**OKLAHOMA TEACHER OF THE YEAR PROGRAM**

**2009**

**BASIC DATA SHEET**

If additional space is required to provide adequate information, feel free to retype this form maintaining the prescribed format and information.

Name of Nominee \_Heather E. Sparks\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Quadrant # (circle) I II III IV V VI

Home Phone Number \_(405) 341-8739\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Cell Phone Number \_(405) 620-0656\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Home Address \_828 East Drive\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_Edmond, OK\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_73034\_\_\_\_

 Street Address City/State Zip

E-mail Address \_\_\_\_ hisparks@aol.com hesparks@okcps.org\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Achieved National Board Certification \_X\_ Yes \_\_\_\_ No

List area(s) of National Board Certification \_\_Middle Childhood Generalist\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

School Site Name \_\_Taft Middle School\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ School Site Level(s) \_6-8\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

School Address \_2901 NW 23rd, Oklahoma City, 73107\_ Phone Number (405) 946-1431\_\_\_\_

Grade Level Taught \_\_8th Grade\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Subjects \_Algebra and Pre-Algebra\_\_

Years in Present Position \_\_3 years\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Total Years Experience \_15 years\_\_\_

Name of Superintendent \_\_Sandra Park (Interim Superintendent)\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**EDUCATIONAL PREPARATION *(LIST MOST RECENT FIRST.)***

**Name of College or University Dates Attended Degree Earned**

Oklahoma City Community College 2003-04

University of Central Oklahoma 2001-02

Oklahoma State University 1995-97

Oklahoma City University 1991-95 M.S. in Elementary Education

Oklahoma City University 1987-91 B.S. in Early Childhood Educ.

**EMPLOYMENT RECORD OF SERVICE *(LIST MOST RECENT FIRST.)***

**Name of School District Position Held Dates**

Oklahoma City Public Schools 8th Grade Math 2005-present\_\_

Edmond Public Schools 5th Grade 2004-05\_\_\_\_\_\_

Oklahoma City Public Schools 5th Grade, 6th Grade Math & Science,\_\_\_\_1993-04\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

 4th Grade, Writing Workshop, Curriculum\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

 & Technology Coordinator,\_1st Grade\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_

Additional Information: Publications, Honors, or Special Assignments

Publications: “Prepare to PASS: 5th Grade Math” and “Prepare to PASS: 5th Grade Science”

Honors: 2007 Presidential Awardee for Excellence in Math and Science Teaching (PAEMAST), 2006 Who’s Who Among American Teachers, 2004 Wheeler Community Learning Center Teacher of the Year, 2004 OEA-OKC Excellent Educator, Kappa Delta Pi,

Special Assignments: Oklahoma Master Teacher for Math and Science (1996-2001), Mentor Teacher (1997, 1998, 2000, 2007)

I hereby give my permission that any or all of the materials/DVD may be shared with persons interested in promoting the Oklahoma Teacher of the Year Program.

 Signature: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

**Professional Organizations:** NEA (1989-08), OEA (1989-08), OEA-OKC (1993-08): President (98, 00, 01), Vice President (03), Treasurer (02), Secretary (04), Newsletter Editor (93-96), National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (98-present), Oklahoma Council of Teachers of Mathematics (1998-present), National Staff Development Council (2008), Council for Presidential Awardees in Mathematics (2008).

**Service on Committees:** National Schools Attuned Facilitator Advisory Board (2007-present), Oklahoma Schools Attuned Advisory Board (2007-present), Taft MS Teacher Advisory Committee (2007-present), Taft Academic Leadership Team (2006-present), Taft MS Title I Committee (2005-present), Oklahoma City Building Blocks Program (2004), Jean G. Gumerson Scholarship Committee (2004);

**Presentations:** Oklahoma Teachers Improving Math in Middle Schools (OTIMMS) Facilitator (06-present), Co-Director (08); Middle School Math Professional Development Institute (PDI) Facilitator (05-present); Improving Mathematics Pedagogy and Content Knowledge in Teachers (IMPACKT) Facilitator (07-present); Oklahoma Schools Attuned Core Course Facilitator (2001-present); “I Can Do It” (classroom management seminar) Facilitator (2006-present); National Council of Teachers of Mathematics Annual Meeting Presenter (2004, 2007); Oklahoma State University Writing Project HOUSSE Workshop Facilitator (2007); University of Central Oklahoma Pre-Service Teacher Preparation Facilitator (2006-present); Oklahoma State University Writing Project Teacher Consultant (1995-present); and facilitator of more than 200 workshops on such topics as writing across the curriculum, technology integration, assisting second language learners, implementing a student-centered classroom, graphing calculators, inquiry-based learning, grant writing, and numerous other education-related topics.

