Most high school coaches can claim that collaboration yields positive results, but one coach who just celebrated a 600th career victory can substantiate it.

Kathy Matthews, a physical education teacher and girls' basketball coach at Union Catholic High School in Scotch Plains, N.J., recently became one of only five coaches in New Jersey high school girls' basketball history to earn such a distinction.

But her skill as a team player goes beyond the court. Matthews, and Joan O’Donnell, a fellow physical education teacher at Union Catholic, decided to take their expertise to the next level - together - by enrolling in Thomas Edison State College's professional certificate in Personal Fitness Training, offered through the School of Professional and Continuing Studies.

“We may be seasoned educators but learning is an ongoing process,” said Matthews, who has been teaching since 1977. “The courses in the program refreshed my knowledge of anatomy, kinesiology and exercise physiology and familiarized me with current research and developments in the field. There was constant brainstorming between Joan and me, especially when dealing with discussion questions, reading assignments and projects.”

O’Donnell, herself with 24 years of teaching experience, said that she and her colleagues are often persuaded by senior school administrators to continue their education beyond the baccalaureate level.

“I may pursue my master’s degree at some point, but because I teach full time, run group exercise classes at the YMCA four days a week, and am busy raising two teenagers — taking the professional certificate program made more sense from an efficiency standpoint,” noted O’Donnell. “The program was rigorous but incorporated the aspects that I love — exercise, nutrition and strength training — with a medically-based fitness model that I could apply immediately to our curriculum.”

The two credit their principal, Sister Percylee Hart, who offered the school's moral and financial support throughout their endeavor. She recognized a need for a program that would benefit not only Union Catholic's students, but the teaching staff as well.

“Our personal fitness training courses enabled us to effectively work with students and colleagues toward physical fitness and weight loss goals,” said O’Donnell. “This past February we got the entire school involved with a health and wellness week. Staff and students were given pedometers to track their activity. We also instituted a healthy eating program and held exercise classes after school for students. We concluded the week with teachers from an array of curriculum teaching different aspects of health. It was a huge success and we are planning an even bigger week for this school year.”

Both plan to continue to utilize their knowledge to meet the needs of Union Catholic's students by offering them an expanding variety of activities that they will enjoy and will benefit them both physically and emotionally.

“I am the Health and Physical Education curriculum specialist at the school and will utilize the knowledge I’ve gained to incorporate customized fitness regimens into our curriculum,” said Matthews. “The trend in physical education is toward personal fitness. Emerging health issues such as obesity and diabetes in young children are also reasons why we are focusing on ways to educate our students on how to live healthier lives.”

For more information on Personal Fitness Training and other professional certificates offered at Thomas Edison State College, visit www.tesc.edu/spcs.