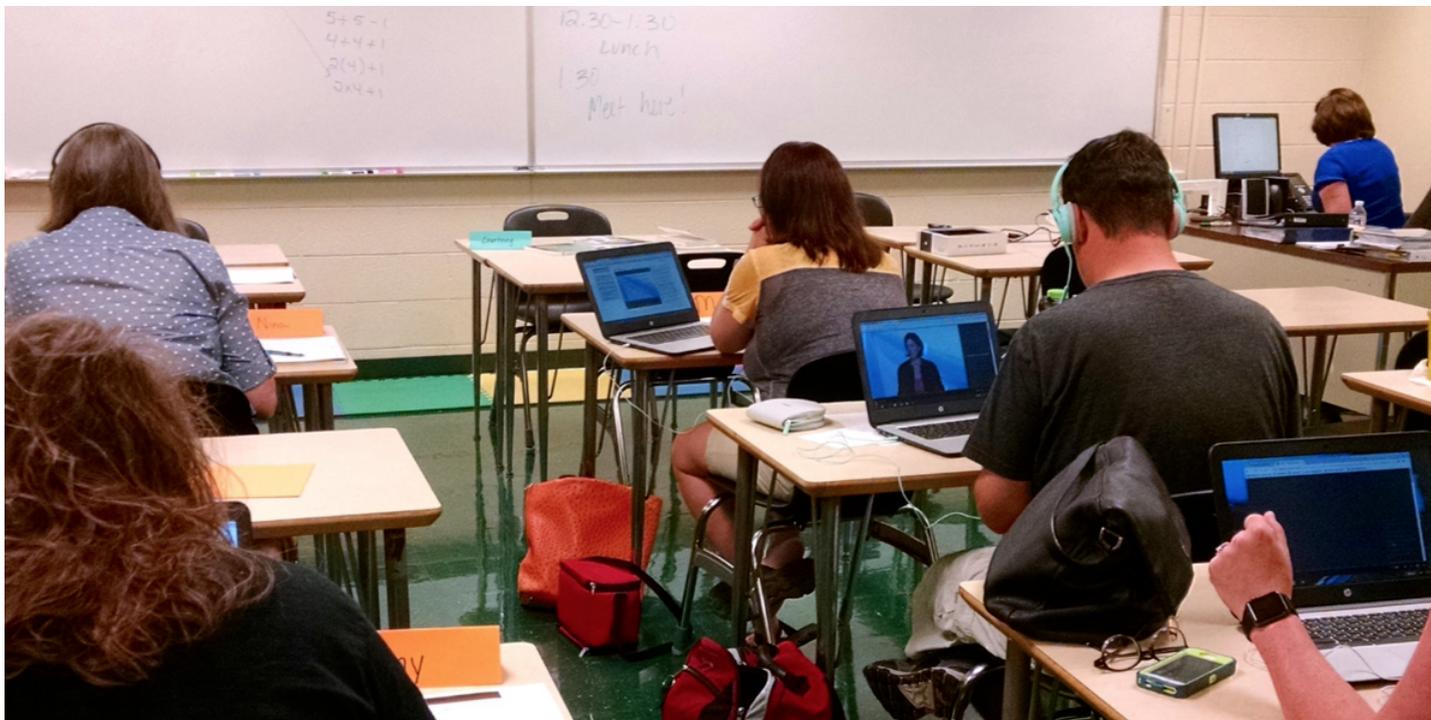


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TOP STORY

Getting schooled: Teachers prepare for school year with intensive training

By SARAH GUINN MESSENGER STAFF JOURNALIST Aug 26, 2017 Updated Aug 26, 2017



These aren't students in these desks — they're teachers. Math teachers from across Athens City Schools' district study an online course to help them get ready for the new school year ahead.

Photo submitted by Courtney Koestler

Note: This story appears in the Saturday, Aug. 26 newspaper on Page A1.

Normally, Athens City School students would have filled rows of classroom desks and sorted through coursework material this week. Instead, teachers were the ones in their place.

