

Posted 4/18/2005 10:14 PM

Teacher of the Year: 'Let teachers teach'

By Greg Toppo, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — When Jason Kamras learned in 2002 that 80% of his students at John Philip Sousa Middle School had less-than-stellar math skills, he came up with an elegant but unusual solution: Why not give each student two math teachers?



Math teacher Jason Kamras instructs a photograph y in an after-school program. Eileen Blass, USA TODAY

He piloted a program that split the math curriculum in half, with two full-time teachers progressing at a more leisurely pace. The following spring, the percentage of students with poor skills was cut in half.

Kamras, 31, also put digital cameras and photo-editing software into his students' hands so they could create multimedia projects about their lives.

"They love talking about their own lives, as all children do," he says. "And it has a much more lasting impact in terms of achievement."

At a White House ceremony Wednesday, Kamras will be named 2005 National Teacher of the Year. The 55th recipient of the award, Kamras is the first to represent the District of Columbia.

A 1995 graduate of Princeton University, Kamras came to Sousa for his first teaching job in 1996 through Teach for America, a national program that recruits graduates of top colleges to two-year stints in urban and rural schools. After three years, he earned a master's degree in education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and returned to Sousa in 2000.

Sousa has been labeled "in need of improvement" by President Bush's No Child Left Behind law, and Kamras doesn't back down from the challenge of improving his students' skills.

But he says teachers need better resources and more freedom to produce results. "I want to see those test scores at the end of the year and see that they've made gains. That's really important to me. But I think if you have that as the goal, you need to get out of the way and let teachers teach."

Teachers need higher salaries, better working conditions, better training and mentoring and clearer administrative rules, he says. The law's requirements, which say all students must read and do math proficiently by 2014, are noble, he says, but if teachers don't get what they need, the demands are unreasonable.

"If the shareholders of GM said that by the year 2014 we want to have X number of perfect cars coming off the assembly line ... but we're going to give you technology from the 1980s, we're going to pay you non-competitive salaries, and we're not going to train you any more than you have already been trained, is that fair? I'm not sure that it necessarily is."

At Sousa, he says, teachers don't always get what they need. This year, he had to suspend his two-teacher math program because the school couldn't find enough qualified teachers.

The school has no librarian and no music program. And for a few weeks last fall, Kamras held class in the library because of a pipe leaking sewage into his classroom. "We have a lot of challenges that really make it difficult."

The Teacher of the Year Program is a project of the Council of Chief State School Officers, sponsored by Scholastic and financial services firm ING.

RELATED LINKS

[Buy A Link Here](#)

**[Subscribe Today: Home Delivery of USA TODAY - Save 35%](#)**

USATODAY.com partners: [USA Weekend](#) • [Sports Weekly](#) • [Education](#) • [Space.com](#)

[Home](#) • [Travel](#) • [News](#) • [Money](#) • [Sports](#) • [Life](#) • [Tech](#) • [Weather](#)

Resources: [Mobile News](#) • [Site Map](#) • [FAQ](#) • [Contact Us](#)  
[Email News](#) • [Jobs with Us](#) • [Terms of service](#) • [Privacy Policy](#) • [Media Kit](#) • [Press Room](#)

[Add USATODAY.com RSS feeds](#) [XML](#)  
[Add USATODAY.com headlines to your Web site](#)

Wash/Politics

[Washington home](#)

[Washington briefs](#)

[Election 2004](#)

[Government guide](#)

[Health](#)

[Health home](#)

[Medical resources](#)

[Health information](#)

Editorial/Opinion

[n](#)

[Ed/Op home](#)

[Columnists](#)

[Cartoons](#)

[More News](#)

[Top news briefs](#)

[Nation briefs](#)

[World briefs](#)

[States](#)

[Lotteries](#)

[By the Numbers](#)

[Special reports](#)

[Day in pictures](#)

[Snapshots](#)

[Offbeat](#)

[Video headlines](#)

[Talk Today](#)

[Marketplace](#)

[Newspaper Classifieds](#)