

Multicultural Academy Paying Dividends For GVSU Grads

Education Students Extremely Marketable

Grand Valley State University education students have become extremely marketable teachers in the state of Florida.

The GVSU student teachers who have participated in the Cross Cultural Student Teaching program in Broward County, Florida, have been offered positions within the district upon graduation. Seven participated in the spring of 2004 and seven more in the fall.

Three GVSU graduates – Jenny Shinsky, Jenny Kolodziej and Kathryn Maddox — who were part of last spring's pilot program, accepted positions and are in their first full academic year teaching in the Broward County district.

Shinsky said her first year as a teacher at Broadview Elementary School has been a rewarding experience.

"The most rewarding thing is having parents come to you, flooding you with compliments," Shinsky said. "One parent told me I should be teacher of the year because of the improvements her daughter has made. This little girl has had difficulties learning in the past, and I apparently have opened her eyes to other ways of learning."

"It is great to get the positive feedback from parents, who – from what I hear – are normally hard to please. I just like to know that I am making a difference – even if it is for one child."

Maddox accepted a position at Liberty Elementary in Margate, Fla. Her classroom is comprised of 25 second graders who come from many diverse backgrounds.

"My students have Haitian, Columbian, Romanian, and Portuguese heritages just to name a few," Maddox said. "Their learning abilities vary, with most being low to average."

"My biggest challenge right now is meeting the needs of ALL my students. Because my students' levels are so different, I find it very hard to accommodate every student's need, especially the extremely low students. But through small group instruction, their needs are slowly being met."

"I've had two parents tell me that they are very happy that their child is actually learning this year," Maddox added. "One parent told me that this is the first year her daughter isn't just sailing by, but she's actually learning. Another parent told me how happy and excited the child is about coming to school after fighting with her every day to get her to go to school. This year, the child loves her school, loves second grade and loves being in my class. Stories like that make my job even better."

Kolodziej now teaches third grade students at Liberty Elementary School full time.

"After completing my student teaching in Broward County, it opened my eyes to a school district that I felt really needed my help," Kolodziej said. "I am glad I made the decision to return to Florida."



Jenny Kolodziej works with her third-grade students at Liberty Elementary.

"I jumped right into the unknown, and at first it was scarier than I could ever describe. Fortunately, I have discovered a school that really cares about its staff and more importantly, its students."

"Working at Liberty Elementary School is teaching me how successful schools should work, and I feel very lucky to be part of the team," Kolodziej added. "While the road isn't always easy — as I'm sure it isn't for any first year teacher — I have accepted the challenge of teaching in a very diverse, very demanding environment and the reward has been worth more than all of the struggles."

The distance learning program enables student teachers to work alongside a multicultural staff, including individuals from South America, the Caribbean and Cuba. It allows student teachers to acquire new knowledge regarding the varied cultures, including how the family expectations from one culture to another may differ, acceptance of the various cultures and the influence of certain cultures in Florida.

"This experience is preparing them to be able to teach in a multicultural setting," according to Patsy Fox of the College of Education. "They have gained understanding of the cultures of the varied students and how to use this knowledge to be great teachers."

The program is funded, in part, through a Cross Cultural Student Teaching Grant, procured by Loretta Konecki in the College of Education's Teacher Academy. The Broward County School District is the fifth largest district in the country, and one of the fastest growing.

"What it does, is offer students opportunities to student teach in an area that consistently needs teachers," Konecki said.

During the fall semester, another seven students participated. Of that group, six have been hired, two are still interviewing and the remaining student must return to finish coursework.

After two semesters in the district: the students have been observed teaching and have interacted with faculty in their assigned schools.

"The consistent comment made by Broward staff is that the GVSU students are very well prepared," said Linda McCrea, Unit Chairperson for Curriculum & Instruction. "Now, teachers are requesting to work with GVSU students. Some prefer GVSU over other institutions."

"The College of Education is pleased with the project's results."

Former Interim Dean Anne Mulder, Ph.D., provided initial contact for the program and has been the on-site coordinator. Loretta Konecki, Ph.D., wrote the Grant for the Cross Cultural Student Teaching program, while Patsy Fox, Ed.D., serves as a field coordinator, supervising the student teachers in the field and teaching the seminar courses.

Prior to the student teachers coming to Broward County, they received five days of Professional Development at Eberhard Center. They received the Standards of Florida for their grade level, exposure to simple phrases related to the school environment in Spanish, First Aid and CPR training and so forth. Once there, they participated in resume writing and portfolio workshops with students from Nova Southwestern and Florida Atlantic universities.



Kathryn Maddox conducts a lesson at Liberty Elementary School.