

# REFOCUSING ON AUTISM



*UGA Special Education Professor David Gast works with both undergraduate students and teachers already in the classroom to create a cohort of educators better able to contend with the unique difficulties of teaching children with autism*

BY CATHARIN SHEPARD

**F**or the past 17 years, special education professor David Gast has dedicated his life to preparing University of Georgia students for the challenges of teaching children with a wide assortment of mental disabilities.

But with retirement on the horizon, the highly respected scholar has shifted his attention to working with not only his young undergraduate students but also teachers already in the classroom, creating an intensively trained cohort of educators who are better able to contend with the unique difficulties of teaching children with autism – developmental disorders which impair a child’s communication skills and ability to interact.

When Gast entered graduate school in 1971, he intended to work primarily with children with autism. However, the special education field of the ‘70s was exploding with reams of new information, leading the then-doctoral student down many different paths. But in the last few years, Gast has returned to his academic roots.

“As I approach the end of my career, I



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want to get back to what I really wanted to do when I got into the field back in the early ‘70s,” said Gast. “These last 10 years of my career, I want to go back to where I started and really focus on these kids with autism.”

To help deal with the soaring increase in the number of children diagnosed with autism, Gast developed a partnership with Gwinnett County Public Schools in suburban Atlanta in 2003.

Since its inception, the Collaborative Personnel Preparation in Autism (COPPA) graduate program has prepared dozens of elementary school teachers to better work with children with autism. COPPA was originally funded by an \$894,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Education and has recently received a second federal grant of \$793,000 to expand its work through 2011. The partnership is led by Gast and Deanna Luscre, who

coordinated the Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) program for Gwinnett schools from 1996-2003.

The project could not have come at a better time. Diagnoses of children with ASDs are growing as much as 17 percent per year, according to U.S. Department of Education statistics. It is estimated that the prevalence of autism could reach 4 million Americans in the next decade.

The newly expanded program will offer training in partnership with Clarke, Cobb and Forsyth county schools, in addition to Gwinnett schools. Sixty percent of the funding will be used to support fellowships for graduate students interested in careers in special education with an emphasis in ASD. Teachers from other school districts are also encouraged to participate in one or more of the courses that will be offered.