selected for the award, she taught second grade at Jackson Park Elementary School in University City, Missouri.

The PAEMST is given annually to the best precollege-level math and science teachers in each of the 50 states and four U.S. jurisdictions. IRA members Jo Anne Deshon, who teaches at John R. Downes Elementary in Newark, Delaware, and Pamela Thompson, who teaches at Madison Elementary in Madison, Maine, also were recognized with the PAEMST. In addition to receiving $10,000, winners also were treated with a trip in January to DC where they were feted at the White House and they attended a presidential press conference on the latest education reform efforts.

“It was a whirlwind adventure for sure,” Carter said. “One thing that stood out to me was how eager everyone we met with was to talk with us. There seems to be a sense of urgency in Washington, DC, right now about education, especially science and mathematics education. It left me feeling hopeful that the planned reforms will be executed carefully, with the needs of students being at the forefront of concern.”

One part of Obama’s reform plan would require states to adopt college- and career-ready standards in reading and math to qualify for nearly $4 billion in Race to the Top funding and other federal money. He has praised a 48-state effort to adopt common reading and math standards so U.S. children can be prepared to face stiff competition in the global economy.

While at Jackson Park Elementary, Carter helped promote a standards-based math curriculum and generate enthusiasm among other teachers. Even so, Carter said, “I am finding that it is not always the curriculum that matters as much as the instruction. Teachers who can differentiate based on the needs of students will be the most successful, in literacy and math.”

She also tried to make math fun and engaging for parents of her students, and had held several events in her former district—math nights and math game breakfasts. “Anything we could do to bring parents into the school and get them doing math with their children! Just like reading, children need to see their parents doing math and having fun with math. It assigns value to the subject and helps students see that mathematics has a place in their world.”

Carter, who has a bachelor’s in communications from Bradley University and a master’s in education from Washington University, is National Board Certified as an Early Childhood Generalist and is certified in early childhood and elementary education. She has facilitated workshops in other districts in the region, has presented at several state and local mathematics conferences, and recently (April 2009) published an article, “Connecting Mathematics and Writing Workshops: It’s Kinda Like Ice Skating,” in IRA’s The Reading Teacher.

She said she is extremely grateful for the PAEMST. It “encourages me to continue to strive for excellence in my classroom and community. I am proud to be a part of a rising tide of exceptional teaching in our country. Mathematics in the early primary grades is a complex and deeply important endeavor. It is my privilege as a kindergarten teacher to help children unpack what they already know about mathematics, while setting the tone for a lifelong journey of discovery and inquiry.”

Recess boosts learning, new survey says

When most people talk about how to improve education, they tend to focus only on what happens in the classroom. Elementary principals, however, who are the key instructional leaders in the learning process, report in a recent Gallup poll that the most unexpected opportunity to boost learning may exist on the playground at recess.

The first-of-its-kind survey of almost 2,000 principals throughout the United States, sponsored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), and Playworks, revealed enthusiastic support for recess among principals, who see it benefiting kids both in the classroom and in life.

Key findings from the survey include the following:

• Four out of five principals report that recess has a positive impact on academic achievement.

• Two-thirds of principals report that students listen better after recess and are more focused in class.

• Virtually all principals believe recess has a positive impact on children’s social development (96%) and general well-being (97%).

For further information, read the full report, State of Play, which is available on the NAESP website at www.naesp.org.