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**ASSURANCE STATEMENT**

The undersigned hereby assures that \_\_Heather Sparks\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

is a full time classroom teacher without administrative duties who expects to continue in an active teaching position in the \_Oklahoma City Public Schools School District during the 2008-09 school year.

 It is understood that if our local teacher of the year is selected to be a **finalist**, he/she will be required to submit a DVD not to exceed ten (10) minutes of classroom teaching and attend interview sessions with the Oklahoma Teacher of the Year Selection Committee to be held at the Oklahoma State Department of Education, Oliver Hodge Education Building, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

 In addition, Oklahoma’s Teacher of the Year will also be Oklahoma’s Ambassador of Teaching. As Ambassador, the teacher will share his or her knowledge and resources with fellow educators around the state. It is understood that if our local teacher of the year is selected as **Oklahoma Teacher of the Year**, he/she will be released from his/her classroom duties. The State Legislature has funded the Oklahoma Ambassador of Teaching position to provide for a full-time certified teacher for the boys and girls in the classroom of Oklahoma’s Teacher of the Year.

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 Superintendent’s Signature

 \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

 School District Name

 \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

 Date

**PROFESSIONAL BIOGRAPHY**

I can’t remember a time when I didn’t love teaching. As a child, my best friend’s mom was a first grade teacher, and I loved helping her with all the glamorous tasks of teaching including grading papers, cutting out decorations, and designing bulletin boards. Over the years, I found other outlets for teaching: Sunday school as a teenager, summer camp as a high school graduate, and struggling writers in college. I loved teaching young children once I became a *real* teacher too, but I didn’t become passionate about teaching until three years ago, when I was offered a Title I Math Enhancement position at Taft Middle School.

It was my first experience in a traditional middle school, and I was hooked the minute my first class began. Within a few weeks, I was reassigned to an eighth grade team to replace a transferring teacher. It was during that first semester with my eighth graders that I became passionate about teaching. I had an opportunity to make a real difference for students, especially those who struggled in math. After years of exposure to math from only basic textbooks and worksheets, the majority of my students lacked any appreciation of the subject. I embarked on a new teaching mission: to engage students in math, so they could experience the power it held and, yes, even the fun it could be!

I had not always appreciated math, although I had always loved the subject, and it came easily for me. I grew up enjoying puzzles and brainteasers, especially those that included numbers. I was always on the lookout for patterns in the world including numbers on license plates and repetition in phone numbers. My brain is naturally attracted to patterns, so it’s not hard to believe I eventually gravitated toward mathematics education. In addition, in high school, outstanding mathematics educators influenced me. One in particular, Alice Ward, was especially influential. She engaged my mathematical mind and pushed me to higher levels. She also encouraged me to consider teaching as a profession. I think of her today when I encourage my own best math students to become teachers.

 My greatest contributions as an educator have been to serve as a role model for standards-based teaching and to share my experiences with others. I believe that teaching is a constantly evolving profession that requires educators to be continuous learners and self-evaluators. I learned early in my career the importance of reflection in my work and to this day, I still stop at the end of each day, each unit, each semester and each year to evaluate my lessons and consider their impact on students. If a lesson or unit is not as effective as I would like, I make adjustments.

 I work daily to encourage teachers to better engage students. I share lesson ideas and resources that assist teachers in seeing that conceptual development that is often missing when relying solely on textbooks instead of trusting their professional judgment.

 Through workshop facilitation and my website, I share my experiences and resources with teachers across the state and country. I have created hundreds of lessons over the years and have found that through constant collaboration, those lessons have improved.

 My greatest accomplishments in education come each day when a student who has struggled with a concept finally has that treasured “ah-ha” moment. I want each of my students to find those moments often so their confidence in mathematics grows and they feel able to tackle higher level math courses in his or her future.

**PHILOSOPHY OF TEACHING**

My overarching teaching philosophy is best illustrated in a stanza from Robert Frost’s poem *Two Tramps in Mud Time*: “But yield who will to their separation,/My object in living is to unite/My avocation and my vocation/As my two eyes make one in sight./Only where love and need are one,/And the work is play for mortal stakes,/Is the deed ever really done/For Heaven and the future’s sakes.” I am so thankful that as a middle school math teacher, my avocation and vocation have been united. It is in my passion for my work that I can make the most difference for students and my passion is what frames my philosophies of teaching.

