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SIMMONS CONFERENCE ADVANCES MATH TEACHERS’ SKILLS

Would driving 300 miles to SMU for a conference on how to better prepare students in math be worth it? Denise Blume, a veteran public school teacher from Enid, Okla., thinks so. She was one of 118 teachers who attended the inaugural Research to Practice Conference, a component of the Research in Mathematics Education unit developed by the Annette Caldwell Simmons School of Education and Human Development.

The unit, created last year and funded by The Meadows Foundation, provides evidence-based research to support math educators’ teaching practices. The goal is to improve students’ understanding of math concepts critical to their achievement.

The director of the program, Associate Professor Leanne Ketterlin Geller, believes that today’s more complex and technology-driven industries require math teachers to engage in a higher level of instructional quality so they can teach their students more effectively.

“I don’t think people view mathematics as a way that we access the world, and yet, you really do need to approach the world mathematically. There’s so much that we need to do day-to-day that is mathematically driven,” she says.

She adds that elementary school teachers have to be well-versed in math and other subjects so their students can matriculate to the next grade level and beyond, but many teachers don’t have a passion for math. “A large percentage of the population,” she observes, “will say, ‘I don’t like math.’ And when they’re teachers, that’s likely coming across in the way that they’re designing and delivering their instruction. It’s the way they think about math.”

Blume, who teaches fifth-grade math at McKinley Elementary in Enid, acknowledges the obstacles to teaching math. She says it’s a challenge to think of different and creative ways to engage the students and then train them to apply math skills and concepts to everyday life.

For this reason, she was enthusiastic about the February conference. “The presenters have the knowledge of what the research tells us, and we can take that. It was not fluffy stuff. It was really important knowledge,” she says.

Ketterlin Geller says it’s more important than ever to provide support for math teachers. Performance on tests indicates most students are struggling. In fact, a majority of students aren’t reaching proficiency in math. “We know teachers are committed to their profession and to helping children,” she says. “Teachers need support because they’re faced with high expectations and a diverse classroom.”

Today’s classrooms include some students who have been exposed to math concepts early in childhood and others who were not challenged to think mathematically until they were in school.

Sixth-grade teacher Terri Guillen finds this disparity in learning experiences to be the challenge for teachers. Guillen teaches at St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic School in Dallas. A 12-year veteran, she has seen students grasp math concepts quickly because of early exposure to math. Others struggle. Part of the problem, she believes, is the students’ lack of confidence. It’s especially important, she says, that students have a strong foundation in order to understand more complex math concepts later. One way a teacher can help students is to give them a variety of ways to learn, and the conference gave Guillen ideas for brainstorming and collaborating with colleagues.

The challenges a math teacher faces increase when students matriculate to secondary schools, where more complex math concepts are taught. Ketterlin Geller believes math teachers need to be given the tools to teach elementary concepts in a way that provides the foundation for subsequent mathematics.

“If we’re not providing the support for the teachers, then they’re not going to be able to provide the depth of understanding for the students,” she says.

By the time students get to middle school, they often lack systematic exposure to core mathematics and are at a juncture when they are making decisions about a future in math or science.

To turn that around, Ketterlin Geller believes the teacher must train a student to think analytically: “Teachers should be building multiple strands of thinking, including conceptual, procedural, reasoning and problem-solving. We want to be developing multiple skills.”

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LEANNE KETTERLIN GELLER

 headlines/advocacy, noel family boosts dyslexia education

For brothers Ed Noel ’75 and Will Noel ’82, a mutual desire to help address learning difficulties faced by those with dyslexia cemented a lasting relationship with the Annette Caldwell Simmons School of Education and Human Development.

Dyslexia, a disorder that hinders reading and written language, has been a constant focus for the Houston-based Noel family. Ed, a semiretired real estate appraiser, and Will, an attorney, are dyslexic.

The family takes a keen interest in training teachers to teach children how to work around their dyslexia. That’s why the Noels have donated generously in recent years to support Simmons’ dyslexia-related endeavors.

