

Thank you, Dr Cooper

In 2016, Dr Sandi Cooper, a mathematics education professor at Baylor University, initiated a partnership with a local school district to create a mathematics summer program focused on early number sense. The Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Baylor University in Waco, Texas and local schools worked together to develop a rich learning experience for pre-kindergarten and kindergarten students. Since then, this program has continued to grow and evolve each summer. I had the opportunity to work with Dr Cooper on this program and saw this partnership in action.

Math for Early Learners Academy (MELA) is a four-week summer program for pre-kindergarten and kindergarten students to develop early number sense. It is a partnership between Baylor University, local school districts and the Mayborn Museum, which is a children's museum on Baylor's campus. Dr Cooper is passionate about early childhood mathematics education and informal education, so MELA was an idea to bring the two together. As the director of MELA, Dr Cooper works throughout the school year to organize the program. She seeks out funding opportunities, meets with the elementary school principals, identifies teachers to serve as the Master Teachers and plans the logistics with the Mayborn Museum staff.

Dr Cooper also continually finds ways to help MELA grow and change. When MELA began, the curriculum was modified from an existing year-long school curriculum to fit the four-week schedule. Since then, Dr Cooper had the goal of creating a curriculum and assessment specifically for summer programs like MELA that other schools and programs can utilize. She organized a team of mathematics education professors, in-service teachers, instructional coaches and graduate students to build this curriculum and assessment. New pieces are being piloted in MELA each year to continue to develop the curriculum materials. Dr Cooper also pivots and adjusts when necessary to best support the local schools. In 2021, MELA needed to look different because of the pandemic. Instead of hosting it at the Mayborn Museum on Baylor's campus, Dr Cooper worked with a local school district to embed MELA into their summer school as their mathematics instruction. It followed a similar format as previous years but was adjusted to fit into a summer school setting. MELA continues to evolve and change, but Dr Cooper's goal is always to best support the students in the local school districts.

MELA is a true school–university partnership, as it is mutually beneficial for all who are involved. Dr Cooper leads the planning of the program, but each partner plays a specific role. The school districts provide meals, transportation and part-time staff. The Master Teachers are also from the local school districts. Undergraduate students at Baylor University in the elementary education program work as teaching assistants (TAs). By helping with MELA, the TAs gain an alternative field experience prior to their year-long student teaching internship. They work with small groups of students, learn from the Master Teachers, and focus on teaching early childhood mathematics. Mathematics education graduate students



from Baylor are also included in the partnership. They help plan the logistics of the program, assist with trainings and conduct research during MELA. Prior research projects have examined students' learning as well as explored the TAs' teacher-noticing skills. The Mayborn Museum hosts MELA. This location allows students to not only deepen their understanding of number sense in the classroom, but also see the math they are learning in the museum exhibits and, subsequently, the world around them. Museum walks and STEM presentations by the Mayborn staff are included in the weekly schedule. MELA provides a wide range of activities that are both engaging and meaningful for students.

Dr Cooper started MELA as a program with one district that has now expanded to three local school districts. Approximately 75 students attend the program each summer. MELA continues to grow and evolve to best support the local schools and students. Thank you, Dr Cooper, for your commitment to building relationships between Baylor University and local schools.

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