

## SIM Leadership Award

# **Kathy Boyle-Gast**

Kathy Boyle-Gast of Athens, Georgia, embodies the qualities that make a great leader. She's energetic and generous. Quick to action and eager to learn. Creative and dedicated. And a tireless advocate for the Strategic Instruction Model™.

Boyle-Gast is the 2015 recipient of the SIM Leadership Award, which recognizes individuals who have shown exceptional leadership and excellent service to SIM by helping educators become strategic teachers and, as a result, students become strategic learners.

She's been a full-time professional developer since 2006, but she's been involved with SIM for almost 30 years, since participating in reading and writing strategies professional development in 1986. When she used the strategies with her seventh- through ninth-grade special education students in Lexington, Kentucky, she saw rapid improvement for all of her students.

"I was hooked," she says.

After she moved to Georgia, where she found almost no sign of SIM, she assumed a new mission, seeking SIM professional developer accreditation and preparing "to change the landscape of Georgia education." She completed Learning Strategies certification in 1992 and Content Enhancement a few years later. Other teaching responsibilities kept her from professional development work until 2006,

when she left public schools and set out on her own.

Since then, she's provided private tutoring, conducted SIM professional development through the University of Georgia, and worked with more than 25 Georgia school districts involved in state and regional grants, such as the Georgia Drop Out Prevention Project and the Northeast Georgia High School Writing Project.

"I never set up a website or advertised, but by word of mouth, the teacher and student success began to spread, and I gradually began to get requests for SIM PD across the state," she says.

Most of the schools with whom Boyle-Gast works would be characterized as economically deprived and showing inadequate progress based on NCLB measures.

"Many are beginning to realize that all of the 'quick fixes' being thrown at them by the state departments are not making any difference," she says.

With SIM, Boyle-Gast has shown that true change and improved results for students are possible. Take, for example, her work with a small district in Jefferson County, Georgia. For the past three years, with funding from grants from the East Georgia Learning Resource System, Boyle-Gast has provided professional development in SIM writing strategies with the full support of

the district's administration. Instructional coaches, and even the superintendent, attend her sessions.

"We are seeing rigorous implementation from the majority of teachers, and I am in consistent contact with the support people who are in the rooms regularly. It's fantastic," she says.

Students' overall writing scores improved in 2013–2014, resulting in a request from the superintendent to expand strategies instruction in the district.

"The outcomes of these efforts are looking really

positive," Boyle-Gast says.

Within the SIM Network, Boyle-Gast has been a hard-working and energetic proponent of SIM. She's attended SIM in the Southeast every year but two since its inception; she's generously shared slides, checklists, rubrics, and other materials; and a couple of years ago, she helped organize an effort to develop scoring keys for use with *Proficiency in the Sentence Writing Strategy* student materials. She's even taken SIM to Ireland and the Bahamas.

## Kathy Boyle-Gast: In Her Own Words

### Testament to the power of SIM

Early on, after moving from Kentucky to Georgia in 1990, I corresponded with some of my middle school students who were recipients of my first years of teaching the *Sentence Writing Strategy*. One rather cantankerous but very intelligent student with LD (age 13 at the time), who really struggled with written expression prior to the strategies, wrote letters to me for the first two years after my move. He always did the "Search and Check" step, marking subjects and verbs, citing the formula, etc., on at least a few of the sentences that he wrote. He said he did this to let me know that he had not forgotten what I taught him. The last time I spoke to him on the phone was when he was 18 and he had moved to Virginia to begin his college career. That is one of so many testaments of the power of an effective strategy that provided a kid with success and confidence that contributed to his overcoming some potentially life-impeding challenges.

### FUN FACT

Maybe her most extraordinary accomplishment is this: Boyle-Gast believes she has submitted post-professional development reports and evaluations from every SIM session she has conducted, going back to the days when reports had to be mailed to Kansas instead of submitted electronically. Every. Session.

### It doesn't get better than that

Last spring, I was asked to demonstrate teaching a lesson in the *Fundamentals in the Sentence Writing Strategy* shortly after a PD with a group of elementary teachers. It was arranged to have all of the teachers come to one classroom to watch me provide instruction in the fourth *Fundamentals* lesson (the teacher had already begun to implement the week prior). Twenty-nine third-graders, all of whom were very deficient in their written expression skills, plus twelve teachers and a few administrators, packed into the classroom. I was nervous, since I had not taught a large group of young students for about eight years. Gratefully, it was like riding a bike, and it was so much fun to teach. Not only did the students do a fantastic job remaining engaged, they were able to recall the initial information provided by their newly trained teacher in prior days (albeit referring to their cue cards at first). Then, after presenting new information, modeling, and doing guided practice, I left the class as the students were doing a controlled practice item independently. About an hour later, the teacher came to find me with all of the students' work in hand. The practice sheets were scored, and she was ecstatic that they all had reached mastery. She said she had never seen some of the students in her class actually get and remain engaged and excited about learning (especially writing, with which most of them struggled significantly). It just doesn't get better than that.