

AU's Lea R. Powell Institute receives grant to fund literacy program

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The Lea R. Powell Institute for Children and Families in Alfred University's Division of School Psychology has received a grant that will fund a program aimed at improving literacy skills among poor rural families. The \$800,000 grant from the state Education Department was awarded jointly to the Lea R. Powell Institute and the Cattaraugus-Allegany Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES). The grant is for a four-year period, with funds distributed to the Powell Institute and the BOCES Adult Education Department. Dr. Ellen Faherty, director of the Lea R. Powell Institute, said funds will be used to establish an Even Start Family Literacy Partnership. The goal is to provide intensive family-centered education programs for parents and children and improve literacy skills of children and parents in impoverished rural families. Cattaraugus-Allegany BOCES has been providing Even Start programs for nine years. BOCES and Cornell Cooperative Extension formed an Even Start Partnership last year, serving 12 school districts in the two-county area. The grant awarded to Alfred University and BOCES is a second partnership. Parent educators from BOCES are assigned to work with eligible families in school districts served by Even Start, helping parents to enrich the educational environment in the home and improve literacy levels in the targeted school districts. Cornell Cooperative Extension intensifies the service with home visits and group programs, in which community educators provide expertise on such topics as budgeting and proper nutrition. Even Start operates in part on the premise that educational and economic success is best achieved through a focus on the well-being of the entire family. "We need to address the whole environment," Faherty said. "You can't address (reading deficiencies) if you don't address other problems" in the home. "Even Start helps parents to become their child's first teacher," added Carol Gallo, coordinator for adult and family literacy at Cattaraugus-Allegany BOCES. "Even Start operates on the integration of core components that are provided to participating families. Family literacy services must be of sufficient intensity in terms of hours, and sufficient duration, to make sustainable changes in a family. Some parents need tools to relate to their children and see the advantages of learning; the school districts appreciate that Even Start helps to prepare children for school readiness." Even Start seeks to teach parents how to advance their child's academic, social and physical development. Other goals include improving parents' literacy skills so they will be better able to help their children achieve academic success. Enhancing the parents' employment potential through General Equivalency Diploma, job readiness and job retention programs also helps parents become self-sufficient. The \$800,000 grant obtained from the state Education Department will be used to create a three-way partnership among the Powell Institute, BOCES and Cornell Cooperative Extension. An additional two school districts are served by the new partnership. School district served by the Even Start Family Literacy Partnership include: Allegany County: Andover, Belfast, Bolivar-Richburg, Cuba-Rushford, Fillmore, Friendship, Genesee Valley and Scio school districts. Cattaraugus County: Allegany-Limestone, Cattaraugus-Little Valley, Ellicottville, Franklinville, Hinsdale and Portville school districts. The partnership between BOCES and the Powell Institute will enhance the original Even Start program, Faherty said. Professional staff in the AU Division of School Psychology will provide BOCES parent educators with further training through various professional development institutes offered by the Powell Institute's Center for Rural School Psychology (CRSP). The summer institutes will offer parent educators training in childhood development, language acquisition, components of literacy development, child psychology, parenting, effective communication and working with special-needs children. The role of parent educators, Gallo explained, is to facilitate a family-centered educational program involving parents and their own children, up to age seven, to help parents become full partners in the education of their children, and to assist children in reaching their potential as learners. A learning environment in the home develops a "kinship between parent and child" where the child views his parent(s) or primary caregiver as a role model for learning. Advanced graduate student interns in school psychology at Alfred will work as consultants, assisting parent educators throughout the school year. Initially, at least five graduate students interns will serve as consultants to parent educators, bringing expertise in such areas as child development, family processes and parenting. There are currently six parent educators in the Even Start program, serving about 225 families and as many as 400 children. Gallo hopes that the newest state grant will allow BOCES to hire one more parent educator. "Parent educators' caseloads are very large," Faherty said. "Having (AU graduate student) consultants available will help the parent educators work more efficiently and effectively." Faherty said services provided directly to Even Start families through the Powell Institute's Child and Family Services Center (CFSC) include family evaluations, family therapy and educational/support groups. Peter Tigh, elementary principal for Portville Central School District, which has

participated in Even Start since its inception in Cattaraugus and Allegany counties, lauded the program's effectiveness."As a school principal, I have seen the value in the close personal contacts that are established through the Even Start program," Tigh said. "The parent educators have been an effective part of our attempts to involve families in the educational process. These solid relationships carry on throughout the elementary years."Vincent DiTanna, elementary principal in the Bolivar-Richburg Central School District, said having a parent educator work with youngsters in his district has paid off. "It's been very helpful," he said. The parent educator's "working with the parents and children in the home is a big help to us when the children get to school."Bolivar-Richburg offers a preschool program to prepare 4-year-olds for kindergarten. Even Start helps prepare children for the preschool program and allows educators and school officials to learn what services -- speech therapy for example -- a child will need before entering the public school system. Faherty will serve as director for the Alfred University portion of the Even Start Family Literacy Partnership. Serving as project staff members will be Dr. John Cerio, professor of school psychology; Dr. Nancy Evangelista, assistant professor of school psychology, and Dr. Edward Gaughan, professor of school psychology and chairman of the School Psychology Division.Cerio will supervise the clinical work of students providing direct services to families (assessment and educational support) and will coordinate in-service training for parent educators through the CRSP summer institutes. Gaughan will provide training and supervision for the student consultants paired with parent educators. Evangelista will provide students specialized coursework on early childhood interventions and early literacy development. Gallo said having Alfred University as an Even Start partner will create a stronger local program and may very well serve as a model for other Even Starts throughout the state. "Already I have had other coordinators ask to read our grant to think about how this concept could work in their own communities. Possible research projects could evolve from the progress that is made," she said."Our Even Start Literacy Partnership with Cornell Cooperative Extension has been sound. The Alfred University 'connection' will raise the project foundation to another level."Added Tigh: "The partnership being established with Alfred University will only enhance an already effective program."