

One idea for closing the achievement gap

By **LAURA FEDERICO**
of The Montclair Times

It's a program that seems to benefit everybody. The Center for Community-based Learning at Montclair State University gives Montclair public school teachers a chance to give struggling students the extra attention they need.

It gives working parents the security of knowing their children are not only safe and occupied after school but are improving their scholastic performance as well.

It gives undergraduates at Montclair State University an opportunity to earn credits while gaining assistant-teaching experience.

Best of all, it gives underperforming students a chance to get a jump on that evening's homework – and hopefully, to catch up to their classmates in reading and math.

Although enrollment in the free after-school STARS program is not limited to English as a Second Language, minority or economically disadvantaged students, most of the students who participate in it fit those descriptions. Established in 1995, STARS is one of the initiatives the district has developed to try to close the persistent academic achievement gap. It was designed in response to research that suggests that certain strategies – for instance, low student-teacher ratios, a nurturing environment, and enrichment activities to supplement daily coursework – have been relatively successful across the nation in narrowing the gap.

Thus, on some days at some STARS sites, the teaching and tutoring staff actually outnumber the students. Organizers of the STARS program currently assign 100 Service-Learning MSU students to 12 different school and



Staff photo by Susan Zeilhofer

ONE-ON-ONE LEARNING: Montclair State University student tutor Lorena Pang assists a STARS student with reading.

community sites. There, about 125 Montclair public school students between grades one and five receive tutoring on a one-on-one basis, or in a small-group setting.

On a recent afternoon at Bradford school, a handful of students read books aloud and silently, then broke into small discussion groups, under the supervision of two teachers, a teaching assistant, and three MSU undergraduate tutors. This year's books, provided free to the students to take home at the end of the year, were supplied by a grant from the Montclair Fund for Educational Excellence.

"We're reading *Junie B. Jones Is Not a Crook*," reported Renee Powell, Bradford third-grader. "The teachers helped us choose it. Now we talk about it and do different activities on it"

Asked if she enjoyed reading, Powell responded, "Now I do. I read on my own; I'd call it a hobby now. When I have to go on long drives, I take a book with me. This program showed me reading was really cool."

Another Bradford student,

Cheyenne Coley, concurred. "I think it's absolutely excellent," she said. "I loved to read." But unlike Powell, Coley said, "I always loved to read."

But she did not always love math. "I like it better than I used to now," she said. "Sometimes I still don't like it, but it really helps you learn to come here."

After participating in the STARS program for a year, she said, "Before I felt like I was not a good student, but now I feel like I'm great."

Christine Aquino, MSU tutor, was enthusiastic about the benefits of the program for children. "It's really helpful because it reinforces their schoolwork. And when they see new people coming in, it energizes them. They want to impress you."

A sophomore anthropology major who does not necessarily intend to go into teaching, Aquino has been pleasantly surprised by how receptive the students are to tutoring. "I'd thought they might be more resistant, but they aren't at all," she said.