

NO TEACHER LEFT BEHIND

Preparing Special Education Teachers for Classroom and Legal Issues

BY LISA SUHAY

Some children spend their school years racing to catch up with the learning bus as it speeds past their mental and emotional doorsteps. Ensuring no child from this stratum is left behind has resulted in the molding of a new breed of educator who can better address special needs while steering clear of legal and political pot-holes along the way.

Through a grant from the Virginia Department of Education, Old Dominion University's Commonwealth Special Education Endorsement Program (CSEEP) allows those special educators teaching on a conditional license in Virginia's public and private schools to enroll in a distance learning program for just \$100 per class.

"Teachers stay in place, teaching, while becoming significantly more effective," said Stephen Tonelson, a university professor and grant director based in the university's Lions Child Study Center. "It overcomes geographic and financial barriers while providing the same coursework, knowledge and skills obtained in traditional programs."

Since its inception in 1998, the program has

resulted in approximately 800 fully licensed special education teachers in Virginia schools, who before had worked with limited knowledge of special needs under provisional/conditional licenses.

"Virginia's students with disabilities are experiencing better academic and nonacademic outcomes as a result of the licensure practices of the Commonwealth Special Education Endorsement Program," said Thomas Elliott, assistant superintendent of teacher education and professional licensure for the state Department of Education. "I believe that this program is one of the most beneficial investments in children that the Virginia Department of Education has made."

Thanks to TELETECHNET, Old Dominion's pioneering distance learning network, the classes are delivered to some 40 sites throughout the Commonwealth. Providing this flexibility and financial support is allowing experienced teachers to continue to improve their skills and opening the door to additional higher education training for younger teachers, who may be parents with little time for travel to the main campus.

OVER THERE AND BACK AGAIN

At 59, Don Deliz is on his third career, having transitioned from Navy service to health care executive until he finally followed his wife, Lorinda, and three daughters – Dianne Deliz, Heather Howard and Karen DeGrandmont – into teaching.

“I watched my wife teach math at Kellam High (in Virginia Beach) for 18 years and thought, ‘I can do this,’” Deliz said with a wry laugh. “Of course, I also used to think my wife was having an affair because school ends at 2:15 p.m. and she’d get home at 6 p.m. I’d wonder what was going on at that school. Now that I’m in it, I know it’s a love affair with teaching.”

Deliz began as a substitute teacher at Larkspur Elementary School in Virginia Beach and cycled through schools, filling in for teachers in general education classes until he found himself before a room full of special education students at First Colonial High School in Virginia Beach.

“These kids needed me and I have the maturity,” Deliz said. “It was the right fit. I was finally in the right place. I went through two careers and wish I’d figured it out sooner.”

Like many in the commonwealth of Virginia, Deliz went into special education after taking courses and obtaining a temporary, three-year license. Within a year, however, the former Navy officer found himself again “at sea,” struggling to keep students afloat amid the challenges inherent in the education of those with both learning disabilities and emotional issues. One student in particular, clearly brilliant at math but too bound by emotional issues to apply himself in a classroom setting, motivated Deliz to “acquire some new strategies.”

The school’s assistant vice principal, Ann Mannarino, steered him to Old Dominion.

Using grant money obtained from Troops to Teachers, a U.S. Department of Education and Department of Defense initiative helping eligible military personnel begin a new career as public school teachers, Deliz enrolled in the award-winning CSEEP. In September 2005, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities recognized Old Dominion with the Christa McAuliffe Award for Excellence in teacher education for CSEEP.

The program is overseen by a team from the Lions Child Study Center, including: Tonelson, professor of early childhood and special education; Jane Hager, chair of the educational curriculum and instruction department; Robert Gable, Darden College Professor and eminent scholar of special education; Cheryl Baker, graduate program director of special education; Ann Maydosz, grant coordinator; and Kim Hughes, research coordinator.

Deliz has taken 11 interactive, televised courses at the main university campus and two courses at the Virginia Beach Higher Education Center. “You go in and you can press a but-

ton to buzz in questions, and in some classes there’s a microphone and a camera so you can even see the faces of the other students who are participating,” Deliz said. “People all over are taking the course with you – if they’re on a ship or ... at some other campus in Virginia.”