My first philosophy is to have a positive attitude. Each day, I look forward to work, and I long to try new strategies, to build more engaging lessons, and to activate excitement for a subject that I believe gives great power to students. “Math is POWER!” is my class slogan and my goal is help every student make sense of math so they have the power to be successful students in the future. When I greet them at the door each day with a welcoming smile and a positive attitude, I set the stage for learning.

My second philosophy is to maintain high expectations. At the beginning of each school year, my students sign a contract agreeing to keep their grades above 70%. If at any time during the school year, their grade drops below that mark, they are required to attend tutoring before school, after school, at lunch, or on Saturday. The result is that my students rise to the level of my expectations. Each year, students tell me with pride that they have never earned above a “D” in math until I made them! My hope is that students will leave my class more confident in their abilities to tackle challenging curriculum that may face them in the future.

My third philosophy is to connect class work to real life. One way I do this is through a classroom financial system. Each day, students earn a salary for coming to class prepared and ready to work as well as for exceptional work, assessment performance, and even good mathematical arguments. With the money they earn in salary, they pay expenses, including rent on their chairs and taxes for the materials. Occasionally, they also pay fines for classroom infractions, such as disrupting instruction, failing to come prepared for class, or inappropriate language. Each student maintains his/her account, and an auction is held at the end of each quarter where students may bid on items with any discretionary income. By providing students with financial experiences, I am helping them prepare for the future.

Future success is also dependent on the ability to communicate effectively, so my fourth philosophy promotes this ability. An outsider peeking in my classroom might be a bit surprised. They do not see desks in straight rows with students working robotically in textbooks. Instead they see students sitting in groups at tables, so that each day, when I ask my students to explain, evaluate, and consider other ideas that may be different from their own, they can do so effectively. Group members also learn from each other, especially when I encourage them to share answers and those answers don’t match. They argue and work to convince others of their thinking. By doing this, students are preparing not just for high school, but for life.

My final philosophy of teaching is to engage students in meaningful tasks. My creativity and passion for my work help me seek out and design lessons and activities that will capture student interest while assisting them in learning new concepts. For example, I don’t teach my students to calculate square footage and perimeter of miscellaneous figures. Instead, I provide them the skills needed to design the “ultimate” apartment, where they are responsible for determining the appropriate measurements and related budgets. Students dive into their designs, selecting from tile and carpet samples and calculating related costs. It is in these types of engaging lessons that my avocation and vocation unite as one enabling me to be the best teacher I can be.

**EDUCATION ISSUES AND TRENDS**

Merit pay, teaching time, gender equity, recruiting and retaining teachers, and closing achievement gaps are just a few of the many issues and trends that garner headlines across the country on any given day. While all of these issues are worthwhile to address, one issue that has gotten little attention is the inability of America to overcome mathematics phobia to adequately compete in the global marketplace.

Math phobia has plagued Americans for decades, borne from three distinct and alarming trends. First, mathematics curricula has grown from a simple set of key, conceptual ideas to a plethora of hundreds of concepts that vary significantly from region to region and state to state. The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) has dubbed this the “mile wide and inch deep” curriculum, and the National Math Advisory Panel (NMAP) concurs, noting that textbooks have grown from a few hundred pages just three decades ago to well over 800 pages for some! Yet, math has not changed in those years. Because the curriculum is so wide, teachers lack the time to address important content adequately. In addition, students spend roughly a third of each school year reviewing concepts they were to have learned previously.

The second trend is that math phobia is widely accepted as a cultural norm. “I was never any good at math,” is often uttered in conversations when mathematical topics arise, and even is used as validation for the inadequacies of students. Because a negative attitude toward math is understood and shared by many, students who struggle are commonly excused from success and tracked into less demanding courses.

Underestimation of abilities often directly affects the third trend: an under-prepared teacher workforce. When early childhood and elementary teachers skim important topics, or worse yet, avoid them because a lack of personal understanding, our students suffer. The idea that a third grade teacher need only know third grade concepts is creating a system that lowers standards to basic levels causing stagnation of academic growth. So what can be done to reverse the course of this great (yet stealth) epidemic of math phobia? The complex solution lies in a combination of three actions.

