

The June Harless Center for Rural Educational Research and Development, named in honor/memory of the late wife of James “Buck” Harless, June Montgomery Harless, one of West Virginia’s most avid supporters of education, was established in 2000 with a mission to provide leadership in education initiatives for rural West Virginia educators and students and offer a support system that addresses educational problems, sustains school improvement, and provides positive growth in all educational factors.

The Center, located in the College of Education at Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia, has a rich history of successfully sponsoring a variety of educational programs. In the eleven year history of the June Harless Center many partnerships with local schools and school districts have been formed to support and advance student outcomes. At this time, the June Harless Center manages projects in 27 of West Virginia’s 55 county school districts. Activities in the state range from an NSF funded Appalachian Math Science Partnership (AMSP) grant focused on improving student outcomes, a Professional Development Schools Partnership (PDSP) among 18 rural schools focused on enhancing professional development for both practicing and pre-service teachers, to exploration of alternative methods for identification of potentially gifted students from poverty, a collaborative between the Ruby Payne aHa Process organization and the June Harless Center. Other program enhancement projects of the Center include professional development sessions for educators on standards based mathematics, kit-based science, global studies, reading and language arts, world languages, vertical and horizontal teaming, empowering practices, technology integration, parent programming, pre-engineering and robotics. The Harless Center also facilitates on-line college courses for high school students, after school clubs and summer camps.

A partnership with the CREATE Lab at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, has enabled the Harless Center to provide a PreK-12 venue for the innovative educational products of the CREATE Lab. The CREATE Lab personnel at Carnegie Mellon University develop the products, and the Harless Center provides the format for verifying their educational value and providing the staff development and dissemination of the products to teachers and students throughout West Virginia.

One of the first initiatives of the June Harless Center was the establishment of a model demonstration site composed of a kindergarten and first grade classroom in 2001 in an old, unused public school building in Wayne County, West Virginia, which is a rural, economically depressed county. It remained in this location as it grew to include grade two. The focus was delivery of research based practices in reading and mathematics and demonstrating these practices in the classrooms through videoconferencing to rural schools across the state and Appalachian Region. In Fall, 2007, the model moved into one wing of Kellogg Elementary, a large nearby public school. The focus for the extended kindergarten through fifth grade 21st Century Model Site was to provide a laboratory for delivering all disciplines in an integrated format through research based strategies and to promote positive character education through an assimilation approach into “how we do business.” The model laboratory provided a venue for researching, implementing, observing, and evaluating teaching strategies and student outcomes.

One of the most recent initiatives of the June Harless Center was the establishment of the Marshall University Early Education STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) Center (MUEE STEM Center) in the Fall, 2010. The Center is located on the Marshall University campus and in partnership with the Cabell County School System serves three and four year old children who enter into kindergarten in the Cabell County System at the

age of five. The MUEE STEM Center also serves Marshall University as a laboratory in which individuals involved in the study and education of young children can observe and/or participate in a variety of ways. The classroom provides an observation room for parents and research purposes where observation can occur without interrupting the natural activities of the children. Students and faculty members can observe, participate, interact, conduct research and complete practicum experiences.

The Center is accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). The accreditation seal indicates that a program has undergone a rigorous validation inspection to authenticate that it is offering high-quality experiences to children.

The West Virginia Department of Education supports the Early Education STEM Center in curriculum and early childhood standards implementation. As a model site for the WVDE, the MUEE STEM Center serves as an outreach pre-k program to counties across the state.

The eleven full time Harless Center educators provide expertise to the Center in various capacities; however, the actual staff of the MUEE STEM Center is composed of a Director, Studio Coordinator, Studio Educator, Lead Teacher, Foreign Language and Global Studies Coordinator, two full time graduate interns, and three undergraduate interns. The MUEE STEM Center has a Board of Directors, an Advisory Board, and a Faculty Advisor from the College of Education.

The mission of the MUEE STEM Center is to provide a holistic 21st century early education program, weaving STEM content into play-based learning. The goal is for children to develop problem-solving skills, channel creativity and self-expression, develop effective self-help skills and positive health attitudes, habits and healthy food choices, engage in STEM

experiences on a daily basis, develop social, emotional and coordinated motor skills, and embrace multicultural and world language diversity.

The Marshall University Early Education STEM Center prides itself on offering model, high-quality early education experiences based on a philosophy influenced by the Reggio Emilia Method which includes the following premises:

- The program exists to promote a child-initiated, teacher-supported, negotiated curriculum in which children's curiosities about the environment are supported and encouraged.
- The program is based on a co-constructivist theory that promotes a dual relationship between teacher and child in which both explore, experiment and problem solve issues and questions that are relevant to daily life.
- The program is intended to meet individual development, regardless of special needs. Each child is an individual with specific needs in all developmental levels.
- The environment promotes a nurturing experience in which children have the opportunity to explore, manipulate, and investigate in a safe environment.

The MUEE STEM Center exists to focus on this time in child development as a unique and opportune stage, worthy of its own distinctive approach to environmental, inquiry-based, hands-on, concrete learning. The children who progress through the program are developing a foundation for the life-long experience of learning and living in today's global society.

The MUEE STEM Center values healthy choices and lifestyles. The kitchen staff, manager, head cook and interns in the dietetic program, is devoted to ensuring that children are provided a healthy breakfast, lunch and snack that includes fresh foods which promote a healthy

lifestyle. The children and staff in the MUEE STEM Center prepare for meals together and eat “family style.” Cooking is incorporated frequently into the classroom as well as curricular activities that encourage healthy choices. This is critically important due to the increasing rise in obesity related illnesses such as diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease in the United States and especially the Appalachian Region. Children learn to try a variety of fruits, vegetables and ethnic food options. A playground garden provides opportunities for the children to explore and learn how to plant, care for and harvest fresh items from the garden.

Parents are a major part of the MUEE STEM Center. We value parental involvement, support and voice. Family/children activity nights and training sessions are offered frequently to parents and caregivers by the staff and other university personnel. Many of the topics have a health promotion theme including advice on coping with proper food portions and food choices as well as actual cooking with young children. Scheduled and unscheduled conferences and other formats for constant communication have been initiated at the MUEE STEM Center. A website, “My Day” (a daily publication e-mailed to parents), phone calls, home visits, weekly updates on the music and literature focus, and a message center promote parent voice and communication efforts. “Message From Me,” an e-message center developed at the CREATE Lab at Carnegie Mellon, allows children to take pictures of daily activities, record a message and send the picture via text or e-mail to their parent/s or teacher, will be incorporated into the classroom in January, 2012.