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Georgia Southern COE alumna sees impact of research in her school and district

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Alissa Sasser, Ed.D., who is Statesboro High School's (SHS) assistant principal for Curriculum and Instruction, said her career in education is owed to the strong teachers and administrators that have surrounded her throughout her career.

In 2000, when she began teaching in a fifth grade classroom, Sasser said she didn't feel like she understood the purpose of what she was doing. But with the support of good, veteran teachers and administrators, she was able to find her life's work.

"(Eventually), I saw the importance and relevance of my work, and it became more of a calling because I saw how important it was for all students to receive quality instruction," she said.

Sasser obtained her specialist and doctoral degrees at Georgia Southern University in educational leadership to help her pursue her next goal — becoming a school leader.

"I really wanted to do for other people what had been done for me," Sasser said. "I wanted to be a strength finder. That is an art — to be able to find someone's strength and develop it. If you can empower people in that way, you

can impact schools, groups of children and ultimately, communities.”

Her passion for teacher development drove Sasser to focus her dissertation research on the relationship between new teachers and their mentors.

“There was limited perception data available from novice teachers, or those with five or fewer years of experience, particularly about whether or not having a mentor had an impact on their decision to remain in the profession,” Sasser said. “My research focused on the perception of these teachers as related to their experience with a mentor and whether or not having a mentor had an impact on their decision to remain in the profession.”

Her research showed that new teachers valued mentorship, but she also unexpectedly discovered an additional finding.

“The teachers felt like the mentors supported them in areas of pedagogy and classroom management, but they felt least supported in the area of job-related stress,” Sasser said. “They ultimately also valued face-to-face meetings more than they did virtual meetings.”

With Sasser’s research, Bulloch County Schools Director of Professional Development, Kelly Spence, collaborated with Sasser on the school system’s Induction Teacher Program for teachers in their first three years in the classroom. The program initially provided informal mentoring and learning sessions in 2016. However, with Sasser’s help, the second year included formal mentorships with training and stipends available for mentors.

“I led the program the first year, and I was going to solicit some help from others,” Spence said. “We needed collective expertise at the time. I was very excited to have Dr. Sasser’s help.”

When Sasser completed her research in February, Bulloch County Schools decided to use the monthly induction teacher meeting to focus on positive mindsets and teacher burnout prevention. This session also included yoga and a focus on mindfulness. The activities offered in this session were a direct result of the data collected from Sasser’s research findings.

“It was the missing link,” said Statesboro High School Principal Ken LeCain, Ed.D. “Teacher mentorship and development is often an area that gets a lot of lip service. It is a very easy area to slide to the side and say ‘Well we have other things to do,’ when in actuality it is one of the most important things you can do in your schools, unless you want a lot of teacher turnover.”

LeCain said that induction teachers are a growing part of the population at SHS and other schools in the region. In the 2017-18 school year, Spence estimated that approximately 40 teachers took part in the Induction Teacher Program within the Bulloch County School system with about 25 percent teaching at SHS.

Sasser and Spence say that moving forward, they are constantly looking to improve the Induction Teacher Program and are now collecting data on how they can improve the sessions and content.

“Mrs. Spence has really given me the opportunity to build on my research,” Sasser said. “I feel like the teachers and I have grown so much as a team. It is so exciting to see my research in practice as opposed to something you put on a shelf and not look at again.”

Research is now an integral part of Sasser’s job process.

“The doctoral process at Georgia Southern really ignited within me a curiosity that I didn’t know was there,” she said. “It helped me put curiosity at the forefront of everything I do. This curiosity is the fundamental element that