Evaluating Programs and Personnel Preparation Needs for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders

In the second phase of a two-year research project Dr. Maureen Conroy and Dr. Carol Schall and their MERC study team (see page 3) address a major need in the successful education of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) – an investigation of the application of a program evaluation model for use by teachers and related service personnel to identify program strengths and gaps to improve services and personnel preparation. Their study used SurveyMonkey to survey all MERC school division personnel working with students with ASD. A 70-item questionnaire with a three point response scale (insufficient, emerging, exemplary) was used to assess ten program and training indicators. The sample included mostly special education teachers (70%) in self-contained classes across all grade levels, with a total return of 73 completed surveys.

The results indicated relative strengths in current programs (parental and family support, environmental elements/visual supports, functional communication systems, and instruction), as well as relative gaps (team processes, data collection, social and peer relationships and supports, and behavior change elements). The report includes recommendations for improving the delivery of services to this growing student population, including the need to more consistently apply evidence-based best practices, increasing teacher knowledge of social and peer support strategies, and increasing access to behavior analysis and related supports.

This important MERC study has demonstrated the utility of the measure that was developed and provided feedback to our member school divisions about needs to address to ensure effective programs for students with ASD. As such, it addresses current practice and has established an instrument to allow continual evaluation of these services. For more detail, I encourage you to read their final report which will be available on the MERC website after June 15.

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MERC Director
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Research in Progress

MERC currently has three full studies in progress:

**Formative Assessment Practices With Benchmark Testing**

This ongoing study is directed by Dr. Lisa Abrams and Dr. Jim McMillan. This past fall additional small focus group interviews were completed with middle and elementary school teachers. Results of this first phase of research will be presented at the fall Policy and Planning Council meeting, along with a proposal for phase 2 that will consist of a large-scale survey to examine the use of benchmark testing results.

**Dropout Prevention and Retention Strategies**

This review of literature of best practice, prepared by Dr. Donna Dockery, Department of Counselor Education, will focus on successful strategies for lessening prolonged student absenteeism and improving the graduation rate of students at-risk of dropping out. The results of the review will be presented at the June meeting of the Policy and Planning Council.

**Technology and Online Instruction**

Dr. Charol Shakeshaft and Dr. Jonathan Becker, faculty in the Department of Educational Leadership, will direct three studies related to instructional technology: 1) a review of literature of best practice for delivering online instruction to high school students; 2) a statewide survey of current practice in instructional technology; and 3) a cost-effectiveness analysis of instructional technology provided by MERC school divisions. The study group for these studies was formed this spring. Results of the review of literature will be presented this fall.

Dissemination of MERC Studies

**REPORTS**

- The Relationship Between Middle School Mathematics Teachers’ Belief and Practices: Creating and Implementing a Web Model of Belief by Dr. Kurt Stemhagen.

**RESEARCH BRIEF**

- Relationships Between Middle School Mathematics Teachers’ Beliefs and Practices by Dr. Kurt Stemhagen.

**SEMINARS**

- The Relationship Between Middle School Mathematics Teachers’ Belief and Practices: Creating and Implementing a Web Model of Belief was presented on March 5, 2010 by Dr. Kurt Stemhagen.

Welcome New Interim Dean

W e welcome new Interim Dean of the School of Education, Dr. Michael Davis, to MERC’s Policy and Planning Council. Dr. Davis has been a member of the School of Education for 24 years. His major interests are in the areas of school change and teacher preparation.

We would also like to express our appreciation to Dr. Beverly Warren for her years of service and support to MERC and wish her well in her new position.

New Member!

M ERC is very pleased to announce that Goochland County Public Schools is now a member!

Goochland is the only new member we have added to the original seven divisions in 19 years, and we welcome them with open arms. They have already participated in one of our studies (benchmark testing) and will contribute much to MERC’s mission and activities.

Here are the new members of the MERC Policy and Planning Council:

From left: Dr. Linda Underwood, Superintendent and Karren Streagle, Testing Coordinator

Our heritage and ideals, our codes and standards - the things we live by and teach our children - are preserved or diminished by how freely we exchange ideas and feelings.

- Walt Disney
Autism Study Team Members

VCU: Maureen Conroy, Carol Schall, Joy Engstrom

*Chesterfield County Public Schools*: Meredith Eads

*Colonial Heights Public Schools*: Jo Read

*Hanover County Public Schools*: Diane Brown, Roberta Gentry, Heather Weston, Tara Childs

*Henrico County Public Schools*: Brook Bottari, Selena Joy

*Hopewell Public Schools*: Sheila Bailey, Joyce Charity

*Powhatan County Public Schools*: Lisa Oxley, Gayle Keith

*Richmond Public Schools*: Maria Beck

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Thanks to MERC Graduate Students

This year two MERC graduate research assistants, Angie Wetzel and Jesse Senechal, both doctoral students in the School of Education Research and Evaluation Ph.D. track, have worked on MERC projects, and we are grateful for their contributions.

Angie has taken a position at the Medical College of Virginia next year, and Jesse will be back to help with the website and the technology studies.

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Redesigned MERC Website... *check us out!*... www.soe.vcu.edu/merc

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**Virginia Commonwealth University**

**Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium**

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**MERC**

MERC is a consortium of Virginia Commonwealth University and eight Richmond area public school systems dedicated to improving education through conducting and disseminating action and applied research and evaluation. By connecting the professional expertise and practical wisdom of school leaders with the research interests of university faculty, the research agenda is set so that results are useful in local decision-making and program development.

Simply put, MERC’s primary mission is to conduct research practitioners think is relevant, and transfer it into schools and classrooms. MERC also provides technical resources for conducting evaluations.

**NEW**

*Evaluating Programs and Personnel Preparation Needs for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders.* By Maureen Conroy, Ph.D. & Carol Schall, Ph.D.

*Benchmark Assessments: Promises and Perils (Are we wasting our resources?)*. By James H. McMillan

*Guidelines and Resources for VCU-Public School Research*

Current newsletter
MERC’s WORK

MERC’s WORK is published two times a year.

Director................................Jim McMillan
Managing Director.........................Gwen Hipp
MERC Research Assistants...............Jesse Senechal
and Angie Wetzel

How to Contact MERC

If you would like to participate in a study group, attend a seminar, or receive MERC documents, please contact your school division representative or call the MERC office (tel. 804-828-0478, fax 804-828-0479).

How to Order MERC Reports

Upon completion of a research topic, copies of complete studies are sent to each superintendent’s office and are posted on the MERC website.

Additional copies can be obtained at no cost to members by either calling or faxing the MERC office at tel. 804-828-0478, fax 804-828-0479. See our website at: http://www.soe.vcu.edu/merc/ for a complete listing of our publications.