

# Molding Master Teachers

*By Martin Merzer*

How an innovative University of Florida graduate program is developing and retaining master teachers who enrich students, inspire colleagues and rededicate themselves to a noble profession.



“Even in the most trying times, amid the most difficult circumstances, there is a generosity, a resilience, a decency, and a determination that perseveres; a willingness to take responsibility for our future and for posterity.”

— PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA, FEB. 24, 2009

## Preface

The educational leadership programs that serve as the centerpiece of this report could not be possible without the support and leadership of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, which has forged a path for children's advocates in the state of Florida and beyond.

**Rodney Watson is a teacher.** He came to it later in life, after 15 years of breaking rocks in a quarry. He loved his classroom work, but he felt the frustration, the isolation, the insecurity so common in his profession. Nearly half of all new teachers give up and leave the profession during their first five years on the job. Resource shortages are a major factor, but there are others. “Nothing contributes more to the dropout rate than the feeling that you’re on an island,” Watson says, “that you are unappreciated and your work is not affirmed.” That is no longer the case for Watson. Now reenergized, now re-dedicated, he remains a teacher – and has emerged as a teacher leader – at Village Oaks Elementary in Immokalee. Watson: “Finally, I’m feeling confident in what I do, confident in my teaching, confident that I belong in my profession and with my students.”

**Michelle Toral is a teacher.** She drives more than an hour each way between her home in a comfortable Miami suburb to Lillie C. Evans Elementary School in the poverty-scarred heart of Liberty City. Two years ago, in only her second year of teaching, Toral was sensing trouble. “I was that teacher you hear about,” she says. “I came to work. I did my teaching. I went home. No one realized my leadership abilities.” That has changed. Toral: “I coach and facilitate different protocols here now. I’m in charge of our faculty meetings. And I’ve become so much more effective in my own practice.”

**Gwen Green is a teacher.** And she is the mother of a teacher. And both of them are inspirations, and both have come a long way. Green began her contact with the Collier County system as a school-bus driver. Then, she earned a General Education Degree. Then, she earned her Bachelor of Science degree. Then, at the age of 48, she became a teacher, now working with fourth graders at Highlands Elementary in Immokalee. But it still isn’t enough. Green: “It’s a thirst for knowledge and I’m not finished yet. I’m just not filled up. If I’m still being enlightened, I can enlighten my students better, because this isn’t just about me – it’s about what flows out of me to them.”

What these teachers have in common with each other – and with a growing number of other Florida teachers – is participation in an innovative, big-bang-for-the-buck, job-embedded graduate program. It was developed by The Lastinger Center for Learning, housed in the University of Florida’s College of Education and its School of Teaching and Learning.

We’ll get to the details in a moment, but first know this: During a moment in time when everyone is compelled to extract maximum value out of every dollar, public or private, this program already is delivering that value – and on a scale that begs to be widened.

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“We know how to develop master teachers. We’re doing that right now and we do it better than anybody. We truly believe this work is transformational for teachers, and we know it can scale to thousands and thousands of teachers.”

— DON PEMBERTON, PH.D., DIRECTOR OF THE LASTINGER CENTER



## A blueprint for training high-quality teachers

The inquiry-based program has three overarching goals: to create “master teachers,” to mold teacher leaders who share their newfound knowledge with peers who are not in the program, and to develop teacher researchers.

In many ways, it is a blueprint for training and retaining high-quality teachers – and for invigorating an increasingly demoralized workforce.

“We change the way you teach, improve the way you teach,” Pember-ton said. “This is the cutting edge for developing teachers in America. I’m convinced that America is chasing after what we have here.”

Twenty-six Florida teachers already have graduated from the three-year-old program, their skills sharpened, their masters (or in some cases, specialists) degrees in hand, their bank accounts unimpaired because tuition is free. Now, 171 teacher/students from Lastinger-partner public schools in Alachua, Collier, Duval, Miami-Dade and Pinellas counties are enrolled, with more on the way.

All are rededicating themselves to their profession and their classrooms – which improves student achievement and elevates the teacher retention rate – and all are influencing hundreds of colleagues in their own and neighboring schools, essentially morphing from isolated and often surprisingly shy individuals into educational Johnny and Jane Appleseeds.

Alberto Carvalho, superintendent of the sprawling and under-funded Miami-Dade school system, examined the program in action at Lillie C. Evans and emerged as a strong supporter. “What I saw there exemplifies exactly what we represent and what we need,” Carvalho said.