“Education is the key, and at the lower grade levels of schooling you have where you can capture the student,” says Ed. “We’ve just glad that SMU and Simmons are embracing that area.”

Ed’s wife, Pat Oden Noel, ’75, who earned a Bachelor’s in education and has taught K-4, says children with dyslexia often aren’t identified until the third or fourth grade – critical years because of the large amount of new information introduced. Training teachers to identify struggling students earlier and to use methods that bridge the gap in reading abilities could make the difference in how they succeed.

“We’re very excited to help” with that training, Pat says about the Noel family contributions. “We’re very grateful we’re able to do so.”

Ed and Will’s late mother, Virginia G. Noel, was one of the founders of the Neuhaus Education Center in Bellaire, near Houston. Neuhaus started as a resource center for parents and teachers trying to help students with dyslexia. Its mission has since expanded to include providing teachers of all students with professional development in research-based methods of reading, writing and comprehension.

The Noel family active on the center’s board, and Will serves as a lifetime trustee.

The Noel family has long been proponents of education, but when David Chard, who has a strong research background in learning disabilities, was selected to lead Simmons in 2007, the family stepped up its involvement with the school.

“We felt it was a natural fit,” Will says. “We felt it was a natural fit.”

Since then, the dean’s conference room in Simmons Hall was named for the Noels’ mother. And Simmons collaborates with Neuhaus to offer through distance learning a Master’s degree of education in reading and writing. The International Dyslexia Association recently recognized Simmons for being one of the top nine American university programs meeting IDEA standards in teacher training.

Last year, Neuhaus also received Simmons’ Luminary Award, which honors individuals or organizations that have shown extraordinary commitment to improving lives through education.

But it isn’t just the week Simmons does with dyslectic education that impressed the Noels. It’s the overall research-based teaching methods the school advocates, as well.

“What we want is to have a well-qualified teacher in every classroom, and training teachers is a very important part of that,” says Barbara Noel, Will’s wife and a dyslexia tutor, who has been impressed by what she has seen at Simmons.

Will attributes the strides Simmons has made in education research to Chard, as well as to SMU President R. Gerald Turner for his leadership.

“When you see programs being led well,” Will says, “you just know the organization is on the right track.”

Pat Oden Noel ’75 (left), Simmons’ faculty members and Barbara Morganfield, and Will Noel ’82.

Pat Oden Noel ‘75 (left), Simmons’ faculty members and Barbara Morganfield, and Will Noel ’82.
For educators like Christian Ruiz, principal organizations in West Dallas.

Zone with 10 public schools, three private community resources to students and To focus on how to effectively deploy income households.

impediments to parent engagement in low-effects of exercise on academics and possible are open. Topics in discussion include the Research possibilities for faculty and students through internships, work-study programs to evaluate and help neighborhood schools students to the mix with research designed she says.

refer to it as an educational ecosystem,” have to fix all the pieces, which is why we “We recognize we can’t just fix one of the broken pieces and expect it all to work. We have to fix all the pieces, which is why we “The challenges we face are what happens to the children when they’re not here,” she says, explaining that some may not have food or electricity at home. Addressing those problems has united the center’s partners and schools.

Lynn Romelko Jacobs, associate professor in Simmons’ Department of Applied Physiology and Wellness, says she’s excited about working with West Dallas students. She’s particularly focused on researching the effects of exercise on education. In the upcoming school year, Jacobs plans to pair up with Paul Tovanoff, professor in Simmons’ Department of Teaching and Learning, to observe the current exercise Delores Sosa Green, executive director of Trinity River Mission, which offers after-school tutoring, says she believes the Metrics Project will help nonprofit agencies get additional funding with outcome-supporting data. It also will help families get improved services, she says, because organizations will be better able to evaluate progress on each family.

“We’ll know what family is getting what services,” she says. “Now, if we enroll a kid in our tutoring program, we may not know the child’s circumstances because we focus only on academics. The Metrics Project will definitely prevent a lot of kids and families from falling through the cracks.”