ONE: Launch a public campaign to reduce math phobia. Educate families of the fact that mathematical ability is not genetically inherited, that there are multiple ways to learn and use math, and that hard work impacts mathematical understanding and achievement.

TWO: Create a balanced, national curriculum that focuses on what NCTM calls procedural fluency and the automatic recall of facts, and works to develop conceptual understanding. In other words, students should learn both the ‘how to’ and ‘why’ behind math concepts. Of course, creating a national curriculum will take, quite literally, an act of Congress, so I propose a ***recommended*** curriculum, one that is based upon standards such as those put forth by the National Math Advisory Panel. Adoption of a streamlined curriculum would enable educational stakeholders (teachers, administrators, textbook publishers, assessors, etc.) to focus resources on developing a highly effective system that meets the needs of all learners.

THREE: Require teachers, regardless of teaching level, to become proficient in math, especially in the “Critical Foundations of Algebra” as set recommended by the NMAP. Far too many early childhood and elementary teachers lack the conceptual understandings they need in order to adequately prepare their students. Worse yet, due to this lack of knowledge, they inadvertently teach concepts incorrectly (e.g. “You can’t subtract a larger number from a smaller one.”) thereby setting students up for misconceptions in upper grades with subsequent concepts.

Once America adopts a moratorium on math phobia, recommends and supports a national curriculum, and adequately prepares its teachers, we will find our ability to compete globally significantly strengthened. After all, when students find success in math, they often find success in related fields like science, technology, and engineering, thereby proving *Math Is POWER!*

**THE TEACHING PROFESSION**

 Since I began teaching, I have always worked to maintain the highest professional standards for myself. I believe our profession can only improve if each of us is willing to improve through professional development and reflection. I also believe the teaching profession needs more role models, especially in mathematics education. When I dove into secondary math education five years ago, I realized I was an unusual specimen. I was not intimated by the National Standards for mathematics education. In fact, I worked to implement them every day in my classroom. I set the text books aside and looked at what students needed to know for the future. Then I began to design a curriculum that would not only engage students in real-life lessons, but also would prepare them for future courses.

I then stood up to be questioned and even ostracized by my colleagues. But, I proved my approach to teaching was both practical and effective. I found that as I shared my lessons and techniques, teachers across the state began to try them and they too, found success and joy in teaching. I realized it was my calling to teach not only students, but also teachers. I accepted a new role of professional model. Today, I invite teachers into my classroom to see students engaged in learning from each other instead of textbooks. I videotape my lessons for others to see. I also share and answer questions about lessons I have created via my website and list serve. And, to stay current, I continue to read, reflect, and grow professionally.

 It is this type of professional growth that I believe should serve as the foundation for accountability for teachers. While the current basis for accountability in the teaching profession is based largely on tenure or years of service, I believe a trend toward performance-based pay is growing in popularity. Brought on by the No Child Left Behind Act, teachers and schools are being rewarded for student performance on annual tests. However, I am reluctant to support any system that bases accountability solely on one test. Not all students are test takers and not all skills can be quantified by a test. There is no fair way to place a value on the contribution of any one teacher on the success of a student. After all, if his first grade teacher taught him to read, and his fourth grade teacher taught him to long divide, can his eighth grade teacher take full credit for him successfully completing a division story problem?

 I feel that a system should be developed that would ensure accountability through a variety of sources including student performance over time as well as teacher growth and development. States across the country are developing teacher accountability systems that are created collectively by all the stake-holders and emphasize student learning and teacher professionalism. Teachers and community members alike applaud this approach to teacher accountability. After all, as noted recently in the McKinsey Education Report, “The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers.”

**SUCCESS STORY IN OKLAHOMA**

I have never shied away from new teaching techniques, always eager to try them out so I can evaluate their efficacy. One such technique that proved very successful for me came via professional development provided by Dr. Lee Jenkins. Through his workshop called “Data, Not Guesswork” I learned to utilize total quality tools in my classroom. One of my favorites and most successful of which has been the Continuous Improvement (CI) model, which I still use today. The idea behind the model is to constantly expose students to the information they have learned and will be learning thereby never giving them “permission to forget.”

