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Sunshine Partnership is Proven Successful

Loretta Konecki

Linda McCrea
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by Dr. Loretta Konecki and Dr. Linda McCrea

In winter semester 2004 Grand Valley State University initiated a partnership program with Broward County, Florida. Since then 25 GVSU students have completed their elementary or secondary student teaching in schools in Fort Lauderdale, Pompano Beach, or other Broward County communities. Currently nine additional students are student teaching there and nine more GVSU students are hoping to student teach there during winter 2006 under the Cross-Cultural Student Teaching program of the College of Education’s Teacher Academy funded by the federal government.

Of the 25 student teachers who have completed the program and graduated from GVSU, 19 are now teaching in Broward schools. In addition, Broward County came to the winter 2005 Fire Up conference for student teachers and recruited other GVSU graduates to teach in Broward County. Six of these students chose to teach in Broward County. Since August, the GVSU College of Education under the leadership of Dr. Linda McCrea and project director Dr. Loretta Konecki have tried to bring together the 25 teachers and nine student teachers and their GVSU spouses and friends in order to establish and expand the GVSU graduate support system there. Food, conversation, and camaraderie between teachers and prospective teachers form the basis of the friendships.

In addition to the support from Dr. McCrea and Dr. Konecki, GVSU students and new teachers also have had support from two master teachers, Helaine Sikora-Morrocco and Monica Schlosser, who are on special assignment to the Broward Schools Urban Academy and serve as coordinators for the GVSU program. They have come to GVSU twice to become more familiar with our program and to recruit GVSU College of Education graduates to come to Broward to teach. They are enthusiastic about having our graduates teach in their buildings because they find them well prepared, enthusiastic, willing to work, and ready to make a difference in the learning and lives of young people.

The principal of Liberty Elementary School has hired five GVSU graduates for that elementary school alone. Some have called Liberty the Grand Valley of the south. Why Broward County? Broward County has students from over 150 countries whose first language was not English. Thus, there are many English language learners in the schools in addition to the numerous students who come from minority, poor, and single parent families. By student teaching in South Florida, GVSU students have an opportunity to learn and live in a setting that differs from West Michigan. By having experience with the diversity found in Florida classrooms, our students are prepared to teach in a wide array of classrooms and meet the needs of all students.

The Cross Cultural Student Teaching program has changed each semester as we have learned more about Broward County and as we have taken advantage of the ability of GVSU to conduct seminars and observe student teachers in demonstration classrooms over Interactive Television (ITV). This is unique to GVSU. Thus, Drs. McCrea and Konecki are conducting a study on the efficacy of ITV observations. To date, the data are very positive and suggest that classroom dynamics can be observed effectively using the ITV technology. Despite the capabilities of technology, Dr. McCrea still does at least two observations in person in addition to the observations done by Mrs. Morrocco and Mrs. Schlosser on-site.

Florida provides students who do well in student teaching with an opportunity to obtain a teaching position immediately after completing student teaching and graduating. It is difficult to do that in West Michigan. The October 19, 2005 Orlando Sentinel quotes officials of the Florida Department of Education as saying that Florida will need nearly 32,000 new teachers for the start of the 2006-2007 school year next August. They estimate that they will be 9,000 short. Thus, they are launching a national campaign to recruit teachers to Florida.

GVSU students are prepared to meet this need for teachers in Florida. Some of the 34 GVSU graduates and student teachers now in Broward County plan to stay in Florida for a few years and gain experience teaching, then come back to Michigan or move to a different state. Others plan to spend the rest of their lives in Florida. No matter which choice they make, all say that their experiences student teaching and teaching in Florida have been fantastic and they would not change it for anything.