



NMSU math lab promotes learning for students and teachers

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Math can be fun, that's one of the lessons New Mexico State University faculty are sharing with teachers and students across New Mexico this summer.

As part of the summer professional learning series of the Mathematically Connected Communities (MC2) project, NMSU's College of Education and Department of Mathematical Sciences hosted a weeklong math lab for the first time on campus in Las Cruces June 2-6. The camp consists of about 60 students who are going into the third grade, sixth grade or an algebra one class in area public schools.

"The math lab is an opportunity for children to engage in content, particularly the content they are going to be learning in the Common Core State Standards, but they are doing it with their colleagues through really fun activities," said Cathy Kinzer, associate professor in the department of curriculum and instruction.

"Teacher leaders facilitating the learning experiences and our MC2 staff believe that it can be engaging and fun to learn math," she said. "It's not just about doing 30 or 40 problems in a workbook, it's about actively making sense of math through collective problem solving."

While the campers work on math projects, public school teachers observe both the students and teacher leaders facilitators in a real-life setting to consider strategies needed to teach diverse learners in their own classrooms.

"The beautiful part of math lab is the children are doing the math in the morning," Kinzer said. "Then in the afternoon, the teachers and teacher leaders debrief and talk about the math lesson and what went well and what modifications need to be made for the lesson the next day. It is a collaborative teaching and learning cycle to support students' learning."

The new math lab is just one aspect of the MC2 project. NMSU works with about 500 teachers



Sele Ukpedinjagba (left) writes a math problem on the chalkboard during New Mexico State University's math lab, while Jacob Yoder (right) and Karla Dow (middle), a Belen sixth grade teacher look on. The math lab was a weeklong event the NMSU College of Education hosted as part of the Mathematically Connected Communities (MC2) project. (NMSU photo by Tiffany Acosta)



Lesli Gomez, a fifth grade teacher at Loma Heights Elementary School in Las Cruces, gives instructions for a math project during New Mexico State University's math lab. The NMSU College of Education hosted the math lab, which included about 60 children who will enter third grade, sixth grade or algebra one class, as part of the Mathematically Connected Communities (MC2) project. (NMSU photo by Tiffany Acosta)

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across the state to improve mathematics education in New Mexico.

“The new Common Core State Standards really require kids to have a deeper understanding of mathematics and algebraic reasoning and understanding how to manipulate equations and expressions and apply what they learn in a real-world setting,” said Wanda Bulger-Tamez, MC2 project director.

The MC2 project not only partners with NMSU College of Education instructors but also with professors from the NMSU Department of Mathematical Sciences and public school teachers and districts from across New Mexico along with teacher leaders.

“It’s really fun because you draw on the expertise of teachers, who have a lot of classroom experience, the educational theory and mathematicians, who know the math deeply, so coming together is a really wonderful synergistic experience for all of us involved,” Bulger-Tamez said.

Ted Stanford, associate professor of mathematics in the College of Arts and Sciences, has worked with MC2 for 10 years. He said unexpected issues always arise and collaboration is a helpful way to solve the problems.

“Every student thinks differently,” he said. “Being a good teacher means you can respond to different thinking from different students and that’s hard to do especially if there aren’t students around to practice with.

“One of the most beneficial things about this partnership is we can talk not just about what they are getting right and what they are getting wrong, but how are they thinking and how are they communicating, how are they being precise and how are they learning to reason mathematically,” Stanford said.

With new requirements, the expectations for each grade level are different from just two years ago, according to Bulger-Tamez.

“Common Core has changed the curriculum, and as teachers we are learning what are the new expectations and kids are learning what are the new expectations,” she said. “Things are shifting so we are in a transition period in New Mexico. We are trying to ensure that kids don’t suffer through the transition and teachers are ready for those transitions.”

“Kids aren’t just supposed to learn how to write down numbers, they are supposed to think about math and talk about math with each other,” Stanford said. “If you have not done that before or been expected to do that before, it’s kind of a new thing and it’s hard to learn how to do.”

In addition to the math lab, NMSU will host math academies across the state in five other locations this summer. The weeklong intensive math academies allow teachers in school districts along with their principals or administrators to focus on Common Core standards.

“One thing we’ve learned is when you put people’s heads together, you end up with such a better product than if you are trying to figure it out and go at it alone,” Kinzer said. “That’s why we focus on making sense and understanding the math deeply through making activities and the learning experiences collaborative, challenging and engaging for students and teachers.”

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