



GETTING A FEEL FOR IT: Crisna Gedeon, a Good Fit program participant and Palm Beach Community College freshman, looks over second-graders' work during a lesson on correct change at Village Academy in Delray Beach. Officials say half of education students at Florida Atlantic University change to another major by their junior year, largely because they feel detached from the teaching profession. *Staff photo/Joe Amon*

PREPARING FOR THE REAL TEST

Good Fit students get in-class training, support before their teaching careers start

BY SCOTT TRAVIS
STAFF WRITER

DELRAY BEACH • They start their teaching careers energetic and ready to change the lives of children, but quickly leave exhausted and discouraged.

That's been the story for many young teachers in South Florida and elsewhere, who find themselves overwhelmed with unruly or

hard-to-teach students, as well as disappointed by low pay and lack of support. Researchers estimate half of all new teachers leave the profession within five years.

Officials at Florida Atlantic University decided they needed to do something to help reverse this trend.

FAU's College of Education is using a \$300,000 state grant to pilot a program called "Good Fit," which provides experience and support for future teachers early in college. The program started in the fall. FAU officials are asking the state Legislature for \$3.2 million to continue this program and other teaching initiatives next year.

For eight hours a week, the Good Fit students help a teacher in a local public school. They are paid \$500 for each semester they work.

Many participants are education students attending Palm Beach, Broward or Indian River community colleges who plan to transfer to FAU their junior year. The program also encourages FAU students in other majors to give teaching a try.

"Teaching is a demanding job. The kids don't let you fumble around if you don't know what you're doing," said Glenn Thomas, an administrator in the College of Education. "It takes a special person with a lot of preparation."

Crisna Gedeon, 18, of Delray Beach, helps in a second-grade class at Village Academy in Delray Beach. She's a freshman at Palm Beach Community College and has always wanted to be a teacher.

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Program gives students taste of profession

GOOD FIT

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"I had so many teachers who inspired me," she said. "I want to help young people, and we need teachers."

Gedeon works with 12-year veteran Lawanda Brown, helping students learn math and vocabulary words. In a recent class, she was helping them count coins.

While students may observe classroom teachers during college, most don't get hands-on experience until they student-teach in their senior year, Thomas said.

Half of education students at FAU change to another major by their junior year, largely because they feel disconnected

from the teaching profession, officials said.

The Good Fit program may convince some students that teaching is not for them, but it's better they know that earlier on, Thomas said. Educators think most of these prospective teachers will enter the classrooms more confident and skillful.

"They have an opportunity to see a master teacher at work and get a feel for the school," said Tammy Ferguson, principal at Village Academy, which serves students from pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. "When they start teaching, they'll be able to hit the ground running."

FAU's College of Education graduates about 450 students every year, barely making a

dent in the state's teacher shortage. Florida needs about 30,000 teachers every year, according to the state Department of Education.

School district recruiters often travel across the country, and sometimes internationally, to fill teacher vacancies. But the Good Fit program focuses on teachers who live in South Florida and want to stay here.

"When the teachers move here from out of state, they're often here a couple of years and then get homesick and are ready to leave," Ferguson said. "Or they can't afford to live here."

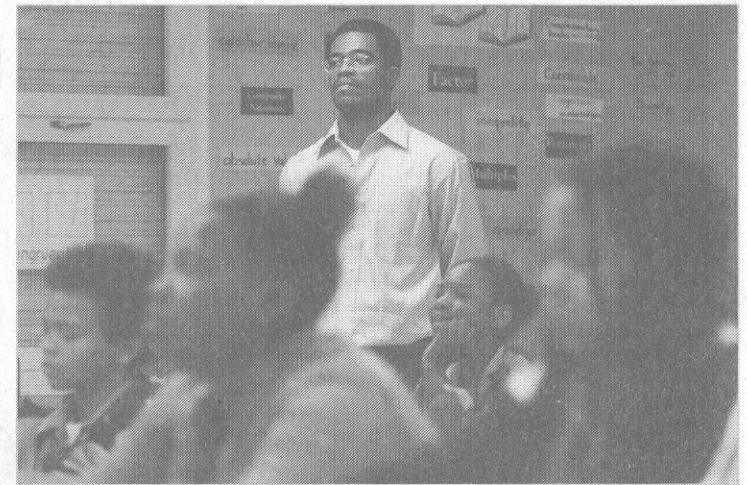
The 134 Good Fit participants work in schools in Broward, Palm Beach and Okeechobee counties, as well as the FAU-

A.D. Henderson School on the Boca Raton campus.

Georges Bernavil, an FAU junior from Hypoluxo, is a civil engineering major who recently decided to consider teaching. He's worked with the program for two weeks now, mostly observing middle school math teacher Sandra Owen. But he said the experience has already shattered some misconceptions.

"I thought it would be little kids throwing paper," he said. "But there aren't many behavior problems. I guess that's what happens when you have a really good teacher."

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ON HAND TO HELP: Georges Bernavil, a civil engineering major at Florida Atlantic University, waits for a chance to help in Sandra Owens' math class at Village Academy. More than 100 Good Fit participants work in South Florida schools. **Staff photo/Joe Amón**