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For Immediate Release:

MATHEMATICS + LITERATURE = EIU'S WINNING COMBINATION FOR TEACHING

CHARLESTON – When Eastern Illinois University associate mathematics professor Andrew White added it up that day in class 10 years ago, he knew the story made sense: Combine children's literature with mathematics, and he could create an innovative method of training for his education major students while reaching out to youngsters in area elementary schools, as well.

The result was called the Math Literature Connection, and today, White's project is credited with helping dozens of pre-service teachers at Eastern get live experience with kids in a group setting and making mathematics and literacy enjoyable for young audiences.

It was a decade ago that White, then a first-year member of the mathematics department at Eastern, happened upon the idea for MLC.

"It was an accident," he said. "Some students in one of my math methods classes had to do a class project. They came up with the idea of taking children's books that relate to mathematics and doing sketches to act out the math concepts in the stories.

"At the same time there was a mathematics conference being held at Eastern, and they were looking for people to make presentations. I wanted to get Eastern's students out in front of everybody because I thought they were really creative, so we took the ones from my class, put on a performance, and it went so well we've been going ever since."

Since then, White's acclaimed groups of students have performed at mathematics and education conferences from Washington, D.C., to Anchorage, Alaska, as well as elementary schools across Illinois. Their appearances have spread their reputation and increased demand for their talents to the point that there is a two-year waiting list for their shows. The group limits itself to about three performances a semester.

The concept behind MLC is based on presenting education as entertainment.

White teaches mathematical methods and general mathematics courses to elementary education major students at Eastern. Each year he selects 10 or 12 students, based on aptitude, to participate in the

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MLC group. The students then pick children's books, often Newberry or Caldecott winners, that somehow involve mathematics or numerical themes. They read them, summarize them and reinvent them "with poetic license" through short plays.

MLC members might turn the story of "Goldilocks" into that of a guy eating pizza with three girlfriends; in "One Hundred Hungry Ants," audience members might play the roles of ants at a picnic. Such spectator participation is an important facet of the presentations, and when the group gets teachers from the audience to run around among their pupils like charging rhinos in "Jumanji," youngsters go wild, White said.

"The interactive is what brings the math and the literature together," he added.

MLC benefits both the Eastern students who participate and the youngsters they present to.

"Our pre-service teaching students get to see what it's like working with kids, and the kids see that math and reading can be enjoyable," White said. "Everyone has so much fun, and I never know what's coming next."

If MLC breathes new life into math and children's literature, teaching mathematics at Eastern has provided a second wind for White, too. The East St. Louis native spent 31 years as a mathematics teacher in East St. Louis and Fairview Heights elementary schools before retiring a decade ago. Bored with retirement and having earned his doctorate, he decided to return to the classroom and accepted an offer to join the mathematics faculty at Eastern.

"Working with college students is so much fun. They keep you young," White said.

Members of this year's Math Literature Connection are Jason Antesberger of Clinton, Adamma Bankhead of Naperville, Becky Bloemer of Teutopolis, Todd Fatka of Clifton, Marcy Flessner of Dieterich, Amanda Jones of Hillsboro, Megan Landreth of Mount Zion, Patricia Moore of Danville, Andrew Peralta of Mahomet and Sheri Probst of Dieterich.