First Colonial’s Mannarino is pleased with the results. Deliz is the first student she encouraged to enroll in CSEEP. “Don was a good fit for the program,” she said. “He has an expressive personality. After these courses we get really well qualified teachers who are more prepared and sensitive to these students’ needs. While the program is condensed, there is a lot of follow-up and mentoring that goes on, and that also makes the difference.”

While Deliz is still completing the program, many strategies he needed are already in play in his classroom. The boy who could not perform math functions in a classroom setting is now “employed” in Deliz’s class as a tutor to other students. “By being the teacher to his peers this student is getting comfortable and the frustration is down for everyone,” Deliz said.

In addition to gaining confidence in the classroom, Deliz said he is now more knowledgeable when discussing the needs of his students with administrators. “I became a better teacher. I know my stuff now,” he said.

A report compiled by the CSEEP team, based on a follow-up survey of teachers who had gone through the program, was conducted in summer 2003. The findings were extremely gratifying, Tonelson said. The data indicated the following: that more than 88 percent of the respondents were fully licensed and teaching in their specialty areas; that CSEEP helped them to obtain full licensure; and that the coursework increased their ability to provide effective classroom instruction. The vast majority of respondents expressed a high level of satisfaction with the mentoring component, and perhaps most important, nearly all of those polled (90 percent) indicated that completing the licensure program through CSEEP increased the likelihood they would remain in the field of special education.

THE ROAD TO TEACHER OF THE YEAR

Jennifer Smith, 32, mother of two and a Churchland Elementary School special education teacher, is twice graduated from Old Dominion – first taking traditional, on-campus courses to become a kindergarten through 12th grade teacher, and more recently as a special education teacher via CSEEP. She was named Teacher of the Year for 2005 by the Southeastern Cooperative Education Programs (SECEP). Smith mainly teaches autistic children at Churchland Elementary in Chesapeake for SECEP. Autism is a neurological disorder affecting one in 250 children nationwide.

During a telephone interview, with background sounds provided by her 3-year-old son, Gaven, and her 11-year-old daughter, McKenzie, it was easy to understand why this teacher chose distance learning to further her craft.

“It was close to home and I didn’t have to fight tunnel traffic. What could be better?” said Smith, who took all her special education classes via TELETECHNET at the Virginia Beach Higher Education Center. “Under the circumstances, I don’t see how I could have done the courses without the distance learning option.” Smith taught for two and a half years with a temporary license before entering the program.

Smith offers her students more than lessons in math, reading, science and social science. She helps them to recognize signs of emotional frustration before they have a meltdown, and she also does behavior modification and teaches social graces. For example, she will carefully explain why it’s not appropriate to call someone fat or to point out a blemish on a seventh-grader’s nose. And it’s working, she says. “I end up taking my students into other classrooms with typical peers so they can see how they behave, and now I find my students behaving much more politely than the rest of the population!”

By continuing her education, Smith found not only the added tools she needed for aiding her six students, who have difficulties interacting with the mainstream school population on emotional and social levels, but also ways to keep herself out of legal difficulties. The federal government’s No Child Left Behind policies have spawned a host of legal minutia and

teacher accountability issues in the field of special education.

“Legal aspects are now such a huge part of teaching special education and I never knew it,” Smith said. “I learned how to assess students, their needs and weaknesses, but knowing what you are responsible for, legally, is a huge part of this job. You can really get yourself and your school into a mass of trouble if you aren’t up on it.” Now that she has been prepared for the challenges inherent in the system and equipped with sharper tools of her trade, Smith says she feels more secure in her work.

Smith admits that even with the convenience of distance learning in her own back yard, the choice to take the courses and become fully licensed was a strain. “The most stressed-out part of my life was when I was taking classes at night, teaching by day and having a family life.”

Her advice to those who have the temporary license, but who may be unsure about making the commitment for full certification, is this: “It does get easier and you become a better teacher.

“This is a chance to be part of something big in the life of a child with special needs,” Smith concluded. “It was worth it. It was really worth it all.”

Lions Child Study Center team members supervising the CSEEP distance learning program include (front, left) Jane Hager and Cheryl Baker; (middle row) Ann Maydosz and Kim Hughes; and (back row) Robert Gable and Stephen Tonelson

