



*Photography by Jason Henry*

# TEACHING TOOLBOX

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Florida Master Teacher Initiative is a national model for giving teachers tools to promote student success

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By Boaz Dvir



When our pipes leak, we don't want just any plumber — we want a master plumber. When our lights go out, we want a master electrician. So when our schools are in trouble, we should demand master teachers.

And that's just what a coalition of educational leaders from the University of Florida and the Miami-Dade County Public Schools is creating through a promising program that recently got a major boost with a \$6 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

Study after study has emphasized the importance of teacher quality in student success, but those same studies and others have also found that teachers often feel "overwhelmed, underprepared and unsupported," according to the proposal the UF-Miami group submitted to the Department of Education.

Citing research by the National Center for Education Statistics, the group reported that "almost half of all teachers leave the profession in their first five years." Another study found that almost 80 percent of teachers found their professional development opportunities ineffective.



*Benjamin Franklin Elementary School third-grade teacher Andrea Johnson recently enrolled in the Florida Master Teacher Initiative. She's pursuing a UF specialist degree in curriculum instruction with an emphasis on reading.*



**“What we’re doing is taking the latest research on effective education that our professors and others at UF and around the country are conducting and translating it to the classroom.”**

**— Donald Pemberton**

Figures like those were on everyone’s mind when Greg Taylor of the W.W. Kellogg Foundation, Don Pemberton of UF’s Lastinger Center for Learning and David Lawrence and Ana Sejeck of the Early Childhood Initiative Foundation met at a Miami restaurant in 2006 to brainstorm ways to better equip teachers with the tools they need to lead their students to higher academic ground.

“We started to talk about the concept of helping to nurture passionate teachers,” recalls Taylor, vice president of program strategy for the Battle Creek, Mich.-based Kellogg Foundation, a juggernaut in early-childhood education reform and racial equity.

As they talked, the outline of a plan to empower teachers began to take shape on the back of a napkin. Today, the Florida Master Teacher Initiative has become one of the most promising programs in American education and an emerging national model.

“This program is tremendously innovative because it takes the best of practice and connects that with theory,” says Charles Bleiker, a Florida International University early-childhood-education associate professor and Lastinger Center advisory board member who has studied the Florida Master Teacher Initiative.

Sponsored by the Kellogg Foundation and other nonprofit, academic and governmental organizations, the Master Teacher program has been transforming hundreds of inner-city schoolteachers — and thousands of students — around the state. This on-the-job initiative offers two tracks: an unprecedented, tuition-free, individualized UF master’s or specialist degree, and practical, long-term professional development.

“What we’re doing is taking the latest research on effective education that our professors and others at UF and around the country are conducting and translating it to the



*UF Master Teacher Professor-in-Residence Magdalena "Magdi" Castañeda observes one of her graduate students, Leslie Cabrera, who teaches at Coral Park Elementary School in Miami.*

classroom," says Pemberton, who directs the Lastinger Center. "Our professors-in-residence — who work on-site at the schools — tailor their lessons to help teachers meet their students' specific needs."

It's the students, the vast majority of whom come from low-income homes, who reap the biggest benefits, he notes.

The program — which the UF College of Education and its

partners currently offer in Miami-Dade, Collier, Pinellas and Duval counties — consistently delivers on its original premise and promise: It boosts student accomplishment through sharper, more engaging instruction.

While one of the goals of the new grant is to generate hard data on the impact the program makes on student performance, schools where the program has been piloted have already shown marked improvement in their Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, or FCAT, results.

"We owe a great deal of gratitude to the professors in our college who've created the content that makes up the infrastructure of this highly successful program," says Lastinger Center Associate Director Alyson Adams.

Enlightened, energized and empowered through this intellectual interaction, the Master Teacher program participants gain the skills and poise to help their students scale new heights.

"Now children in some of Florida's most vulnerable schools have access to high-quality teachers who ensure their academic success," Pemberton says. "The research tells us that this makes all the difference in the world."

Professor-in-Residence Magdalena "Magdi" Castañeda, a former Miami-Dade public schools teacher who joined the Master Teacher Initiative at its inception in 2006, says "I really believe in this work. It has transformed me as an educator and a person."

"Magdi exemplifies the type of professor we've been lucky to have join our team," Pemberton says. "She's passionate, committed, experienced and she gets it — and so her students get her."

Adams, who has observed Castañeda in action, credits the professor's success to her ability to keep her eyes on the big picture and maintain a hands-on approach with her students.

"She truly understands it's more than teaching them," Adams says. "It's connecting with them."

Yendi Sotolongo, a math and science teacher at Miami's Maya Angelou Elementary School who earned a UF master's degree in 2008 through the Master Teacher program, says Castañeda's classroom experience reinforces her credibility.

"She knows what to expect from us," Sotolongo says, "and holds our hand through the entire program."

Castañeda, who wrote her dissertation on mentoring, says "I'm working in the trenches, with the teachers who need our help."

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## Investing In Innovation

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To expand and study the program in its birthplace, the original partners — UF, the Miami-Dade County Public Schools and the Kellogg and Early Childhood foundations — applied for a new, multi-million-dollar U.S. Department of Education grant.

They were not the only ones vying for a slice of the \$650 million Investing In Innovation Fund (i3). Nearly 1,700 applicants submitted proposals, says Boston-based consultant Gary Romano, who advised the Master Teacher team.

"I've never seen anything like this," he says. "Everyone who's anyone in education applied."

With such stiff competition, the Master Teacher team held out a mere glimmer of hope that it would win an i3 grant, despite meeting its major criteria — creating a replicable model.

