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Oak Grove Middle teachers honored for team approach

"Two heads are better than one," as the saying goes.

But at Oak Grove Middle School, 10 heads are better than one.

Ten teachers have been honored for their team approach to teaching seventh-graders.

"They function so well together. They're familiar with their kids and the needs of their students," said Principal Tess Smith.

The teachers, known as the Apache Team, won the "Teams That Make a Difference" Award from the Mississippi Association of Middle Level Education for their team teaching of about 160 students.

The teachers won a plaque, no monetary rewards or a big ceremony or anything, but they are happy nonetheless.

"We were so surprised and so honored," said team leader and math teacher Kim Wilson. "I didn't even know Miss Smith had nominated us. You do it because you love it, but day to day, it is hard. It lightens the load, especially because we weren't expecting it."

Wilson made her comments as her students were intently studying for a math test.

Right across the hall, team member Jennifer Clark's seventh-grade science students were working in groups to make mini-movies about cell division.

"The students are engaged in learning - when they're creating they remember things better," Clark said.

That's an insight she can share with team member Tabitha Baker, who entered Clark's classroom to check on her special education students.

"I'm a new teacher here, and usually you would feel overwhelmed, but the team has helped me so much. They are very supportive," she said.

Next door to Clark, team member Leslie Langham was teaching seventh-grade English.

Langham says being part of the 10-member team helps her be a better teacher.

"It's working with my peers to make education better for all of the students to meet district, state and federal expectations," she said. "I've learned different teaching techniques, different teaching styles and new ways of classroom management."

Although the Apache Team teachers are in their own classes, they meet twice a month or more, to discuss their students and brainstorm.

They also meet frequently in smaller groups, and meet once a month with school counselors and behavior specialists to discuss students who are in academic trouble.

The teachers say the team approach has proved helpful in dealing with students who are struggling academically or with behavior problems.

"I think when we are looking at a problem with a student, we talk to each other to get different perspectives, and we come up with a solution, I probably wouldn't have considered by myself," Clark said.

"If a student is having trouble in one class, he may be having trouble in my class, and we can work together to solve the problem for that student," Langham added.

Seventh-grade ancient history teacher Brad Williams said the team actually helps him avoid problems.

"They're always good about communicating. It helps to get a good perspective on each class to make sure we're covering benchmarks," he said. "It keeps us on track and helps us stay on point."

The team approach isn't lost on students or parents.

Seventh-grader Lucy Pruitt, 13, said the teachers collaborate to make sure they don't overload her or classmates.

"They are understanding," she said. "They work together to make sure they don't give us too much homework. They don't pick favorites and they give second chances."

Fellow seventh-grader Cristina Friend, 13, said when her teachers team up, it helps her.

"When they work together, they never leave us stranded or confused," she said. "They find ways for us to learn more. That's why most of us have good grades in our classes."

Parent Kim McMurry says the team has worked well with her 13-year-old daughter Elise, who is dyslexic.

"They're just an understanding, helpful group of teachers," she said.

"Sometimes with children who have learning issues, it's hard to communicate with teachers, but I have been totally pleased, and Elise loves working with all of them."

The team of 10 is actually part of a larger team.

Oak Grove Middle School has three teams of seventh-grade teachers who work with a total of 500 students. The teams all have Native American names

The Creek team has previously won the team teaching award.

Next year could be the year for the final team, the Choctaw Team, to bring home the prize.