Improving Teaching in Head Start

by Joel Schwarz

A new Center on Quality Teaching and Learning that will be headquartered at the University of Washington is designed to improve teaching practices in Head Start programs. Susan Sandall, Ph.D., an associate professor of special education, whose research focuses on developing effective teaching practices for young children with disabilities and how to prepare teachers and other Head Start personnel to work with those youngsters, is the co-director of this new center.

“There is a greater expectation today that those who are teaching young children should have higher education in how children learn. Historically, it has not been thought that this was necessary for pre-school teachers, but it makes a difference,” said Sandall. “Preschool teaching is not babysitting. We need to be sure that all children are learning and these teachers need the ability to teach children who have a disability or who are really struggling.”

One of the areas that Sandall wants to focus on is raising the standards for Head Start teachers, many of whom are employed from the local communities and don’t necessarily have teaching certificates or much training in how children learn. This means that many instructional practices that have been proven to work are unknown by Head Start teachers or don’t occur consistently in the classroom, she noted.

A significant challenge will be finding a way of continuing to employ Head Start teachers from local communities while fostering ways of implementing the best proven teaching methods. “We think there is a role for ‘coaches’ who can demonstrate skills and encourage further engagement in the process for Head Start teachers,” said Sandall. “It would be terrific if every child in Head Start enters kindergarten performing at the same level and with the curiosity and persistence that will serve them well in their school years. We need to do this by increasing the performance level of teachers.”

Head Start, which was launched in 1965 as part of the Johnson administration’s Great Society and War on Poverty programs, is charged with serving the poorest preschool-age children in the country.
by promoting school readiness. It does this by enhancing social and
cognitive development of children by providing educational, health,
nutritional, social and other services to children and their families. Sandall, who is a former classroom teacher and a teacher trainer,
said the new center’s mission is to find, evaluate and bring the most
effective teaching practices to all children, including those with
disabilities, enrolled in Head Start. The focus will be on inclusion,
similar to the way that classes are conducted at the Haring Center’s
Experimental Education Unit, (EEU), one of the University Center for
Excellence in Developmental Disabilities programs based at CHDD. A
state-certified special education program, the EEU offers inclusive
education classes and services as well as serving as a source of
training for UW undergraduate and graduate students. The EEU
serves children with and without disabilities from birth through
kindergarten. “We want to achieve everything possible for all children in Head Start by bringing effec-
tive teaching practices to them,” she said.

To achieve the new center’s goals, Sandall and other center researchers will be involved in:

- Gathering, assessing, and cataloging research-based practices on early childhood assess-
  ment, curriculum, and instruction.

- Placing practices proven to be effective into daily use through professional development of
  Head Start staff and creating a system to sustain the use of those practices.

- Collecting and reviewing data to appraise improved quality and student learning in Head Start
  classrooms.

- Fostering links among parents, teachers, and pre-kindergarten and kindergarten staff to as-
  sist Head Start students make a smooth transition to elementary school.

The grant funding the center runs for five years starting in January of 2011, and the program event-
ually will have a staff of between 25 and 30 people at the UW. The center will include collaborators
from six other institutions – the University of Virginia, Vanderbilt University, Iowa State University, the
University of Southern Florida, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and the University of Illinois at
Urbana Champaign.

“Investing in early childhood education should make children ready to learn,” said Sandall.
“Otherwise, you are always playing catch up. It makes sense to invest time and resources early. Head
Start is at an important crossroads. We want to capture a leadership role in early childhood education
and influence the preparation of the next generation of teachers.”