

2016

# GVSU Program: A Grand Vision for Early Literacy Preparation

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### Recommended Citation

Lancaster, Paula E. (2016) "GVSU Program: A Grand Vision for Early Literacy Preparation," *Colleagues*: Vol. 13: Iss. 1, Article 15.  
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/colleagues/vol13/iss1/15>

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# A Grand Vision for Early Literacy Preparation

By Paula Lancaster, GVSU Faculty

In January of 2015, Grand Valley State University College of Education faculty members Paula Lancaster, Barbara Lubic, Cathy Meyer-Looze, and Elizabeth Stolle joined forces with the Michigan Department of Education and three other Universities\* to realize a grand vision for the State of Michigan:

Michigan will implement an aligned, seamless, and responsive system that empowers professional educators with knowledge and skills to implement evidence-based practices and interventions to improve the achievement and college and career readiness of the lowest performing students, K-12.

Work towards fulfilling this vision is being supported by a grant from the Center for Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform

Center (CEEDAR) at the University of Florida, and is one of the many examples of the unprecedented collaborative efforts toward improving education for Michigan's children, adolescents, and young adults that educators are undertaking across the state.

CEEDAR has worked successfully with many states and institutes of higher education (IHE) to reform teacher and leader preparation programs. In order to receive a CEEDAR grant, the state education agency must work with four IHEs and each IHE must, in turn, have at least one general education, special education, and educational leadership faculty member on its team. These unique configurations enhance the likelihood that resulting initiatives will be well-aligned and reflect the differing expertise that individuals bring to the table.

In Michigan, the focus of our CEEDAR work is on preparing teachers and leaders to provide highly-effective, early literacy instruction and support for struggling learners. In part, the work assumes that the process of ensuring that all students will acquire strong, early literacy skills is a vexing challenge. Overcoming this challenge is complicated work, and no single organization, instructional methodology, or literacy-based approach is likely to meet the challenge. If the work was easy, it would have been accomplished long ago. What is needed is an all hands on deck approach in which educators at every level and of every theoretical orientation work together to compliment and support each other's collective efforts.

In the College of Education at Grand Valley State University, our focus is on ensuring that graduates of our teacher and leader preparation programs are well equipped to meet the varying literacy needs of all students. We recognize that teachers are better able to accomplish this goal if they are prepared with a range of skills and knowledge and have multiple opportunities to practice implementing these approaches with feedback prior to becoming professional educators.

A first step in this process is to align our goals with the goals of the Michigan Department of Education (MDE). One MDE goal addresses disseminating information about the literacy needs of struggling students, and creating recommendations for meeting those needs. The second goal focuses on defining evidence-based practices in literacy instruction within a multi-tiered systems of support model and providing educators with access to resources on these topics. A third goal will prompt review of certification structures and standards in both general and special education for early literacy, and a fourth goal focuses on alignment with State Board and CAEP standards.

The CEEDAR team in the COE has been working to create our aligned goals and include all relevant stakeholders in the work. As part of the second step in this process we

have joined with our colleagues in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences in both the English and Psychology Departments all of whom are committed to the project. For the first time in our collective memories, all faculty from the College of Education (general and special education and educational leadership) and from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences who teach an early literacy-related teacher/leader education course gathered to analyze our curriculum and coursework. We identified gaps and redundancies while working towards ensuring that key critical components of literacy instruction are taught and practiced within our programs.

Third, we are surveying our current student teachers and recent graduates of our teacher and leader preparation programs regarding their literacy preparation to add a level of validation to our curriculum analysis. Survey results will provide valuable insights into what knowledge and skills our students have learned and feel prepared to teach and support. We will continue to survey, monitor the results, and adjust our programs over the coming years. Fourth, we will ask our community partners in K-3 classrooms to review our curriculum, provide input, and potentially house field-based courses during which our teacher candidates can practice what they have learned.

Our goal is an aligned, seamless, and responsive preparation program that prepares professional educators with knowledge and skills to implement evidence-based practices and interventions to improve college and career readiness for all students. The work is daunting but critically important. Students in Michigan deserve nothing less than our best collective efforts.

\*We are privileged to be working with dedicated colleagues from Northern Michigan University, Sienna Heights University, Western Michigan University, and the Michigan Department of Education.

*“Unity is strength...  
when there is  
teamwork and  
collaboration,  
wonderful things can  
be achieved.”*

*—Mattie Stepanek*

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