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Stanley 'Teacher of the Year' Uses Unique Strategies to Tackle a Far-Reaching Problem: Understanding Math

By Clare Varellas



Stanley Middle School math teacher Cooper Howard
Photo provided

At one point last year, Stanley Middle School principal David Schrag and his co-administrators worried that someone had abandoned a car in the school parking lot because the same car was in the lot every day when he arrived to school and when he left. As far as he knew, the car never moved.

But contrary to what the administrators thought, the car was not abandoned. It merely belonged to Cooper Howard, a Stanley math teacher who recently won the Lafayette School District Teacher of the Year award for spending an extraordinary amount of time helping students, planning, and working toward being the best teacher she can be.

"Just the fact that she is here so much, working long hours is pretty remarkable," said Schrag.

Schrag himself nominated Howard for the award, aware of her leading role as math department chair, her ability to work with students, and her use of new math strategies in the classroom to make concepts more accessible to students.

"If there were three things I would use to describe Cooper Howard, I would say she is reflective of what she does and she is always trying to get better, she is very student-centered and she is always keen on what's best for kids, and she's passionate," said Schrag.

Now in her 13th year at Stanley - she started teaching math after working in business - Howard is constantly seeking better methods of getting the material across to students, an attribute that contributed toward her receipt of the district award. Most recently, she has incorporated several new activities into the teaching of her pre-algebra and math support classes that allow more students to participate in the learning action.

The first new activity Howard likes to call "silent math," because it allows students to start class off with a set of problems to do on their own, free from the voices of other students who know the answer. Howard writes several quick math problems on the board that follow a pattern, reinforcing concepts students have already learned. She then takes the pattern one step further to a type of problem the class has yet to learn, to see if students can solve the new problem by following the pattern.

"It's a nice, quick activity that involves and engages the students, and it allows them to see math patterns that they might not have necessarily seen before," said Howard, who learned the activity from a district-hired math coach last year. "Quite often I'll use [it] as an entry point to a lesson. You can take material that they know and incorporate it into the pattern."

Howard also likes to allow students time to discuss these math problems amongst themselves to move closer to the answer. And much to her surprise, students take advantage of this time to improve their math skills.

"Here's the amazing thing: they actually talk about math," said Howard. "If it goes too long, then yeah, there will be kids that go off, but it floors me."

Finally, Howard likes to have students explore multiple ways of solving math problems by inviting students to write on the board their different strategies for solving a given problem.

Howard's ability to use these new methods in the classroom and her leadership within the math department garnered the administration's admiration, as the math class structure at Stanley has undergone change in the past few years.

"We are always talking about our students, and sharing ideas with each other," said Howard of her relationship with her colleagues.

Former Lafayette School District superintendent Fred Brill chose Howard out of the five teacher nominations he received, one from each school in the district. Howard then proceeded on to a contest for Contra Costa County Teacher of the Year, for which she had to apply by writing essays and submitting letters of recommendation. Though Howard did not win the countywide competition, her title as "Teacher of the Year" among a district of over 380 teachers is notable.

But Howard is in no way prepared to stop improving her teaching skills. Although she grew up knowing she wanted to be a teacher, Howard very much disliked math and struggled with it when she was younger because of a lack of confidence in her ability to do it correctly. Howard didn't realize her competency in math until she was

working in business, teaching engineering companies computer-aided design.

"I was never, ever going to teach math. I hated math when I was younger," said Howard. "It was a very, very painful subject."

Even now, Howard admits that she sometimes doubts her mathematic skills. This is exactly why she hopes to incorporate into her teaching of math a lesson about having the right mindset toward challenges, and the ability to work hard toward a goal. It was this concept that allowed her to finally understand math, and to be teaching it today.

"Quite often in [a parent-teacher conference], my story will come out, and then we talk about strategies to help [a student] overcome their particular challenges," said Howard. "We're doing a lot of teaching other than just math."

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