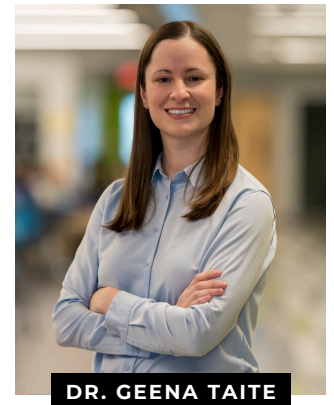


The Math Educator Changing the Way We Think About Learning

Meet Dr. Geena Taite, New Jersey state finalist for the Presidential Award for Excellence in Math and Science Teaching, and PCTI STEM Academy's 2024 Governor's Educator of the Year.



DR. GEENA TAITE

When Geena Taite walks into her high school math classroom at PCTI STEM Academy in Wayne, New Jersey, she's not just a teacher—she's a trailblazer. A newly minted PhD in Mathematics Education from Montclair State University, Geena has reshaped how mathematics is taught in her district and beyond. Her journey is a testament to what's possible when passion meets opportunity.

"I've always loved math," Geena shares. "But when I started teaching, I realized just how interconnected mathematical ideas are, and that made the teaching process even more exciting. I wanted to help my students make those connections—and I wanted to do it better."

This drive for improvement led Geena to Montclair's PhD program in Mathematics Education. She was inspired by a colleague who had pursued the program. "She had this research-based approach to teaching that was phenomenal," Geena recalls. "Observing her made me think, 'I want to be that kind of teacher.'"

From the start, Montclair's program exceeded Geena's expectations. Courses like Learning Theories helped her reevaluate how students learn, while conversations with classmates broadened her perspective on tough topics in math education. "It wasn't just one course that changed my thinking," she explains. "It was all of them together. The program helped me see teaching through a new lens."

Geena also found a supportive community in the program. "At first, I was surprised—it was a mix of first-year students and those on their way out," she admits. But over time, she and her peers built lasting connections through group research projects, conference travel, and even virtual writing sessions for their dissertations. "A dissertation can be isolating, but having a community made it manageable. We'd sit on Zoom, working individually but checking in with each other. It helped so much."

Armed with new skills and insights, Geena didn't just learn—she led. After taking a course on mathematical modeling, she pitched the idea for a new elective to her school district. Her proposal was a success. "I designed and implemented a mathematical modeling course and created professional development sessions for teachers in my district," she says. "It was a chance to apply what I was learning and make real change."

Her efforts didn't stop there. Geena conducted a yearlong study on math modeling in her school district, work that later informed her dissertation. She also began sharing her expertise beyond her district, designing professional development sessions for Montclair's PRISM program and presenting her research at national and international conferences.

In 2024, she was named her school's Governor's Educator of the Year and was a 2023 New Jersey State Finalist for the Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching. "It's humbling," she says. "But what's most rewarding is seeing the impact on my students and colleagues."

Despite her accomplishments, balancing work, school, and personal life was no small feat. "Everyone would ask me, 'How are you doing all this?'" Geena laughs. As a part-time student working full-time, she finished the program in just five years. Her secret? "Time management and aligning my dissertation work with my teaching responsibilities. That integration made all the difference."

Geena's ultimate goal is to improve mathematics education—not just in her classroom, but across the field. "Teaching is complex, and I wanted to learn more about effective practices to help other teachers, too," she says. Now, as a leader and researcher, she's doing just that.

Reflecting on her journey, Geena credits Montclair State University for helping her grow. "The program gave me the tools, the community, and the confidence to make a difference," she says. "It changed how I think about teaching and learning—and that's changed everything."

As Geena continues to publish her research and support teachers as a mathematics coach, her story serves as an inspiration. For anyone considering Montclair's PhD program, she offers this advice: "Go for it. It's challenging, but it's worth it. You'll come out the other side not just as a better teacher, but as a leader ready to make an impact."