"When you talk with people across the U.S., they instantly get what UF is doing," Romano says. "The issue for schools around the country is not raising money for professional development, it's spending the dollars they already budget on more effective programs. I can see schools everywhere shifting their allocated funds to this Lastinger Center model."

Nonetheless, when the education department named the Master Teacher program one of 49 winners of the prestigious grant and awarded it \$5 million, it surprised some of the team members. (To fulfill the grant's match requirement, the Kellogg Foundation kicked in an additional \$1 million.)

"I thought it was a total long shot," says Phil Poekert, a Master Teacher professor-in-residence in Miami and one of the authors of the team's i3 application.

But the team may have had a secret weapon in Pemberton, who is closely linked to both of the Florida programs that were funded — the Master Teacher Initiative and Take Stock in Children, a program to help at-risk youth graduate high school

and attend college that Pemberton founded in 1995 and for which he is now serving as interim director.

“I’m lucky to be a part of two of the most innovative programs in the country,” he says. “This is our chance to do more. A lot more.”

Earning the i3 grant places the program in a distinctive group that includes Teach for America, the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools and the Smithsonian Institution’s National Science Resources Center, among others.

“We believe that, although we’re navigating uncharted territory, our work can help all teachers and children, everywhere,” Adams says. “The i3 grant shows that others around the country see that, too.”

In awarding the team an i3 grant, the DOE made its reasons and expectations clear: “The model outlined in this grant proposal shows initially promising results of improving student achievement, increasing teacher commitment and teaching skills, and enhancing overall school culture.”

The grant gives the Master Teacher team the chance to:

- Expand into 25 high-need Miami-Dade County elementary schools. This means that during i3’s four-year span, 1,125 teachers will acquire the abilities to set nearly 30,000 students on the right path.

“When I think about all those children,” Poekert says, “I envision a better future.”

- Hire an independent research firm — California-based SRI International — to conduct a rigorous evaluation of the program.
- Enroll 100 pre-K-to-third-grade teachers in a new degree track that focuses on early childhood education.

“This is the area where we can generate the highest return,” Poekert says. “We can literally change the trajectory of children’s lives.”

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## All About Children

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Like most of the schools that participate in the Master Teacher program, North Miami’s Benjamin Franklin Elementary serves as a haven for its students, 89 percent of whom qualify for free or reduced lunch.

Eighty-five percent of Ben Franklin’s students are African-American and 15 percent are Hispanic, according to a Florida Department of Education survey. Less than 1 percent are white.

Ben Franklin Principal Mary Ann Alonso considers inviting the Master Teacher program into her school one of the best decisions of her tenure. She has seen the Master Teacher program motivate and edify the 13 teachers who are participating in it — and instill a new, more collegial atmosphere in the school.



“Ultimately, the goal of the Master Teacher Initiative is to give teachers the tools to engage their students in learning.”

— Donald Pemberton

“It’s about developing the teachers and making them leaders,” Alonso says. “It helps me because now I’m not just the leader. I’m a leader of leaders devoted to the same cause.”

One of those new leaders is Ben Franklin third-grade teacher Andrea Johnson, who is pursuing a UF specialist degree in curriculum instruction with an emphasis on reading. Alonso has noticed an “improvement in every facet of her work.”

Midway through the two-and-a-half-year program, Johnson has obtained a “bag full of strategies in order to reach the students in her classroom,” Alonso says.

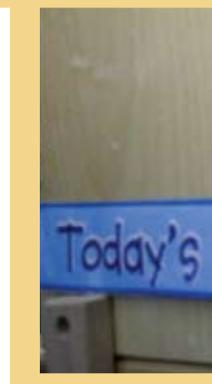
“She may not have realized she had the potential that she’s displayed since she started the program,” Alonso adds.

“She’s been able to explore the research out there and test methods already proven effective.”

During a recent reading exercise, for instance, Johnson implemented one of the many lessons she learned in the Master Teacher program.

Teaching context clues and imagery on a recent bright morning, Johnson took the time to do three different, full readings of a poem: She asked her 20 students to silently read “Hurricane Lynn,” then listen to her reading it aloud, then recite it together.

Then she made sure to ask each student a question about the poem, which described a hurricane’s effect on a small town. The exercise helped the students grasp the vital basics of characterization, context clues and vocabulary. Just as important, they learned from each other’s answers.



“The [Master Teacher] program has taught me to be flexible,” Johnson says. “It has taught me to take what I know and factor in what my students need.”

When a lesson works, Johnson shares her success with her colleagues at Ben Franklin. Besides transmitting grassroots knowledge, this integral part of the Master Teacher program helps build an interactive teacher community.

The increased sense of community has prompted Alonso to promote the Master Teacher program at Ben Franklin and around the county and invite its participants to guide some of her faculty meetings. Their teacher-led activities have included a recent after-school classroom review. Johnson suggested posting clear learning objectives on the walls and tidying up the spaces to better direct students’ attention.

“I tell my teachers that they can’t do it on their own,” Alonso says. “They need to rely on each other.”

Yet, despite its popularity among teachers, the program has maintained the original concentration that Taylor, Pemberton, Lawrence and Sejeck outlined on that napkin four years ago.

“It’s all about the children,” Pemberton says. “It’s simply that the research we’ve done and gathered guides us to providing them with high-quality instruction. But it starts and ends with the kids.” ✕

*Brandon Breslow contributed to this report.*

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**Related website:**  
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**— Principal Mary Ann Alonso**  
*Benjamin Franklin Elementary*



*Benjamin Franklin Elementary School Principal Mary Ann Alonso with some of her students.*

*Jocelyn Nerey watches over her students on the playground at Coral Park Elementary.*