## Improving student achievement

Of paramount importance: Standardized test scores strongly suggest that students of Lastinger-trained teachers are clear beneficiaries of the program.

One study, conducted even before the job-embedded program gained traction, found that students in Lastinger-partner elementary schools scored

significantly higher on the mathematics FCAT (Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test) for three straight years and on the reading FCAT during two of those three years than students in non-Lastinger control schools.

“We see student learning in the significantly improved FCAT scores of our partner schools in comparison to matched schools,” said Philip Poekert, Ph.D., a “professor-in-residence” who guides and counsels Lastinger teacher/students in Miami-Dade.

“Most of all, we improve the future prospects of children who see that learning doesn’t end after grade school or high school or even college,” he said. “After all, their teacher is still a learner, and the professor-in-residence that comes to visit their classroom is their teacher’s teacher.”

Alyson Adams, Ph.D., the program’s director, candidly says this to incoming teacher/students: “I don’t care if you get smarter. You will, but this is not about that. This is about becoming a leader so you can improve your school and your students can improve. This is about your school and your team.”



## Retaining committed and effective teachers

The significance of this cannot be overstated, especially now.

It is difficult to conceive of a public policy more myopic than one that slashes resources for educating our children. Yet, sadly and to everyone's regret, that is what we have.

Programs such as these, however, provide a safety net of sorts – for our children and our nation and our society, of course, but also for government officials and agencies charged with ensuring that our children receive the education, the foundation, they deserve.

Magdi Castañeda, Ed.D., who helps oversee the program in Miami-Dade County, experiences the upside every day, especially when it comes to the crucial matter of retaining committed, effective teachers.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics and researchers elsewhere, almost half of all teachers quit during their first five years, and the problem is particularly acute in urban and rural districts. In some cases, schools serving predominantly minority populations lose 20 percent of their teachers every year.

“We have some brand new teachers, who were in a classroom only one year, who may have left the profession already if it weren't for our program,” Castañeda said. “They say it themselves. I've had conversations with teachers who said, ‘I can't take this any more. It's just so hard.’”

That's where the Lastinger Center's “Teacher Leadership for School Improvement” program comes in – as a multi-faceted improvement and support system.

Established in 2002 and originally endowed by University of Florida alumni Allen and Delores Lastinger, the Lastinger Center for Learning partners

## How it works

**In a nutshell, this is how the job-embedded program works:**

- Teachers who apply and are selected are shaped into a cohort, generally consisting of several dozen colleagues from their school and nearby schools. Each cohort is overseen by a professor-in-residence, someone like Castañeda or Poekert in Miami-Dade and Sylvia Boynton, Ph.D., in Collier and Pinellas, who serve as teachers and mentors, motivators and educational cheerleaders.
- The selection process is rigorous. In addition to strong GPA and GRE scores, applicants are expected to exhibit a profound passion for teaching and a commitment to excellence, to embrace diversity and to demonstrate an appreciation for new, creative, collaborative approaches to their challenging and vital jobs.
- During the 2 ½-year program, the teacher/students earn 36 credits in courses that are conducted online and – importantly – on site at their schools or nearby schools, in what the experts call a “blended delivery” model.
- This is no walk in the educational park. The courses are research-based, demanding, firmly grounded in the practice and context of teaching, and they are fully accredited. Try these course titles on for size: Guided Teacher Inquiry. Differentiated Instruction. Data-Driven Decision-Making. You get the idea.

with foundations and other groups that focus on enhancing early education and the practice of teaching in

elementary schools, particularly those in impoverished areas and with large populations of minority students.

## Team approach helps teachers in the trenches

But several key differences differentiate this from other graduate teaching programs.

For one thing, this is not an individual activity. The cohort works as a team with a clear and direct focus on classroom practice and on improving student results. Participants examine and reflect upon their own practice as they collect evidence of student learning and share and apply their newly gained knowledge with other team members.

Virginia Blackburn, a teacher with 22 years of experience at Highlands Elementary in Immokalee, already had a masters degree and was reasonably happy in her work, but she felt an itch.

“The itch was to bring recognition and professionalism to the profession itself,” she said. “To take it where it needs to go. We're the ones in the trenches. Where do we need to go? What do we need taken care of, so we can take care of our students?”

