



## Church's enrichment program boosts grades

Published: Wednesday, January 12, 2011, 3:37 PM Updated: Wednesday, January 12, 2011, 3:45 PM



By Anne Ruisi -- The Birmingham News



UAB student Leigh Ann Bradley works with Artasia Parks, 10 at New Rising Star Missionary Baptist Church. (The Birmingham News, Jeff Roberts)

For the first time since fifth grade, Keondra Ferguson, a student at Ossie Ware Mitchell Middle School, is on the A/B honor roll. It's an achievement the seventh-grader credits to an after-school enrichment program at New Rising Star Missionary Baptist Church in the East Lake Community.

"I understand math more. The teachers help me with reading too," Keondra said. "I like that they work with us (individually) and in a group. We help each other."

Forty children in grades K-8 are enrolled in the Rising Stars Educational Enrichment Program, said Cheryl Lee, executive director of the church's nonprofit New Rising Star Missionary Baptist Church Community Support Corp.

The corporation seeks to show love for its neighbors by enhancing their quality of life. The Rising Stars program is one facet of that goal. About 30 to 31 children attend each day for an afternoon of homework help, educational enrichment and play time.

"We want learning to be creative and fun," Lee said, and noted students receive a lot of individual attention.

"Individual enrichment is the philosophy. That's the key - the individual," she said.

That individual attention comes from two certified teachers, one in math, one in reading, and a group of education students at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

The college students volunteer their time as part of their degree requirement, said Michele Jean Sims, an associate professor at UAB's School of Education who is in the Department of Curriculum Instruction.

The school has a "mission to work with urban schools and raise the level of excellence," and UAB-trained future

teachers work in a variety of settings, such as Bush Middle and Robinson Elementary and in the Tarrant School System, Sims said.

While the program targets children not performing at grade level, it's not a requirement. High achieving students also participate. The cost per child is \$40 a week; those who can't afford it get a scholarship funded by UAB's Benevolent Fund, Wachovia Bank and other community partners, Lee said. Neighborhood associations in the area assist with the program and Birmingham Weed and Seed provides the services of the certified teachers.

The younger students mainly come from four schools that partner with the Rising Stars: Gate City, Barrett and Robinson elementary schools and Ossie Ware Mitchell Middle School, Lee said. Each school is in the program's service area, which includes the Brown Springs and Gate City and East Lake neighborhoods.

The program provides student transportation from their schools to the church's Brown Springs campus. The students get a snack and their time is structured. Doing homework is first on the agenda and assistance is provided to those who need it. This helps the adults identify areas in which a child might need academic enrichment, which takes up the second part of the afternoon.

"We also look at report cards, test assessments and teacher evaluations" to make sure student each receives the academic help needed, Lee said.

While the children are the main beneficiaries of the Rising Stars program, the college students gain insight and experience. They're applying proven learning methods and strategies they've studied in class to real-life situations, Sims said. Students said that's valuable.

"It's a great experience," said Adam Mahan of Oneonta, who is working on his master's degree in secondary education/social sciences. "You see the growth of students over time . . . It's really a great feeling to see progress and know you are making a difference."

After homework and academic enrichment, there's time for play. Character development and nutritional training are also thrown into the mix.

Parents said they are happy with their children's progress.

"It's been wonderful," said Alicia D. Haynes, whose daughter, You'Lesha Lyde, 13, is enrolled and has shown dramatic academic improvement. "Last year it was Ds and Fs. This year, so far, it's Bs and Cs."

While the Rising Stars program follows the school calendar most of the year, there are day camps incorporating fun and academic enrichment over spring break and for eight weeks in the summer.

"We're here to be of service to the community," Lee said. "Our concern is to show love of Christ in a real world situation."



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