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Graduate Student Adjusts Her Role in Special Education During Coronavirus Crisis

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Office of University
Communications

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Laura Shipman, '20, Teaches at Haywood County, N.C., Charter School

Gardner-Webb University graduate student Laura Shipman finished this unusual school year with creativity and collaboration. When schools around the country transitioned to remote learning because of the coronavirus pandemic, personnel at the charter school where she works quickly formulated a plan.

Shipman completes her add-on licensure for executive leadership studies and school administration from GWU this summer. She wears three hats at her school located in Haywood County, N.C.—director of Special Education (SPED), Multi-tiered System of Supports coordinator, and middle school Exceptional Children’s (EC) teacher. The kindergarten through eighth-grade school is five years old and the county’s only charter school. It serves 309 students with 26 staff, one administrator and five teacher assistants.



Q: How did your school get the necessary materials to students after the transition to remote learning?

Shipman: Within a couple of hours (after the announcement) the head of school and all the lead teachers met to come up with a plan to get electronic devices to the students and how to serve small children who aren’t independent on the computer. Teachers arrived at the school and made preparations for signing out electronic devices and began to make (printed) copies of assignments for students who didn’t have access to a computer or internet. The next day, the teachers and staff set up a drive-thru pick up for students and families. By the next day, the students attended their first online virtual class meetings with their teachers. The different grade levels worked together in collaboration with Special Education (SPED), art, music, drama, physical education, and outdoor education teachers to develop a schedule that would be feasible without overworking both students, parents, and staff. It was a challenge, but in the long run, so many of our students excelled.

Q: What was the biggest challenge you overcame to educate students during this time?

Shipman: Due to the laws that govern students with disabilities and how their Individualized Education Plans (IEP) are written, we had to make sure that the students' education was equitable with their general education counterparts. The SPED teachers worked with the general education classroom teachers to collaborate on the amount of daily instruction or assignments the students were given. The SPED teachers also worked with the general education teachers on teaching packets that were modified or differentiated for students. We also used Zoom to have IEP meetings so that IEP's did not go out of compliance. As the SPED Director, it was my responsibility to keep the administration and the SPED teachers informed of the guidance given by the N.C. Department of Public Instruction Exceptional Children's Department as well as the Office of Special Education. These instructions helped us stay compliant with IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Act), NCLB (No Child Left Behind) and ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act). It was a challenge, but everyone rose to the occasion and showed what rock stars they are!

Q: Why did you want to be a special education teacher?

Shipman: I became an educator by accident. I was a cosmetologist and earned a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration from Gardner-Webb. I had planned on using my degree to open my own shop. Instead, I worked as a cosmetology teacher at the high school and college levels. I encountered students with IEP's. In my training, I did not have the tools to teach students with disabilities. I entered school to complete my Master of Arts of Teaching in Special Education—Moderate to Learning Disabled. I enjoyed the experience and the students so much, that I moved full time into Special Education. I believe that all students can learn regardless of ability. As a teacher, it is my responsibility to find the students' learning modality and strengths and use it to teach the student. I am N.C. highly qualified in special education, both in general curriculum and adaptive curriculum. I have worked in elementary, middle, and high school in self-contained classrooms, resource room, and inclusion. I have been teaching for 10 years.

Q: Why are you working on the add-on licensure for executive leadership studies and school administration at Gardner-Webb?

Shipman: I want to make a difference in education. As an educational leader, I will be able to facilitate progression for both teachers and students. Through the add-on licensure program, I now have a greater understanding of what goes on behind the scenes, so to speak. Before being in the program, I didn't really understand some of the decisions that were being made. Now with the knowledge I have gained, I can see the why. The professors at Gardner-Webb have practical experience in education and are available to help problem-solve and guide the students when they encounter issues in their classrooms or school. They are willing to work with you if you need clarification. As an alumna, I would recommend GWU to anyone who would like to advance their education.

Learn more about the School of Education.