



CREATIVE ATMOSPHERE: Florida Atlantic University freshman Vanessa Pena 19, plays the role of a student for 17-year-old Janice Mullins at Stranahan High School. Pena is in the Good Fit program, in which education students work eight hours a week with master teachers to gain experience in the profession. The program also encourages FAU students in other majors to give teaching a try **Staff photo/Joe Amon**

GIVING TEACHERS RIGHT TOOLS

'Good Fit' students get training, support before going it alone

BY SCOTT TRAVIS
STAFF WRITER

FORT LAUDERDALE • They start their teaching careers energetic and ready to change the lives of children, but quickly leave exhausted and discouraged.

That's been the story for many young teachers in South Florida and elsewhere, who find themselves overwhelmed with unruly or hard-to-teach students, and disappointed by low pay and lack of support. Researchers estimate that half of all new teachers leave the profession within five years.

Officials at Florida Atlantic University decided they needed to do something to help re-

verse this trend.

FAU's College of Education is using a \$300,000 state grant to pilot a program called "Good Fit," which provides experience and support for future teachers early in college.

Many participants are education students attending community college who plan to transfer to FAU their junior year. The program also encourages FAU students in other majors to give teaching a try.

For eight hours a week, these students help a teacher in a local public school. They are paid \$500 for each semester they work.

"Teaching is a demanding job. The kids don't let you fumble around if you don't know what you're doing," said Glenn Thomas, an administrator in the College of Education. "It takes a special person with a lot of preparation."

Jewel Johnson, 19, a sophomore at Broward Community College, helps algebra teacher Jose Brevil at Stranahan High School in Fort Lauderdale, where she graduated. She

has a knack for math and helps students solve equations. This is her second semester in the Good Fit program and she says she loves it.

"When I get my actual class, I'll be more relaxed and a better teacher, because I'll already know the ups and downs," she said.

While students may observe classroom teachers during college, most don't get hands-on experience until they student-teach their senior year, Thomas said.

Half of education students at FAU change to another major by their junior year, largely because they feel disconnected from the teaching profession, officials said.

The Good Fit program may convince some students that teaching is not for them, but it's better they know that earlier on, Thomas said. But educators believe most of these prospective teachers will enter the classrooms more confident and skillful.

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COMING FULL CIRCLE: Jewel Johnson, a sophomore at Broward Community College, is in her second semester of the Good Fit program at her alma mater, Stranahan High School. "When I get my actual class, I'll be more relaxed and a better teacher, because I'll already know the ups and downs," Johnson said of the benefits of the FAU initiative. **Staff photo/Joe Amon**

Program equips teachers

■ GOOD FIT

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"They work with teachers who are well-trained, enthusiastic and passionate about what they do," said Malease Marko Berg, who coordinates the Good Fit programs for Broward County schools. "They're not just sitting off in a corner watching. They're interacting with students in a professional manner."

The College of Education graduates about 450 students every year, barely making a dent in the state's teacher shortage. Florida needs about

30,000 teachers every year, according to the state Department of Education.

School district recruiters often travel across the country, and sometimes even internationally, to fill teacher vacancies. But the Good Fit program focuses on teachers who live in South Florida and want to stay here.

The 134 Good Fit participants work in schools in Broward, Palm Beach and Okeechobee counties, as well as the FAU-A.D. Henderson School on the Boca Raton campus.

Vanessa Peña, 19, an FAU

freshman from Boca Raton, said she values the chance to know early whether teaching is right for her.

"This experience will either make you or break you," she said. "It makes you decide this is what I want to do, or this is not for me."

After a few weeks in Good Fit, Peña has her answer.

"I'm definitely a teacher."

Scott Travis can be reached at stravis@sun-sentinel.com or 561-243-6637.