

STOPPING SCHOOL VIOLENCE

Dr. Caroline Clements, associate professor of psychology, has a big job: she serves as project evaluator for a \$9.5 million dollar Safe Schools/Healthy Students (SSHS) federal grant project awarded to the New Hanover County School System in coordination with other community groups. Not to mention that she serves as director of the UNCW Center for Teaching Excellence. Not to mention that she's been known to teach classes on top of everything else. "My life is very busy," sighs Clements.

The SSHS Initiative provides grant funding to New Hanover County schools and community groups so they can implement proven programs and services that promote healthy childhood development, violence prevention, and alcohol and drug use prevention among school-age children. The federal program, which began in 1999, has distributed funds to over ninety school districts around the country. Then president Clinton established the grant program in hopes that it would reduce the likelihood of incidents of school violence, particularly in response to the Columbine shootings in 1999.

In 2003, the New Hanover County School system, in collaboration with the New Hanover County Sheriff's Department, the Southeastern Center for Mental Health Services, and twenty-seven other community groups, formed the Uniting for Youth Initiative. The initiative was funded \$9.5 million in 2003, and is funded through 2007. The group's goals include improving safety and security at county schools and day-care centers, increasing parental involvement, preventing violence in the home, schools and within the community; preventing drug and alcohol use among minors and improving student mental health in all of the 21,000 students served by New Hanover County Schools.

One of the main goals of the project is to teach children positive social skills. New Hanover County received one of the largest grants *ever* awarded by the SSHS Initiative; other school districts usually receive somewhere between \$1 and \$2 million.

"New Hanover County is a disproportionately violent county. It is one of the more violent counties in North Carolina. It has the highest rate of foster care placement in the state, and is among the highest in teen and domestic violence rates," says Clements. She attributes some of the problem to a high rates of drug abuse among county residents and to the socioeconomic woes that community members face in an area where the divide between the rich and poor is only growing.

Yet, the SSHS Initiative has been shown to positively affect social behavior among young people. "Violence rates, in general, are decreasing

around the country. Violence rates are decreasing at a faster rate in SSHS grant awarded schools," says Clements.

"Every student in New Hanover County is affected by this grant," notes Clements. The grant supports programs that focus on social skills training in pre-k through fifth grade, alternatives to suspension, mental health support in schools, teen leadership experiences, peer mediation training and a youth court in which students participate in model judicial hearings and try their classmates for minor offenses.

Clements coordinates the evaluation of all of the programs and her team documents the effectiveness of the programs twice a year. She employs a full staff to help her reach her goal: three full-time em-

ployees, three graduate students and a part-time Ph.D. student. "We generate tons of data," says Clements, "We go over all of the agencies to see what steps they've taken and what improvements have been made. Kids' behavior should improve over time."

Clements and her evaluation team also survey 28,000 children, parents and school personnel each year to assess school security. The schools administer the surveys and Clements and her team interpret the results.

All of the programs implemented by the initiative are evidence-based, meaning that there is published data showing that the programs are indeed effective. Clements continually evaluates the effectiveness of the programs to show that they are still working. "We only use what we know is effective and we continually evaluate it. We only want programs that work," says Clements. The goal is to identify kids in the most need of service, yet all children are affected. "The focus is on prevention rather than remediation," says Clements.

Lisa Brewster, project director in the New Hanover County Schools, says, "the evaluation department is one of the best parts of this grant. The ongoing evaluation is tremendous, just so we know where we stand." For her part, Brewster has learned a lot through working with researchers at UNCW and believes that the learning relationship is mutual, "I've learned a lot about evaluation, and they've learned a lot about schools," she says.

Clements's evaluation team has also performed assessments of county school security. They sent mock-intruders into the schools, unannounced, to see when and if the intruders would be recognized. "We have seen an improvement in this area, most schools are more aware of safety concerns," says Brewster.

For more information, visit www.nhcs.k12.nc.us/sshs/.

“Violence rates are decreasing around the country...rates are decreasing at a faster rate in Safe Schools/Healthy Students grant-awarded schools.”

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A TEACHER'S COMMITMENT

Some of the particularly effective programs instigated by SSHS funding include:

Project Alert, a preventative program focusing on drug and alcohol abuse. The need for a program like this is high in New Hanover County. "In our Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 30 percent of eighth graders report drug use, and 11 percent of sixth graders do," says Clements. The survey, implemented in 2005 by Clements' evaluation team, surveyed 1000 New Hanover County kids in middle school and high school, and found high rates of drug use and alcohol use. More than half of all graduating seniors surveyed had smoked marijuana; while 46 percent had drunk five or more alcoholic drinks in a row in the past month.

Second Step, a social skills development program in place in some county preschools and all elementary schools in New Hanover County. "We've seen positive changes in four year olds through the individual observations in the preschool setting," says Brewster.

Families in Schools Together (FAST), a program serving small groups of high-risk families. Participants meet once a week for three hours to focus on parenting skills, and cook a meal or work on a family project together. "It has had a tremendous impact," says Clements. Brewster agrees that this program has made significant progress in increasing positive parenting skills among the participants.

As a special education teacher in her native Iran, Dr. Mahnaz Moallem strived to become a better teacher. This dedication to teaching drove her to further her education in Iran and later at Florida State University and it is what drives her research in instructional methods and technology as a professor of instructional technology at the Watson School of Education. "I am deeply committed to human development, and fortunately my work has allowed me to pursue this passion," says Moallem.

Moallem's research focuses on how people learn and how to incorporate non-traditional methods of learning into a Web-based approach to teaching. Her research also has a strong international focus. Her research interests include instructional design models and principles, development of Web-based instructional materials, design and development of online collaborative learning environments, and how new and emerging technology can improve learning and instruction.

She is currently involved in two research projects and has also recently applied for a grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF) with a group of computer science faculty and officials from three local school systems. The group plans to begin a three-year program to encourage students in New Hanover, Pender and Brunswick counties to study science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) by offering expanded information technology programs to students and teachers in grades 7 through 12. The goal of the program is to teach students and teachers how to exploit the Squeak Media Authoring Tool—a free open source computer-programming tool—as a modeling environment to infuse IT skills into core STEM curriculum.

One of her other research projects grew out of her own experience in teaching online courses. "I confronted issues when I started teaching online courses. Students had different styles of learning and it was difficult to keep non-traditional students in online courses. Non-traditional students found that although online courses are convenient, it didn't match their learning styles," says Moallem. She has since spent the last two to three years developing instructional strategies that address the needs of non-traditional learning and is studying how online learning differs from traditional classroom-style learning.

In December 2005, she visited the Philippines and Taiwan and presented her study on different learning styles in an online environment, and found that educators in both places were very interested. In June, she met online with researchers from both places to begin a study comparing online learning styles of students from the Philippines, Taiwan and the United States.

She is also working to partner Wilmington science teachers with science teachers in New Zealand. She's initiated a pilot program for students to collaborate with one another online, and for the participating science teachers to compare teaching methods and set up similar goals.



Dr. Mahnaz Moallem, left, conducting a workshop for teachers and faculty in the Philippines.

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