'Good Fit' students at FAU get training, support for teaching before going it alone

By Scott Travis
South Florida Sun-Sentinel
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FORT LAUDERDALE • 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, and disappointed by low pay and lack of support. Researchers estimate that 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.

Many participants are education students attending community college who plan to transfer to FAU their junior year. The program also encourages FAU students in other majors to give teaching a try.
For eight hours a week, these students help a teacher in a local public school. They are paid $500 for each semester they work.

"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."

Jewel Johnson, 19, a sophomore at Broward Community College, helps algebra teacher Jose Brevil at Stranahan High School in Fort Lauderdale, where she graduated. She has a knack for math and helps students solve equations. This is her second semester in the Good Fit program and she says she loves it.

"When I get my actual class, I'll be more relaxed and a better teacher, because I'll already know the ups and downs," she said.

While students may observe classroom teachers during college, most don't get hands-on experience until they student-teach 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. But educators believe most of these prospective teachers will enter the classrooms more confident and skillful.

"They work with teachers who are well-trained, enthusiastic and passionate about what they do," said Malease Marko Berg, who coordinates the Good Fit programs for Broward County schools. "They're not just sitting off in a corner watching. They're interacting with students in a professional manner."

The 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 even internationally, to fill teacher vacancies. But the Good Fit program focuses on teachers who live in South Florida and want to stay 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.
Vanessa Peña, 19, an FAU freshman from Boca Raton, said she values the chance to know early whether teaching is right for her.

"This experience will either make you or break you," she said. "It makes you decide this is what I want to do, or this is not for me."

After a few weeks in Good Fit, Peña has her answer.

"I'm definitely a teacher."

Scott Travis can be reached at stravis@sun-sentinel.com or 561-243-6637.
Program helps would-be teachers prepare

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

By Scott Travis
South Florida Sun-Sentinel

February 25, 2007

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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.

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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.

"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.
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"They have an opportunity to see a master teacher at work and get a feel for the school," said Temmy 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."

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"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."

*Scott Travis can be reached at stravis@sun-sentinel.com or 561-243-6637.*

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Through FAU program, students get in-class training before teaching careers start

By Scott Travis
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Posted February 21 2007

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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."

Scott Travis can be reached at stravis@sun-sentinel.com or 561-243-6637.

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Program targets future teachers

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