Hart County Schools and the UGA College of Education recently finished a year-long pilot program connecting faculty expertise with school-system experience to help improve various programs in the school system.

The College of Education and the Archway Partnership partnered to send Tracy Elder, a public service representative in the College of Education’s Dean’s office, to Hart County to act as a liaison linking the school system with University resources. Elder has worked with school systems across the state, helping them with programs and school system evaluation. Her experience as a middle-school administrator has allowed her to bridge the gap between teachers and university faculty.

“We are trying to be more connecting and to dismiss the myth of the Ivory Tower,” Elder said. “This is about engaging the school system and starting where they are.”

Over the past year, Elder identified resources to enhance math curriculum in Hart County, fostered relationships between the school system and individual College of Education faculty members, assisted with professional development for academic coaches, worked with the school system to apply for grants, and introduced new leadership development methods, including mentors for administrators and a more feedback-oriented teacher evaluation process.

“This has been a symbiotic relationship and everything that we have done alongside UGA we want to continue with,” said Stan Davis, Hart County’s Assistant Superintendent for Instruction.

Elder had been the lead writer and developer for a state Department of Education (DOE) teacher evaluation system for Georgia schools. Working with Hart County Schools’ administrators and teachers, she merged the DOE system with Hart County Schools’ existing teacher evaluation system, creating a new, customized system to offer more specific feedback for teachers. The new Hart County evaluation system includes quantitative and qualitative measures as well as a mechanism for sharing feedback with teachers. Effective teacher evaluation requires administrators recording informative observations about teaching, making sure teachers follow a productive teaching philosophy, Elder said. Providing specific feedback to teachers allows them to improve their methods and make for more efficient practices in the classroom.

When she began working in Hart County last fall, Elder focused on building relationships and developing trust within the school system. An important part of the process was having conversations with school system administrators and teachers to discuss and prioritize their specific needs. “They are all just really personable people. It’s a really small school system, so that makes it easier to develop relationships,” Elder said.

Once needs had been identified, Elder worked to identify related resources and expertise within the College of Education, the state Department of Education, and other education-related organizations. Connecting Hart County Schools with resources, facilitating relationships to faculty, and assisting with access to other university resources has provided administrators with information to help them make decisions related to faculty development and enhancing student learning.

“She was absolutely perfect. I thought it was beneficial that someone with Tracy’s knowledge could help bridge the gap for our high school students going into college. I would love to see it continue and think that the schools and staff could benefit from more involvement,” Davis said.