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School of Education Fights Teacher Shortages in the Region

(9/17/08 – By Brooke Burger)

MONTICELLO, AR — America faces a shortage of qualified teachers, but the problem is particularly acute in southeast Arkansas and the delta, according to Dr. Peggy Doss, dean of the School of Education at the University of Arkansas at Monticello.

“We have to be very aggressive in recruiting new teachers in education,” said Doss. “The shortage of teachers is a very real crisis, especially in this region, where there’s a shortage in all licensure areas.”

According to Doss, area superintendents and principals call the School of Education on a regular basis looking for teacher candidates.

“All of our graduates are hired immediately,” Doss said. “Some are offered contracts during their internships and asked to begin teaching in the district as soon as they graduate.”

In an effort to address the teacher shortage, UAM is working with the Education Renewal Zone (ERZ), the Southeast Arkansas Education Service Cooperative, and the Arkansas Department of Education as well as public schools and communities to recruit and retain teachers.

The ERZ, a division of the Department of Education, allows public schools, education service cooperatives and higher education institutions to join forces in order to improve public schools. The Southeast ERZ serves as a liaison between UAM and 14 school districts in the region, and provides funding for School of Education projects and initiatives.

According to Doss, the School of Education must explore three different areas of recruitment – on campus, high schools and elementary schools, and the community. The university and the ERZ currently have one major project underway to spur more involvement between colleges and high schools.

The UAM/ERZ High School Redesign is a program designed to provide high school and university faculty the opportunity to share expectations for students, to provide materials needed for success in both environments, and to provide information on resources available from the school districts and the university.

The next event for the High School Redesign project will take place October 1 from 4-6 p. m. in the Capitol Room of the John F. Gibson University Center on the UAM campus. The program, entitled “Best Practices,” will bring together ERZ members, UAM faculty and public school administrators.

The School of Education is working with UAM’s Office of Admissions and hosting on-campus events to attract students, including a recruitment fair in October and a grill-out for first-year students and current education interns.

UAM is also working with UA-Pine Bluff to provide minority grants, and with the state to provide scholarship money to students who agree to work in high-need areas.

But according to Doss, recruiting teachers is just half the battle. “Retention is the other half,” she said.

National statistics indicate that 50 percent of new teachers quit within their first five years in the classroom. “Part of the poor retention rates are due to the first years being the hardest,” said Doss, “but the increased pressure and stress of performance-based testing is also a contributing factor.”

According to Doss, UAM is developing ways to support and better prepare its teacher candidates as well as provide support services and outreach programs for new teachers. “We’re working with public schools to help new teachers in those difficult first years,” said Doss. “In addition, we’re helping prepare teachers to work with diverse classes. If they are better prepared, we are more likely to retain them.”

UAM requires its students to participate in a one-year internship. According to Sue Martin, coordinator of teacher education, the diverse field experience gained by a year in the classroom better prepares the interns for successful teaching careers.

In addition, UAM now offers new programs recently approved by the Arkansas Department of Education, including a special add-on program that allows graduates with a degree in P-4 or middle school education to return for a certification in special education.

Another source of support exists within the Kappa Delta Pi honorary society, which consists of teacher candidates with a grade point average of 3.0 or higher. The group works with elementary schools, children interested in reading and teaching, and provides books for at-risk youth.

Two additional factors contributing to the teacher shortage are simple economics and the region’s rural location. “One of the first questions asked by a prospective teacher is ‘where’s the nearest mall,’” said Martin.

“What we find is once people move here, they love it,” Doss added, “but you have to experience it to know what we know.”

Recruiting and retaining qualified teachers not only helps education but is a key contributor to economic development, said Doss and Martin.

“Business and education go hand in hand,” Martin said. “We both reap rewards from each other and we both have to work together to bring economic growth to our part of the state.”

Another factor contributing to the shortage is salaries. According to Doss, the salaries of teachers vary widely across the state. However, while northwest Arkansas may offer a higher starting salary, it also has a higher cost of living than southeast Arkansas.

“It’s not about the money,” Martin said, “It’s about how much you care about helping students.”

In spite of all these challenges, Doss said the School of Education wants to build the reputation of teaching as a profession. With 35 years in education, including more than 20 in public schools, Doss said she recognizes teaching as a time-honored profession.

“We know if we prepare our candidates to be outstanding teachers,” she said, “that promotes the profession, so we want to turn out high-quality teachers. Teaching is a profession that can touch so many lives and families.”