“I could see there was a movement going,” she said about the Lastinger Center program that helped her earn a specialists degree, “and everyone was excited about the opportunity to learn more and help the community.”

In the end, it really is about the students and the community.

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“The fact that the program is job embedded, allows more relevance. What college teaches is theory, which is great, but in reality, most teachers don’t really figure it out until they’re in the classroom.”

—SEAN KINGSLEY, HIGHLANDS ELEMENTARY PRINCIPAL

talking about what it means in this community,” said Watson, who also teaches in Immokalee. “This community deserves teachers who are as well equipped and well trained as they can be. That benefit to this community can’t be quantified.”

### Job embedded

Importantly, because this program is primarily job-embedded, teachers immediately put to use their theories, their objectives, their learning. This is not dry theory. This is theory and learning that is immediately applied.

“What you learn in an afternoon, you use the next day in the classroom,” Pemberton said.

That was a major selling point for Sean Kingsley, the principal at Highlands Elementary.

“The fact that the program is job embedded, allows more relevance,” he said. “What college teaches is theory, which is great, but in reality, most teachers don’t really figure it out until they’re in the classroom.”

“This is a relevant, real world situation. That’s why we’re so excited about it. When they’re done, they’re really accomplishing something.”

### The inquiry method

In many cases, the teacher/students research issues, questions and concerns that occur to them as they teach. They call it an “inquiry,” and it forms a central element of the program.

“An inquiry is basically like doing research in your own classroom,” said

Toral, the teacher at Lillie C. Evans, who we met earlier in this report and who appears on this report’s cover with one of her math students. “You come up with a ‘wondering,’ something you’re wondering about.

“Maybe it’s a new strategy that everyone’s talking about,” she said. “How is it going to benefit my students? I can give them a pre-test, use the strategy and then give them a post-test, and I can see how effective it might be.

“Research is great, articles are great, but that doesn’t mean all of that will work in every classroom with every group of students. A lot of the time, I’m not even done with my lesson plan and it’s like, ‘OK, never again. Or maybe next time I’ll do this differently.’”

### Learning communities

Toral and the others immediately share their learning with the rest of their cohorts and with teachers who are not enrolled in the program. They do this through seminars, meetings, online forums, and “professional learning communities” that they form with other teachers.

“Even though we have six or seven people here with the advanced degrees, we are all learning from them and that’s what makes the program so powerful,” said Dorkas Howard, the principal of Village Oaks Elementary in Immokalee. “The new strategies the teachers are learning are integrated into the system. It enhances the students. It enhances the staff.”

Howard knows something about motivation and achievement. She wears a button that reads “WIT.” She puts it on “every day, just like my shoes.” What does it mean? “Whatever it takes,” she said.

### A free master’s program

What does the program cost? From the perspective of the teacher/students, essentially nothing. Every participant receives a full scholarship, valued at about \$17,000. They pay only about \$150 per semester for books and fees.

The scholarships are funded by the Lastinger Center, generally through a patchwork of foundation grants, federal Title 1 money and school district budget stipends. In Miami-Dade, for instance, nearly all of the funding comes from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, through the Ready Schools Miami consortium. In Duval County, most of the money comes from the school board. The time is right for a more consistent, sweeping funding approach, but more about that later.

In return for these scholarships, teacher/students agree to remain in their Lastinger-partner schools for the duration of the program and at least another two years. In most cases, these tend to be inner-city or high-need schools that are especially worthy of the best, most committed teachers possible.

### Making a stand

“These are teachers who say, ‘I will make a stand here for five years,’” Pemberton said.



More details about the job-embedded program are available at: <http://education.ufl.edu/centers/Lastinger/developingjob.html>

The program and the commitment it encourages and requires are truly transformational – for teachers, for their colleagues, for their school principals, and most importantly, for their students.

Let's start with the teachers themselves. And let's start with this stipulation: They deserve wide access to this program and to any program that helps them enhance their own education and sharpen their skills and better their lives.

Idealistic. Committed. Altruistic. Choose your adjective, but it is difficult to spend any time in our schools and not come away without knowing – as deeply as you know anything in this world – that these are people deserving of assistance.

They should be crushed by the steadily increasing weight of the challenge and, truth be told, some are. But most are not – though the battle to maintain morale is a constant.

### **Supporting teachers in high need schools**

They teach. They mark papers. They create lesson plans. They reach into their own pockets and pull out hundreds or even thousands of dollars every year to buy their students paper and pencils, folders and sometimes even books. (How did we allow this to become so common that we hardly even notice it any more?)

