

HEALTHY and READY



UA students including Gissella Gonzalez assist teachers in Tuscaloosa's 26 pre-K classrooms.

Through the Tuscaloosa Pre-K Partnership, UA students deliver an array of academic and medical services to preschoolers and their families.

BY OLIVIA GRIDER | PHOTOS BY ELLEN JOHNSON, KELSEY DAUGHERTY AND MADALYNN YOUNG

The premise of the UA/Tuscaloosa Pre-Kindergarten Partnership is that all children deserve to enter kindergarten healthy and ready to learn. Through a nationally unique collaboration between The University of Alabama and Tuscaloosa City Schools, the initiative identifies academically at-risk 4-year-olds and provides them and their families with health and education services. UA students are involved in much of this work, which often relates to their studies.

Because many kids in the program have not had access to consistent health care, UA students offer health screenings to its approximately 450 children each year.

Lauren Longobardo, a senior from Raleigh, N.C., majoring in nursing, helped conduct health screenings and educa-

tion sessions as a service-learning component of the NUR 422 Community Health Nursing course. She says the experience made her appreciate the medical care she has received throughout her life. "I learned how health care is not truly accessible to all socioeconomic groups as well as how to provide patient teaching in a way that ensures the information is understood and retained, even by those of a young age," she says.

In addition to nursing students, those studying education, social work, music, human development, medicine and more participate in the nine-month, full-day pre-K program, which spans 26 classrooms at 11 schools. During the 2016-17 academic year, seven UA students volunteered in classrooms as academic assistants. Several UA

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service-learning classes, including SPE 100 Exceptional Lives in Society, partnered with the Tuscaloosa Pre-K Initiative. UA also dedicated 10 federal work-study awards to students who committed to serving a minimum of 10 hours per week in pre-K classrooms during the 2016-2017 school year, bringing the total number of awards to 82 since 2008. The initiative offers broad health services through partnerships with UA's School of Medicine, Family Medicine Residency and Capstone College of Nursing.

UA nursing and medical students provide free physical examinations, and UA and Shelton State Community College nursing students take vital signs, screen children for anemia and measure levels of cholesterol, lead and glucose in their blood. Capstone College of Nursing students also teach mini-lessons on healthy eating and exercise.

Lucas Urbi, a senior from Williston, N.D., majoring in nursing, says students rotate among stations in order to practice several nursing skills. "I feel prepared as a nurse, having been involved in programs such as these," he says.

Dr. Paige Johnson, assistant professor of nursing and co-instructor of NUR 422 along with Dr. Michele Montgomery, says helping with pre-K screenings can have a far-reaching impact on future health-care providers. "It is my hope that they will see the health disparities and issues that are prevalent just around the corner from our University," Johnson says. "I hope that they will understand the importance of primary prevention, health education and health promotion."

Medical students assist with health screenings as part of their pediatrics clinical rotation, and a resident physician from The University of Alabama Family Medicine Residency attends each screening to check any abnormal health findings and make recommendations for follow-up care.

After each screening, the Tuscaloosa City Schools dis-

trict sends letters to parents with information about their children's health and referrals to physicians, dentists and social workers, as needed.

Other health services provided through the UA partnership include hearing screenings and FocusFirst high-tech vision screenings sponsored by the Center for Ethics & Social Responsibility (see article on page 28). Students have screened more than 2,900 pre-K children for vision problems since the program began. Impairments are typically detected in 11 percent of children, all of whom receive free follow-up care.

Education and human development majors and other students also gain real-world experiences to use in their professions. Students assist teachers with daily activities in the pre-K program's classrooms. UA School of Music and music-education students regularly visit pre-K classrooms to provide introductory musical instruction, and students with the UA Speech and Hearing Center provide speech therapy to children in the program.

Lia Jones, a junior from Greenville, S.C., majoring in management and minoring in communication studies, works in a pre-K classroom for 10 hours each week. She says she often applies what she has learned about verbal and nonverbal communication when observing and interacting with the children. "These kids are developing personalities of their own, and it's interesting to see what they learn and how they convey it," she says.

Jones also says her time in the classroom will translate to her career. "The ability to communicate with and work with all kinds of people from different backgrounds is a great tool to have, and working at this school has given me that experience," she says.

For more information about the UA/Tuscaloosa Pre-K Partnership, contact Lindsey Thomas at lmthomas@ua.edu or 205-348-6491.



Medical screenings include basic exams, blood tests and hearing screenings.