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Press Release

Grant Funds Study to Improve Learning Skills of Incarcerated Youth

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The Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice is collaborating with Georgia State University in a one-of-a-kind study to find the best way to improve the literacy skills of students in juvenile facilities.

Funded by a \$2.9 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Project LIBERATE (Literacy Instruction Based on Evidence through Research for Adjudicated Teens to Excel) is a four-year study to determine the comparative effectiveness of three methods of literacy instruction. The study could help develop a national model for teaching reading, writing, and spelling to middle school aged children in a juvenile justice setting.

“Much has been learned in recent years in teaching elementary school level literacy, but little is known about struggling middle school readers, particularly those who are incarcerated,” said David Houchins, principal investigator on the study and Georgia State University associate professor of special education. “Thanks to Georgia’s Department of Juvenile Justice, we will be able to target this population and bridge that gap.”

The grant, which comes from the Institute of Education Science, an office within the U.S. Department of Education, is the only one of its kind in the nation. The research is being conducted at the Bill Ireland Youth Development Campus (YDC) in Milledgeville.

“It’s an honor for us to be chosen to do this,” said Jack Catrett, DJJ associate superintendent. “The Department of Juvenile Justice is committed to educating the youth in its care, and this study provides an opportunity to find ways to improve the reading skills of incarcerated youth in Georgia and the rest of the country.”

Estimates suggest 45 percent of incarcerated students in Georgia have disabilities. No data are available regarding comprehensive literacy instruction for these students, which is why Georgia State and the DJJ took on the project.

Houchins and his co-investigator, Kristine Jolivette, associate professor of special education at Georgia State, selected two research-based literacy programs to compare against the DJJ’s current reading and language arts curriculum. One method is the “Direct Instruction” program, which uses scripted and explicit instruction of reading, writing and spelling. The other approach is the “Strategic Instruction Model” that teaches mega-cognitive skills, focusing on writing and comprehension.

After assessing students’ current literacy levels and training educators in the instructional methods, DJJ teachers in September began instructing 150 students ages 12 to 16, who are reading at least one grade level behind their peers. Students are receiving two hours a day of specialized reading and language arts

instruction in one of the three instructional methods. Over the next four years, students will continuously enter and leave the project. The research should be completed by summer 2012.

Project LIBERATE builds on the ongoing collaboration between Georgia State University and DJJ, which have partnered for previous reading education studies at the Sumter and Bill Ireland YDCs.

“Education is a top priority for the Department of Juvenile Justice,” said DJJ Commissioner Albert Murray. “We are proud to have the opportunity to participate in developing a potential new education model for juvenile offenders.”

The Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice is Georgia’s 181st school district, and has accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

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