And here and there, they find the support they need. In some cases, they stay after school and gather on weekends to attend training sessions organized not by their school systems but by their peers, increasingly under the auspices of programs like this one.

Michelle Toral is one such person. She will graduate from the program in May, but she already serves as a teacher leader at Lillie C. Evans Elementary.

It doesn't get more inner city than this. The school faces an empty lot, pockmarked with broken bottles and other litter. The breeze carries sand through the neighborhood. A trash and recycling center stands nearby.

Though some signs of housing renewal are evident, many homes are abandoned, their windows shattered or boarded. Single-parent families abound, and hunger and health care are issues. A sign in the assistant principal's office reads: "Good morning. Let the stress begin."

Maintaining the attention of her 19 second-grade students during a math lesson is a full-time job all by itself, something akin to herding kittens. One child sits in an isolation corner; others fidget; a few seem sleepy, their atten-

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—RODNEY WATSON, VILLAGE OAKS ELEMENTARY, 5TH GRADE TEACHER



tion unfocused, at best. Toral fixes one rather active student with a stare, what teachers call, “The Eye.” A little later, she says: “I want everybody sitting, with their eyes on me.” They comply, somewhat reservedly.

Yet, here, at this school, an American flag flies high above the entrance. One sign near the front entrance reads, “Home of The Lions;” another, “Title I In Action.” Certificates of achievement are proudly displayed in the office.

Oh, by the way. During the past six years, Lillie C. Evans, under the leadership of Principal Reginald Johnson, who grew up in the neighborhood and attended the school as a student, has achieved two state-endorsed A grades and four Bs.

### Teachers blossom

Johnson attributes much of that success to Toral, two other teachers who entered the program, and the many

teachers those three have influenced.

“They blossomed under this program,” Johnson said of the trio. “They took the challenge and they became leaders of this school. The need is so deep in inner-city schools, high-need schools. I’m very confident that they made a positive difference in this school and with these students.”

Blossomed? This is what he means, and it applies to most of the teachers in the program.

Toral: “I remember my first meeting about the program with Magdi and Mr. Johnson. He pointed to me and said, ‘She’s under cover over there in the corner. She’s just sitting over there quietly, but we know, we know, she has much more to offer.’”

### Affirmation

Rodney Watson had a very similar experience. He’s the former quarry worker who now teaches 20 fifth graders at Village Oaks Elementary in

Immokalee.

One sign in his classroom, patterned after a road sign, reads, “No Slacking Any Time.” Another: “Kids At Work.” Outside his classroom, one student chalked this on the walkway: “Mr. Watson is my best friend.”

Now, Rodney Watson is one of the school’s most valued teachers and it’s hard to believe that he had a confidence problem, but he did.

“I sort of had a complex, coming from a blue collar background,” he said. “I knew in my mind that what I was doing, I was doing well, but I always felt like maybe I didn’t have it all together, that I maybe wasn’t the teacher I thought I was.”

That began to fade when he learned about the Lastinger Center and entered the program.

“I heard that UF was going to be helping teachers who wanted to get a masters degree and my ears perked up at the mention of UF,” said Watson,



“What I want out of my students is curiosity, wonderment. I want them to know. I want them to constantly ask me, ‘Why? Why is that so hot? Why is that so cold? Why is this green? Why do I have to read that?’ I want them to ask me those things because they’re constantly wondering. That’s how they discover knowledge.”

—GWEN GREEN, 4TH GRADE TEACHER

who proudly flies a Gator flag over his desk. “I’ve loved UF and the Gators forever. I’ve always coveted a degree from that university, to be honest with you, but I never thought I would get one.”

He did, graduating in August 2008 with his masters from UF, under the Lastinger program.

“What interested me at first about it was that I heard it was strongly job-embedded and I would be working

“My example is echoed by each teacher who has gone through this program,” Watson said. “You would hear of improved practice, you would hear of more specific examples of student impact, and you would hear how they’ve grown through the program.”

### Passion for teaching

That is certainly the case for Gwen Green and her daughter, Rachel Patter-

lean on in the school, rather than just teachers at your grade level. It opened the door of communication and sharing. There are times when teachers just want to be tucked away in their classrooms and just do their thing, and we’ve been able to share a lot of things and find new strategies that help everyone.”

