

Education Doctoral Student Helps Failing School Turn Around

During her four years pursuing a doctorate in special education, Pam Williamson has gotten to witness firsthand the changes that can be achieved at a school with a plan for academic excellence.

Williamson was part of a team led by education Professor Elizabeth Bondy that helped Gainesville's Duval Elementary School improve from an F grade on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, or FCAT, in 2002 to an A grade in 2003.

Like many urban schools, Duval has a high percentage — more than 90 percent — of students on free or fee-reduced lunch. Also, almost half of the students move in or out during the year, and high levels of mobility are common in other failing or low-scoring schools, Bondy says.

After the disappointing results in 2002, Bondy — who has been Duval's professor-in-residence since 1999 — and the school staff reevaluated what was working and what wasn't.

One approach was to study teachers whose classes had performed well on the FCAT. The team observed two teachers — one in fifth grade and one third grade — whose students performed very well on the FCAT.

"Pam helped with interviewing,

observing, data analysis of pages of field notes, and interviews," Bondy says. "There were many sources of data, from teacher interviews to classroom observations. It was messy but fascinating data and from that we've been able to get portraits of good teaching."

Williamson says she was fascinated by how the best teachers engaged their students.

"There was a rhythm to the classroom. The teacher wasn't using a textbook — she was up at the board, having children memorize and apply information," Williamson says. "It was amazing how quickly they responded to the questions. There was excitement in the classroom."

Williamson — who will graduate in May 2005 and hopes to become a special education professor — is also working on a project called Duval Fellows, a year-long professional development program that the teachers help create. The program encourages special education teachers to pursue new strategies for children with disabilities in their classrooms.

Bondy and Williamson meet with about 30 teachers, guidance counselors and administrators for three hours each



Pam Williamson

month to discuss concerns and strategies.

"Each teacher has to name some insight they've gained since the last meeting," Williamson says. "Teachers are learning new and different ways to look at children with disabilities in their classroom. They're exploring issues near and dear to their own heart and finding ways to remedy those issues."

Williamson and Bondy say the broader benefit of the research they have done at Duval Elementary is that it can be applied to many similar schools in Florida and elsewhere.

"Hopefully, I'll be able to share information I've learned," she says.

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