

Alfred University's School Psychology Program receives federal training funds

7/07/03

A four-year, \$790,000 grant from the federal Department of Education will allow Alfred University's Division of School Psychology and the Lea R. Powell Institute for Children and Families to expand training for students who will work in rural school districts. Dr. Robert K. Bitting, associate vice president for Academic Research, Planning and Administration, announced the grant award for the "Preparation of Leadership Personnel: Extending Collaborative Processes to Inclusive Early Education Programs in Rural Schools." The most recent grant expands upon a program started in 1998 with receipt of initial funding to train students in Alfred University's doctoral degree program in School Psychology to work in rural schools. Since 1998, Alfred University has formed relationships with several area school districts, all rural in nature, so that its students gain experience in working with students in those districts. To date, 12 doctoral degree students have been trained. Six are now working in rural school districts; another four have just completed internships in partner schools, and three of them are set to begin jobs at rural schools this September. One is a visiting assistant professor at AU in School Psychology and the final one among the original 12 has accepted a postdoctoral position with AU's Rural Justice Institute. "Like inner city schools, rural school districts often have scarce resources, and yet have to deal with students who face serious problems, from malnutrition to abuse," said Bitting. "The problems are exacerbated in rural areas, where there are also scarce community agencies and resources to help children. The role of school psychologists in a rural school district is oftentimes very complex and difficult because the psychologist may be the only mental health professional in contact with the entire family, not just the child." Dr. Ellen Faherty, director of the Powell Institute, agreed. "Through our interactions with the districts in this program, we've learned that rural schools face significant challenges attracting and maintaining quality personnel (teachers, administrators, school psychologists, counselors, etc.) due to shortages of available professionals, lack of financial resources and geographic isolation." Professionals in rural school districts "are working very hard to teach children in the face of disproportionate levels of poverty and its associated problems with limited access to community support systems. The faculty and staff in our partner schools have demonstrated a deep commitment to improving educational outcomes for all children in their rural communities by giving their time and expertise to the project. They have worked many hours without financial reward or complaint. They have truly been an impressive group of educators." With the first grant, the Powell Institute partnered with the Addison, Campbell-Savona, Fillmore and Portville central school districts. With the new grant award, Alfred University's Division of School Psychology will continue to work the Addison, Fillmore and Portville schools, and will add a training program in a Pennsylvania Intermediate Unit. The focus, said Faherty, will shift to "extend the use of the problem-solving approach with preschool-age children and their families." Through the leadership grant program, interns "develop a problem-solving focus in their approach to children with learning and emotional difficulties," said Faherty. They have formed teams of school professionals, including teachers, administrators, counselors and school psychologists who use the problem-solving approach to address individual needs of children referred to them. When the interns receive a referral, Faherty said, they develop ways that teachers and parents can work with the child, and they offer help in implementing those recommendations and in monitoring the child's progress. "They are creative in finding techniques for working with persistent problems and in providing contacts and linkages with other agencies outside school, if needed."