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Grad receives charter school educator award

By **Leesa Allison** - Wed, 07/14/2010 - 21:18

Sarah Weston, a BYU alumna, is the first online teacher to be named Utah charter school educator of the year.

Each year, Utah's Charter Association honors excellence in the 72 charter schools statewide. Weston was one of two teachers given this award for 2009-10.

Weston works for an online school called Online High School of Utah, where she gives students individualized tutoring in mathematics from the innovative courses she creates.

"[This award] shatters the perception that online teachers can't or don't connect with students, and that online learning is the equivalent of workbooks read from a computer screen," said DeLaina Tonks, director of Open High School of Utah. "Clearly, Sarah has made those connections to her students and instilled a love of learning math that was not there before."

Weston uses inventive technology to teach her students. She said she was fearful of switching to online courses after teaching in the classroom setting because something might be lost online. Instead, she has found it to be rewarding.

"When I teach and can see my students' expanding enthusiasm for numbers, when I glimpse their sharp minds slowly wooed by the logic and process of math, I feel successful," she said.

One of Weston's students sent her a message expressing appreciation for a new found desire to do math.

"I just felt the need to express my current love for math — and it's all thanks to you," the student said in a letter to Weston. "If you recall, at the beginning of the semester, I stated that I was terrified of math ... because I was. But, because of your videos, I understand it pretty well now. Right now, I'm just overjoyed that math doesn't make me want to cry anymore."

Tonks is grateful for Weston's work and dedication to the students. She has helped the school achieve its goals, making students' learning its first priority.

"Sarah has perfected the art of individualized instruction and connecting with her students, especially important for math students, some of whom have begun to like math for the first time ever," Tonks said.

Weston said she was drawn to teaching because she has always had academic success and enjoyed the spotlight that came with it.

"As a university student, I considered multiple careers," she said, "eventually concluding that teaching was the perfect amalgamation of academics and storytelling. In a classroom, I could be an educator, entertainer, salesman and counselor, all at the same time."

Weston graduated from Western Governors University, an online school, with a master's degree in math education. After graduating she became an online facilitator for Western Governors University and worked her way up to handling all the incoming mathematics students. She also has been promoted at Open High School as well.

"Sarah has such a flair for maximizing technology, curriculum building and individualized instruction," Tonks said. "She has been offered a position as curriculum director next year, helping our other curriculum writers and teachers put together some of the 'Sarah magic' that she has created in her own courses at the Open High School of Utah."

Open High School is interested in student teachers doing a two-week rotation with OHSU to gain experience to make them more versatile and more marketable. Interested parties can contact info@openhighschool.org.

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