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Award-winning New Brighton math teacher Jon Larson always ready to learn

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Jon Larson believes you never stop learning how to teach. That's why the seventh-grade algebra teacher goes to his classroom every day ready to be flexible in his lesson plans — and, at times, learn from his students.

"You have to be open to different ways of teaching," he said. "You have to know where kids get stuck on a problem and find ways to help them solve it. ... Sometimes, they might find another way that works better for them."

That philosophy has paid off. Larson, a teacher at Highview Middle School in New Brighton, was recently named the 2010 Minnesota Middle Level Educator of the Year. The distinction is awarded annually through the Minnesota Middle School Association.

Larson has been with the Mounds View school district his entire 27-year career. In that time, he has learned a lot about the most effective ways to educate, he said.

For one, Larson finds it's important to make curriculum relatable to students, such as showing them how they might need the information in their

daily lives. Trying to have a sense of humor in the classroom also helps, though Larson admits he doesn't always pull it off smoothly.

"Every day I tell my students a joke," he said. "Sometimes they tell me it's a lame one."

The educator also said it was important to have high expectations of students in order for them to excel. "They will reach to the level you ask them," he said.

Larson, 48, is a Coon Rapids High School graduate. He studied math and

education at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minn. He then went on to earn a master's degree in curriculum and instruction from the University of St. Thomas.

Cindy Kucera, seventh-grade dean at Highview Middle School, nominated Larson. She has worked with him for more than 20 years and said she has seen countless students emerge from Larson's classroom loving math.

She described her colleague as someone who always keeps others in mind, even when making an acceptance speech for his most recent award.

"He talked about the other teachers and how they made him who he is," Kucera said. "He's a very humble person."

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