

Reading program inspires students

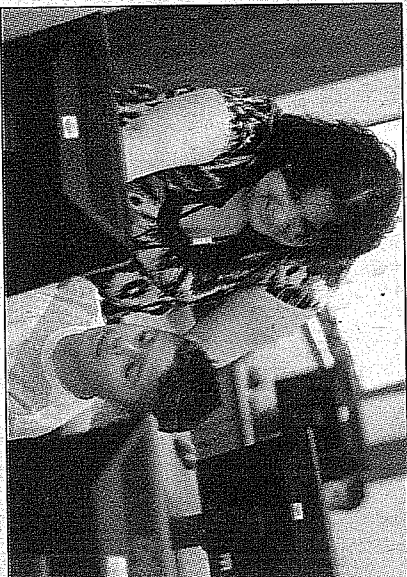
By **Michelle Carter**
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Reading is the window to learning; it is the most important of the three R's of education.

Many students in the Lompoc Unified School District (LUSD) who were lagging behind in reading last year are doing better now, thanks to a web-based, self-paced program called Reading Plus.

Reading Plus is part of a larger program called "United for Literacy" that

was introduced in 2009 by United Way and the Santa Barbara County Education Office with a goal of cutting the county's high school dropout rate by



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Instructional assistant Cernaïda Garcia helps student Anthony Ocegüera with a question during a Reading Plus Program session at Fillmore Elementary School.

50 percent by the year 2020.

"The dropout rate is not the crisis," said Eddie Taylor, CEO of United Way of Northern Santa Barbara

County. "We've got an education crisis."

In LUSD, where most schools have been designated Program Improvement because of low scores on state math and reading tests, Reading Plus was introduced in 2010 and is used at Fillmore, Hapgood and Clarence Ruth elementary schools, Vandenberg Middle School, Lompoc Valley Middle School and the Lompoc Adult School. It is also used at the Lompoc Boys & Girls Club.

Taylor said research shows that by fourth grade, students are reading to learn their other

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subjects, therefore, children who are ill prepared will begin to fall behind in areas like social studies and science.

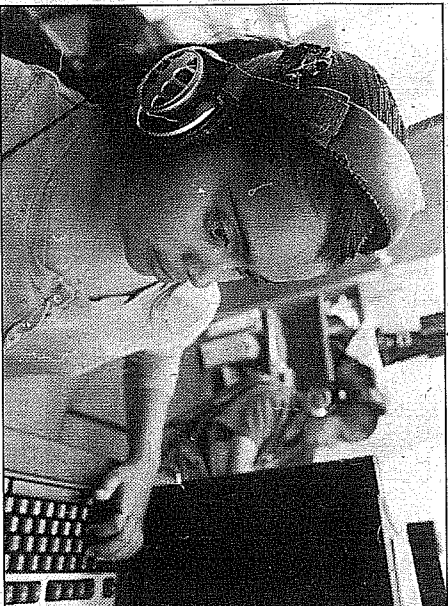
In Santa Barbara County, "40 percent of high school graduates entering community colleges are not reading at high school level," said Taylor.

"If we instill a love of reading and writing, a lot of other problems will take care of themselves," he said.

Third-grade teacher Linda Hogan and Computer Lab Instructional Assistant Cernaïda Garcia run the Reading Plus program as an after-school and before-school intervention program at Fillmore.

"It's a really good program that is making a difference for a lot of the kids," said Hogan.

Fillmore runs three sessions a day for students in fourth, fifth and sixth grades. Sessions begin at 7:15 a.m., before class, then two additional sessions are available after the regular school day ends. Hogan said each session serves about 30 students, about 85 students total for the



Mark Brown/Staff

Esperanza Zepeda works on a computer during a Reading Plus Program session at the Lompoc Valley Boys & Girls Club.

Hogan said her students are averaging an increase of about two grade levels since their initial assessment testing.

"I love the program," said third-grader Brenda Rodriguez as she finished her written assessment of the past year as a Reading Plus student. Many of her classmates expressed the same feelings in their essays, mak-

ing comments such as "It's the best thing that ever happened to me," and "Reading is so much funner."

Other students said they can now read at higher levels and with greater understanding.

Hogan said her students are "more ready to begin the day" after their early morning reading exercises.

At the Lompoc Boys & Girls Club, Taylor worked

with Grants Director Dena Kern to get the program started there.

"We've seen several success stories," said Kern, who added the club had a full class during the school year and now has a waiting list for the summer program. Kern's organization has its own name for its literacy campaign, called "Project Learn."

A chart on the back of the door in the small computer lab charts each student's progress. According to Kern a child's progress depends on how eager the child is to participate.

According to the website, to reach the desired reading level increase of one and a half to two grade levels, a student should participate three to four times a week for 40 to 45 minutes a day.

For more information on the Reading Plus program go to www.readingplus.com.

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