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A Bush-Style Education School in Texas

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DALLAS, Nov. 2 - Seven years ago, a group of public school superintendents from the Dallas area, concerned over a growing achievement gap in reading between white and minority students, asked Southern Methodist University to create a graduate program to help narrow the difference.

From that request, a new school of education was born, and the forces behind it say there may be nothing quite like it elsewhere in the country.

The S.M.U. School of Education and Human Development, which opened this fall with 1,100 students, teaches programs that are aligned with President Bush's hallmark education program, No Child Left Behind, and that the school says are based on the kind of research protocols used in science and medicine.

"There's a real need for this here," R. Gerald Turner, the S.M.U. president, said, referring to a metropolitan area that grew to 52 percent Hispanic this year, with major problems for English-learning children. "Hopefully, we can send out people with the right tools in education to deal with the problems they find."

While Southern Methodist's approach puts the university on the front lines of national reform efforts, it also makes it a target for criticism. Especially vocal are educators who contend that No Child Left Behind, which requires schools to show annual progress in reading and math, focuses too narrowly on testing.

Critics also say that dependence upon one method of teaching may be too rigid for contemporary classrooms.

"It's very dangerous and wrong-headed," said Deborah Stipek, dean of the school of education at Stanford. "If you think about what we want our students to do and what teachers want to prepare them for, issues like social development are really important, as well."

But officials at S.M.U., as well as Education Secretary Margaret Spellings, an architect of No Child Left Behind and an adviser to Mr. Bush since he was governor of [Texas](#), argue that the persistence of the achievement gap is evidence enough that the nation needs new teaching methods that have proved effective.

"S.M.U. is approaching this in a formalized, overt way," Ms. Spellings said in an interview here before visiting the campus on Wednesday to commemorate the school's opening. "In that way, it's very unusual for the way we prepare teachers around the country. By now, I don't think we have the luxury of focusing on things other than those that produce results."

Addressing an audience of education officials from across the state, she said: "When it comes to doing what works, S.M.U. is among the best in the world. I'm confident that your new school will graduate not only some of the most talented teachers in the profession, but also some of the most prepared for real-world classrooms."

S.M.U.'s new venture concentrates on reading - preparing young children to read and helping children who are struggling to learn English.

Dr. Turner called it a "niche offering" among schools of education, created, he said, "because there's a need to help teachers around here, and the problems are pervasive enough that we can make a difference with it."

While statewide test scores last year for third-grade reading show that schools in the Dallas area are outperforming those in other regions of the country, serious gaps remain. About 20 percent of all black and Hispanic children, compared with 5 percent of white students, failed to meet the standards.

To identify teaching techniques that might lift the stragglers, S.M.U. is using federal and private grant money to conduct research in local public school systems that mirrors the kind of experiments conducted in other fields. The research uses control groups and takes into account a wide range of variables to determine which instructional methods work better than others.

The research results are then systematically applied to course work.

While new teachers everywhere enter their classrooms armed with teaching theories, officials here say the S.M.U. approach replaces what Ms. Spellings called in her speech “good intentions, abstract philosophies, untested theories and sometimes harmful fads” with methods of instruction based on proven results.

Robert A. Patterson, dean of the new school, said, “We saw this as a perfect way to respond to a real need,” adding, “It focuses on a particular area, reading, that’s the foundation of the learning process.”

The confluence of Southern Methodist’s approach to teaching reading and No Child Left Behind was both coincidental and, perhaps, inevitable.

Early in Mr. Bush’s first term as Texas governor, the university received a \$1 million grant from Texas Instruments, which is based in Dallas, for science-based research into improving the effectiveness of local Head Start programs.

When Ms. Spellings moved into the White House as a domestic policy adviser in Mr. Bush’s first term and began developing No Child Left Behind, the federal Education Department sought out two S.M.U. professors to contribute.

In addition, Mr. Bush’s wife, Laura, is an S.M.U. graduate and a member of the university’s board.

“We started out well before the Bush program,” Dr. Turner said. “As it came through, our programs were taking shape, and N.C.L.B. was consistent with them.”

Critics, however, remain skeptical about S.M.U.’s approach. They say that other schools of education use science-based research and blend it with other approaches to give their graduates more tools.

“I question the degree of certainty of the research,” said Kenneth M. Zeichner, associate dean for the school of education at the University of Wisconsin at Madison and co-author of a report for the American Educational Research Association on teacher education that concluded that all sorts of research are necessary to determine what works best in the classroom.

Mr. Zeichner described teaching to No Child Left Behind as “a focus on low-level” learners, devised only to improve test scores, adding: “Not that it’s not important. But kids in urban schools deserve the same high-quality education that kids get in affluent areas.”

Deborah Loewenberg Ball, interim dean of the University of Michigan School of Education, said she favored even more federal spending for science-based research but questioned the wisdom of tying teaching methods to a policy that could change in the next election.

“You want to turn out quality teachers,” Ms. Ball said, “but I don’t think you do education around a single policy.”

Ms. Spellings disagreed, saying that major overhauls of teacher preparation and accountability are the only way to improve learning.

“People want to see results,” she said, adding, “If S.M.U. builds a better mousetrap, other people are going to want to build it, too.”