



Monique Despres

Mathematics Teacher

Shadow Ridge High School

BA Mathematics, WSC '99

M.Ed. Middle Grades Education, Lesley  
University 2008

I currently teach Algebra 2 at a public high school, and I'm expected to be able to teach up to and including AP Calculus. When I graduated, I didn't intend to be a teacher. In fact, I was insistent that I would never be a teacher. After graduation, I stayed in Massachusetts and worked as a caretaker at a residential home for behavior-disordered adolescent girls. This was a 24-hour facility where the girls both lived and went to school. In 2000, the program needed a high school teacher. Because they knew I had a degree in mathematics, they asked me to do it. After much thought and advice, I agreed.

There I taught all subjects to a group of students ranging in age from 13-17, all at different levels. In that sparse little classroom, I discovered that there are few things as rewarding as watching a struggling student finally understand a math concept. It was there that I decided that teaching math was an excellent way to spread my love of the subject.

In 2002, I left to teach seventh and eighth grade math full-time at a public school. I was given a great deal of freedom and had great success. Because of my involvement in professional development outside the school, I developed and delivered most of the math professional development for all of the K-8 teachers. I also played a key role in transitioning our school to have dedicated math teachers starting in second grade. I designed our interview process, created a math exam for applicants, and assisted in planning the final program. This program is still in place today. While there, I also wrote the seventh and eighth grade math curriculum and oversaw the writing of the K-6 math curriculum. Toward the end of my time at the school, I was doing part-time teaching and part-time curriculum and professional development.

While teaching full-time, I earned my M.Ed through a weekend cohort program at Lesley University. The program taught me the importance of being part of a graduate program that matches my teaching philosophy, and the cohort aspect means that I now have a close network of fellow educators I can reach out to.

In 2010, I moved to Arizona. I have taught or done professional development for students ranging from kindergarten to grade 12 at six different schools since moving to Arizona. I have also written curriculum for grades ranging from second to high school. Unfortunately, I learned that principals will claim they believe in inquiry-based learning, but they don't provide the support required. In retrospect, it would have been useful to observe a class before signing a contract.

Because of the lack of success I found in Arizona schools, I decided to try other jobs within the education field. I was hired by Math Solutions to train teachers throughout the nation on teaching through inquiry and problem-solving. Marilyn Burns had been an inspiration to me since I first became a teacher so getting a job with her company was a dream come true. Unfortunately, they started to phase out the training program for which I was hired, and I was financially unable to do the training required to transition to their new program. They did ask me to contact them when I am able to commit to new training. I also started a successful tutoring business which is still active.

I had concerns about going back to the classroom, but this year, I have finally found a school with the administrative support required to provide research-based instruction. Currently, the only thing getting in my way is the fact that I have never taught Algebra 2, but my own love of learning and my willingness to reach out to my administrator and other educators continues to lead me in the right direction. I'm feeling the same level of passion that I felt during my first few years in the classroom.

I love reading about and trying new things in the classroom. Inquiry in mathematics is so important, and today, it is easy to connect with other math educators online to share ideas and tackle problems. I have found it helpful to become familiar with the teaching communities on Twitter and become a part of the conversation. I also recommend becoming a member of professional organizations including the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM). Since I started teaching, I have been chosen to present at one regional and two national NCTM conferences. It was exciting to share my knowledge and experiences with other teachers.

Working to help students understand the "why" of mathematics is one of the most interesting and rewarding parts of teaching. There is no such thing as a "math person." It's a beautiful, interesting, and useful subject that anyone can excel at and enjoy. Math builds problem-solving skills and is the foundation for many other fields of study which makes companies happy to hire people who hold a degree in mathematics. We need to get away from a culture of thinking that math is only for some people. Math is for everyone.