School district officials pushed the first day of the new academic year back to Aug. 28 to make room for seven days of professional development for teachers — with four of those days set aside for intensive training in their areas of teaching.

During that time, English Language Arts (ELA) teachers in grades K-8 went through the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project program (also known as the Lucy Calkins writer's workshop) at Columbia University, which focused on writing skills. Middle school and high school teachers received training in content and non-fiction writing in a course called the Collins Writing Program.

Math teachers in grades 4-12 went through an online course, Mathematical Mindsets, which focused on teaching less memorization and more on understanding deep, rigorous mathematical concepts. Teachers picked up on concepts taught by Jo Boaler, a Stanford University professor.

Music, art and physical education teachers also had professional development through the week with varying sessions at Ohio University and the Dairy Barn Arts Center.

Elementary ELA teachers Jenn Wakeley, April Louthain, Maddie Baldwin and Leslie Jones all touted the program, applauded the district for bringing the institute to them and said it was the best professional development they've received as teachers.

Instead of giving students writing prompts to learn from, this program aimed to let students know writing can change the world, Jones said and is a program the district has introduced over the past couple of years. An example of the kind of writing it teaches includes reviews.

Jones' daughter learned how to write reviews in first grade, she said. Later, when she picked out an item online and it was delivered with defective packaging, it inspired her to want to use her voice and write to the company.

Areas teachers focused on included narrative and argumentative writing. Instructors modeled it for the teachers who then taught it to other teachers around them, they said.

"You get that feeling what it's like to a student," Louthain said.

Wakeley emphasized the program isn't about mastery, but rather the process of writing. It encourages classrooms to celebrate at the end of every unit.

At the start of the week, instructors asked teachers to use some adjectives to describe how they felt. They started the week with "nervous" and "tired" and crescendoed to "excited" and "motivated" by the end of the course, Baldwin said.

On the math side, teachers said it was the first time they had all been brought together as a 4-12 grade group.

Courtney Koestler, a faculty member of the Ohio University Patton College of Education and director of the Ohio Center for Equity in Mathematics and Science, facilitated the online course, which pushed against the idea that some people are "math people" and some are not.

Teachers previously focused too much on memorization and commanding students to compute instead of having a deep conceptual understanding, she said. Instead of sending kids home with a list of exercises, the course focused on giving them problems to solve.

Koestler helped introduce the "low floor, high ceiling" concept, which allows students to enter a problem at any level and push the "ceiling" as high as their skill level allows.

West Elementary math teacher Nina Sudnick applauded district officials for bringing the four-day course to them and added it made her even more excited for the year ahead.

“Good teachers are always in a mode of continuous improvement,” she said. “I would say that teachers in the Athens City Schools are always in this mode of continuous improvement; that I want to understand my students’ thinking about mathematics and this course is giving me more ideas on how to understand their thinking.”

Teachers were also encouraged to celebrate mistakes, allowing students to see where they went wrong and learn from it.

East Elementary teachers Maria Douglas and Scott Hall-Jones said they had new teaching strategies going into the new school year and found they had more similarities with middle and high teachers than they previously thought.

Math anxiety has been an issue in their classrooms, they said, but the “low floor high ceiling” concept has helped alleviate some of that and encourage more confidence.

Douglas said problem-based teaching has made a difference with her students, and has changed her teaching style over the past five years.

Celebrating mistakes helps students change their mindset in the way they approach a problem and lowers anxiety levels, Hall-Jones said. Students worry less about doing something wrong once there’s no longer a fear of the negative, he added.

This year’s professional development days have been in the making for three years, according to Supt. Tom Gibbs, and is an investment totaling about \$75,000 for teachers and \$10,000 for support personnel.

Looking at test scores, students needed more work in development when it came to writing, he said, as well as math and science.

“Writing is a combination of which critical thinking and a lot of our learning is built,” he said.

All of the training across the grade levels was designed to ensure every child is going to have a teacher trained in their instructional concepts, Gibbs said.

“That’s huge from my perspective,” he said.

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