Gwen, fourth grade: “I’ve always loved teaching, but this is looking at research in a different way, by looking at a question, being able to lay it out there in front of my children, my students, so they can see it.

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### Recruitment aid

Their principal, Sean Kingsley, said the program has helped him recruit and retain teachers, no easy task in a place as remote as Immokalee, an agricultural community just northwest of the Everglades and 50 miles northeast of Naples.

“When I interview teachers, I talk about where we are,” Kingsley said. “We’re an hour away from civilization. I hate to put it that way, but we are. But I also let them know that if they want to further their career, we have this program available.”



closely with my colleagues,” he said. “That’s what drew me to it, but I didn’t realize how powerful that would be.

“Going through this program, working closely with other teachers, sort of gave me that affirmation that what I’m doing is good work and what I’ve been doing all along was good work.

son. Their stories are remarkable, worth a full report on their own. But this is the important part: They are great teachers, master teachers, and they owe some of that to the program.

Rachel, third grade: “It really opened the door for us to have more of a network of teachers you could



During a recruiting trip a little over a year ago, one prospect immediately accepted his offer of employment, based on his description of the job-embedded masters program. “So, that was it,” he said. “We had her. She’s been here a year now.”

Which is really the point. In many cases, the best teachers become bored or burned out, sometimes leaving the profession entirely, sometimes moving into administration. There is nothing shameful about either, and a terrific teacher could well become a terrific administrator. But even if he or she does, a terrific teacher is now absent from the classroom.

### **Offer this program to every county**

This program is addressing that and it can scale up quickly and dramatically. It attracts teachers and it improves

teachers and it keeps them engaged in teaching, and that helps students at a moment in time when we must do everything we can to improve their educational experience.

This is particularly true in the inner city and in rural areas. Many of these children already have so much working against them – broken homes, poor health care, poverty, the entire catalog of disadvantage that is familiar through great swaths of modern America.

But get them to love or like or even just tolerate and respect the process of education, and maybe you have a shot.

“Here’s the thing,” Gwen Green said. “Most all teachers want to get that masters degree. This Lastinger program, I don’t know who started it, but the governor or someone needs to keep going with it.

“He also needs to be sure that every county in this state is offered this same program, every teacher in this state is offered this program, not just in elementary, but anybody who wants to go further in their education.

“That’s one of the greatest things that the State of Florida can do for education – to help educate teachers who do not have to go completely over their heads in debt or time or travel to do it,” Green said.

“The more they can help us to do this, the more we will have to give to our students.”

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*Martin Merzer, formerly The Miami Herald’s senior writer, recently retired after a 35-year career at the newspaper and at The Associated Press.*

# The Florida Master Teacher Initiative 10,000 Master Teachers for Florida's Schools

**The Goal:** Develop master teachers for Florida's highest need schools to improve student learning and school performance. Teachers agree to remain in the schools for a minimum of five years. Give teachers what they most want: The opportunity to improve their teaching and their students' learning within the context of their own schools, working alongside fellow teachers and professors-in-residence.

**The approach:** Job-embedded, research-based, practice-centered master's degrees, free, to teachers in Florida's highest need schools. The job-embedded master's degree is delivered online and on site to groups of teachers from the same school. This custom-developed master's degree is designed for practicing teachers. What teachers learn can be applied immediately to improve student learning and school performance.

**The teacher commitment:** Teachers must make a five-year commitment to a particular school. And they must pass the GRE. The program is a powerful path to populate Florida's most challenging schools with master teachers who are passionate, committed, and eager to teach.

**What the teachers get:** The master's program is free to teachers except for books and fees. In a world of too much to do, teachers in this program have a chance to spend real time to discuss best practice with the best. Once they get a master's – in about two years – they also get a raise. Each would be encouraged to apply for National Board Certification (which, of course, means another increase.)

**The university difference:** Brings the state higher education system into the classroom to support teacher practice and student learning. No other state would have such levels of direct university engagement in public education.

## What makes this effort special:

- Gives practicing teachers access to the best research and the most effective practices – its focus is to improve instruction continuously.
- Offered to groups of teachers from the same school. The teachers take online classes together and have a professor-in-residence who visits them in their schools providing onsite coaching and instruction.
- Develops teacher leaders for the highest-need schools in Florida. These master teacher leaders share their practices and approaches through the use of "learning communities" with other faculty in their schools.
- Recruits, retains and develops master teachers for Florida's highest need schools.

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