Also, each nonprofit can customize its metrics and outcomes measures to track success with individual programs or services. Measuring data can point to an understanding of what works and what doesn’t but also explain why, Nippert says, adding that the center’s approach could be used as a model in other communities if it’s successful.

That’s key for Sosa Green: “If it’s successful here, eventually the ultimate goal is that (the neighborhood) won’t need us anymore. Then we’ll pick up and go to another community where they need us, and do it all over again.”

But first, the center must determine whether research supports its effectiveness.

“We not only have to prove that partnership works, but how it works,” Nippert says.
Special education teacher Julie Bore’s students faced daunting obstacles — pregnancy, drug abuse, mental illness, homelessness — in a low-income urban school. But Bore’s students faced a compounding challenge; they were in her classroom because they were diagnosed with a disability such as a learning difference or an intellectual disability.

In her new book, Voices: Stories from a Classroom for Teens with Disabilities, Bore shares her conversations with 40 students, like Tammy, who threatens to commit suicide; 15-year-old pregnant Michelle, whose boyfriend hits her in the stomach; and Matt, who lives in a homeless shelter. Each chapter ends with a follow-up note on the student.

“I wrote the book to provide insight for teachers, parents, school administrators and policymakers,” says Bore, now assistant clinical professor of education at SMU’s Annette Caldwell Simmons School of Education and Human Development. “We must improve the education and social outcome of teenagers with disabilities, particularly those who live in poverty.”

Research shows that youth with disabilities are more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol, drop out of school, participate in inappropriate sexual behavior and become victims of bullies, Bore says. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 13.4 percent of U.S. students receive special education services. But, Bore says, low-income schools and parents often lack the resources to help students with disabilities face social and environmental obstacles.

In her book, Bore says special education teachers are key to helping students with disabilities succeed.

“Special education teachers need to establish trusting relationships with students and parents in order to serve as a link to these already marginalized children,” she says. The book includes an index of agencies and resources for children with disabilities. A native of Ng’ochek, Kenya, Bore says her parents inspired her commitment to children. Proceeds from Voices benefit Empowering Children of the Village, Inc., a nonprofit organization Bore helped create to educate and provide medical services to children in her village and neighboring villages.

SUPPORTING SCHOOLS FROM BLOCK TO BOARDROOM

DAVID CHARD (center), Simmons dean, moderated a discussion in the spring about the public’s ethical role in supporting high quality education. The dialogue was hosted by SMU’s Maguire Ethics Center, the Center on Communities and Education and the Simmons School. Panelists included (at Chard’s right) Gerald Brint, CitySquare’s Vice President of Public Policy and Community Program Development, and Florencia Velasco Fortner, CEO of Dallas Concilio. Read more on upcoming community conversations @Facebook/smimusmons.

EVENTS

October 25, 2012

PARENT ENGAGEMENT SUMMIT

Engaging in the Success of Our Children: A Blueprint for Parent Involvement, hosted by Simmons’ Center on Communities and Education, will feature discussions on how to develop effective parent involvement programs. Hiro Yoshikawa, professor of education and academic dean at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, will deliver the keynote address. For information, contact Erin Crosby, ecroesby@smu.edu.

October 27, 2002

HOMECOMING!

Join Simmons faculty, students and staff at the school’s tailgate party on the Boulevard. Food and beverages will be provided. Interested? Email us at simmonstailgate@smu.edu.

January 24, 2013

SIMMONS LUMINARY AWARDS

Upcoming awards will recognize the work of America’s Promise Alliance for dropout prevention, Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Superintendent Daniel King for improving student outcomes, and the Dallas Arboretum and Botanical Garden for providing model science education.

February 15, 2013

RESEARCH IN MATHEMATICS EDUCATION

The annual RME conference conducted by Simmons researchers for math educators takes place on SMU’s campus, 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. (see story on page 2). Visit smu.edu/RME.

SANDY NOBLES, director of the J. Erik Jonsson Community School in Dallas, receives the 2012 Simmons Luminary Award for her organization, the Salesmanship Club Youth and Family Centers.