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VCU Professor Researches Early Intervention Programs for Preschools, Ties to RTR Program

By Sterling Giles

The Institute for Education Sciences, IES, a branch of the US Department of Education, awarded a grant to VCU professors Bryce McLeod, Ph.D and Kevin Sutherland, Ph.D to research behavioral problems in local preschool children. The four-year grant totaled up to \$1.6 million.

Over the last seven years, Dr. Keith Sutherland, a professor in VCU's education program, has been working on developing early intervention programs for preschools in the Richmond area. He has discovered that students from impoverished communities tend to exhibit behavioral problems.

"We know that 18 to 25 percent of students that show up from preschool show problem behaviors," he said.

The objective of the programs was to develop measures to assess the practices teachers were using in the classroom to deal with children with behavioral problems. There are research studies that explore this same topic but only focus on how supportive the classroom is for such students and also how emotionally supportive the teacher is.

Sutherland's programs differ because they explore the methods of intervention executed by the teachers in the classroom. He stressed that the key to implementing effective intervention programs is to detect the signs sooner rather than later.

"You have a young child that has a problem behavior and when we don't help that child to be more successful in school, over time those things get magnified," he said.



Dr. Keith Sutherland leads a discussion with aspiring teachers

Sutherland explained further that failure to detect these behavioral problems at an early age could possibly negatively affect the student's learning experience in future years. Examples of early signs of behavioral problems in students include having difficulty sitting still in the classroom and being incompatible with their classmates and teachers.

As he delved further in his research, Sutherland realized that he would require more funding. Therefore, he teamed up with psychology professor

Bryce McLeod and developed a grant proposal that would be sent to IES.

The process of being accepted proved to be difficult for the duo due to the depleted funds available as a result of federal budget cuts. This caused the proposal process to be incredibly competitive. The duo was denied twice but was eventually awarded the grant on their third proposal submission.

Presently, the two are planning to continue developing intervention programs for schools in the Richmond area.

Despite the shared goals of the Richmond Teacher Residency, (RTR), program and the duo's study, the two are not working in unison. The residents in the RTR program work alongside teaching professionals, referred to as clinical residency coaches, to assist in developing competent, capable teachers. Residents have the ability to choose from two tracks: the Special/Exceptional Education track or the Secondary track. The Special/Exceptional Education track was introduced this year and is designed for those who seek to help children with special needs and disabilities. The Secondary track appeals to those who want to teach core subjects such as music, biology, English, and math.



Dr. Keith Sutherland joined by other RTR coaches and residents

The Secondary track was the first of the two to be introduced; it was developed in 2010. The program was developed by the residency program in response to the needs of the Richmond Public Schools. Kristi Harris, a current resident in the Special/Exceptional Education tract, explained what the school district sought in potential teachers.

The Special/Exceptional Education tract was introduced in early 2014 and was developed in response to the growing desire for special education teachers in the Richmond metro area.

Typically, the residents take specialized training courses over the summer and then begin their respective residencies once the school year begins. The training courses led by the residency coaches typically last for about three months. Once the school year begins, the residents typically teach four days a week and participate in seminars on Fridays.

Sutherland was involved in the residency program over the summer where he served as a Special/Exceptional Education coach. He expressed how thoroughly impressed he is by the residents involved in the program.

“They are bright, they are motivated, and they are enthusiastic,” Sutherland said. “They have all these traits you would hope for teachers that I would like to have teach my own children.”