Teachers create a bank of essential knowledge and then regularly quiz students over the content during the school year. The students maintain graphs of their progress and work toward continuous improvement each week, working to achieve an “all time best.” After putting this model to use, I saw tremendous gains in student achievement, especially from my second-language learners. I discovered that the constant repetition and exposure to the academic language helped to successfully prepare my students for standardized testing. In fact, after implementing the Continuous Improvement model, my student test scores jumped nearly twenty percent in every subject. This achievement even got the attention of the Daily Oklahoman, who noted a “spotlight” on performance in a year that few gains were made across the state.

Since that first year, I have continued to use the CI process in my classrooms, regardless of grade level or content. Students show great enthusiasm for learning as they graph their continuous progress over the year. Students also show personal responsibility for their understanding of lessons because they know they will see the information again in the future. Today, my eighth graders work to achieve “All Time Best” scores on their weekly Continuous Improvement quizzes. Graphing their personal results motivates them to strive for higher scores in the future.

I believe the Continuous Improvement model works because it puts the responsibility for learning on the student, while giving important feedback about the teaching to the teacher. If, for example, I have recently taught a lesson on the Pythagorean Theorem and a question applying this theorem appears on a weekly CI quiz, I get immediate feedback about students’ level of understanding and retention of the concept. I know who needs intervention and additional teaching. Also, I see the pride in students’ faces when they recognize the concept embedded in the quizzes and are able to successfully answer the related question.

Another reason I believe the Continuous Improvement model is effective is because it promotes classroom community. Each week, the students graph not only individual scores, but also, we maintain a class graph of our group progress which represents the class average. Every student contributes when he or she is able to correctly answer a quiz question. The students encourage each other to do their best each week and celebrate with those who make a personal “All Time Best.” When the class reaches an “All Time Best” we hold a class celebration and mark our progress with a star. That simple symbol is remarkably motivating to students who see the results of their hard work in their improved scores each week.

**COMUNITY INVOLVEMENT**

I was lucky enough to be born into a family that valued and modeled service, so from a very early age, I have given of my time and talents to improve life for others. Today, I serve in a variety of ways, always with the intent of leaving the world a better place.

In my building, I take on many volunteer roles. I serve as Eighth Grade Chair, Math Department Co-Chair and Team Chair. I serve on the Faculty Advisory Committee, represent math on the Teacher Academic Leadership Committee, and the Title I Committee, I am the faculty advisor for the Taft chapter of the Junior National Honor Society. Also, I write and design our Taft Family News, a quarterly newsletter created to keep families informed about news and important events occurring at school.

Locally, I mentor teachers, both new to the profession, those pursuing National Board Certification, and those preparing for state certification exams. I encourage them to seek professional growth through the state’s ever-growing resources. Sometimes, my volunteerism is outside my areas of professional strength, so instead, I give my time. I am an annual volunteer for the Friends of the Library and the Muscular Dystrophy Association.

Across the state and country, I also take on volunteer roles. I mentor teachers through Schools Attuned, the Middle Level Math PDI, and OTIMMS. I also maintain my website, [www.hisparks.com](http://www.hisparks.com), as a clearing house for resources, lessons and teacher links for others.

 Finally, I serve in other parts of the world through my work with ProGuate, a non-profit organization that works to improve the living and learning conditions of impoverished children in Guatemala. Our group travels to Guatemala to work with the most at-risk students and their families as we mentor, tutor, and support them in their pursuit to improve their standing in life. Through all my service works, my objective is to help others and make a true difference with the skills and abilities I have been given.

**OKLAHOMA TEACHER OF THE YEAR**

 As Oklahoma Teacher of the Year, I would continue to share my message of passion with my colleagues across the state. When I began teaching first grade fifteen years ago, I had no idea I would find a grade level and subject that would ignite my passion the way 8th grade math has. While I have loved each of my teaching years, the past three years have proven to be both challenging and engaging. It hasn’t been easy. I have worked tirelessly to become proficient in my content skills to guide my young apprentices. But, the journey has been worth every minute. I cannot imagine finding any more meaningful work. I would encourage others to find their passion, even if that means changing schools, grades, or subject areas. All our students deserve teachers who are passionate about their work, even on difficult days.

 My message to the general public would be to ask for their support of public education. Education must change to meet the future demands of the world. A high school diploma of today will not begin to prepare students for the work they face tomorrow. We must change our expectations of schools and leave behind the education system of yesterday, the schools full of text books and traditional grading practices, and be ready to welcome schools of tomorrow full of problem-based learning experiences and alternative assessments. The workforce skills of today must evolve and communities and parents should expect and demand change from their schools to meet these changing needs.