



Stockton graduate students work with Pleasantville students in groups, teaching life skills. At left, Donte Valentine, 10, makes a booklet that identifies safe and unsafe everyday items.

# Which one's the student?

## Pleasantville children help teach degree in special ed

By DIANE D'AMICO  
Education Writer

Melissa Bisono had never made cookies before, so the four-ingredient recipe was perfect for the Pleasantville fifth-grader's first attempt at baking.

"We read (the recipe), then we mixed everything together," said Melissa, spooning the very last bit of batter onto the cookie sheet. "And we added chocolate chips."

The cookies — chocolate chips and all — were part of a delicious life-skills lesson developed by teachers in Shelly Meyers' class in Richard Stockton College master's in special education program. As students like Melissa, students with moderate learning disabilities, cooked, cut, pasted and talked, the Stockton teachers worked alongside them, tracking the success of their lessons.

The Pleasantville students take the life-skills lessons on Mondays at the Atlantic County ARC, with the help of a \$5,000 grant from Stockton.

"Life skills don't get offered much to students with disabilities," Meyers said. "Everyone is so worried about the academics and test scores, but these are skills these students will need in life."

Besides, Meyers, a former teacher and special education supervisor, wanted to give her students a hands-on way to develop and self-evaluate lessons as part of their course work. Many of Meyers' students already have teaching jobs, and some already work with special-education students.

Harvey Kesselman, dean of the School of Education at Stockton, said with 16 percent of all students in the state diagnosed with some type of disability, it's very likely most regular classrooms will have at least one special education student.

"Most teachers are getting extra training," he said. "We want to be sure that training addresses the issues teachers have in the classroom, such as behavioral, assessment and using technology."

Data from the state Department of Education indicates the number of certifications in special education has more than doubled in the past four years, from 1,717 in 2005-



Graduate student Brian Basner of Northfield works with Melissa Bisono (10 yrs of Pleasantville) on cooking skills at ARC of Atlantic County in EHT, Monday November 9 2009. Graduate students from the Stockton College special education program work with Pleasantville students teaching life skills to children as

Staff photo by Ben Foglietto

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06 to 4,169 in 2008-09. The extra certification is especially valuable for elementary-level teachers, making them more marketable to potential employers in a tight job market.

"If they want to go on to do graduate work, we always suggest special education," Galloway Township Superintendent Douglas Groff said. The district has a tuition-reimbursement program, and six teachers are enrolled in the Stockton program.

"We are trying to keep more spe-

cial education students in the district, and there are so many more students with autistic tendencies, that all teachers benefit from the training," Groff said.

One such teacher is Heather Suckiel, who works with disabled preschool children in Galloway Township. Suckiel said she's glad she started teaching before she went back for her master's because it has helped her identify what she needs to learn to help the children.

"This is a great program for the children, but also for me," she said

of the Stockton life-skills project. "We need to incorporate it more because parents are not all doing it."

In creating the program, Meyers partnered with Pleasantville school supervisor of special education Maurice Lesser and Nicole Terzakis, social services director at The ARC of Atlantic County, where there are kitchen and laundry facilities.

During lessons, groups of Meyers' students focus on different areas: job skills, family skills, communication skills, safety and cooking.

In one group, students talked

about conflict resolution, discussing how they might handle an argument over a candy bar. They also created books about things that were safe and not safe. They talked about jobs they might like, and outlined what skills those jobs would require.

"This is really a chance to see how children learn in different ways," said Barbara Shumski, a teacher at Texas Avenue School in Atlantic City.

Rowan University requires all undergraduates in its teaching program to take six credits in special education, and also offers extra endorsement and post-baccalaureate programs, including a new autism specialty.

"It has grown by leaps and bounds," said Jay Kuder, chairman of the special education department at Rowan.

Stockton's Meyers invited parents to a recent session so they could see what their children were learning, and maybe duplicate the lessons at home.

Meyers said some parents were disappointed at first that the program wasn't more academic, but she wanted to show parents that other skills are also important.

The students made four-ingredient cheesecake tarts and showed off their finished project.

"He was begging me to sign up," Racquel Valentine said of her son Donte, 10. "He doesn't really say much. He's in his own world a lot. But he keeps wanting to come here, so that's good."

"It's good that you come, too," Meyers told her. "It shows him you think it's important."

Some parents participated, and others just watched.

"I like to learn with her," Sigrid Rodriguez said of her daughter Joelizabeth, 9. "And I like it when a person takes the time to help her, like they're doing here. She always comes home Mondays happy and says good things."

"She would come here every day."

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### Sinking scholars?

Education Commissioner Lucille Davy announces 55 rising scholars — and none are from Atlantic, Cape May and Cumberland counties. Education writer Diane D'Amico asks why in

her blog at:  
[www.pressofac.com/blogs](http://www.pressofac.com/blogs)

## Education by the Numbers

Source: The Center for Education

39

Number of states with public charter schools, plus the District of Columbia

5,043

Number of charter schools in the United States in 2009.

1,536,099

Number of students enrolled in charter schools in the U.S.

860

Number of charter schools in California, the most of any state

## Schools get \$12 million in grants

Twenty-five school districts and community groups have received \$12 million in federal funds to operate 21st Century Community Learning Centers at schools around the state. The centers provide after-school programs. They are run by:

- AtlantiCare Behavioral Health in five Atlantic City public schools and Our Lady Star of the Sea School
- Cumberland Empowerment Zone at Landis School in Vineland, Lakeside School in Millville, Port Norris School in Commercial Township and Cherry Street School in Bridgeton