Improving Academic Success

We know that when children have a good foundation built on quality education, they have a much better chance of succeeding as adults. We also know that the future of our families, our businesses and our community depends on preparing a new generation for success.

Through innovative initiatives, like United Way Bright Beginnings and United Way Reading Together, through mentoring, peer-to-peer tutoring, after school and character development programs and other academic supports, we are helping young people in our community succeed in school and in life.
“Two years ago, our school was the lowest performing elementary school in the district. This year, we were recognized as the campus with the greatest gains in fifth grade reading. That says to me and my team that we need to expand United Way peer-to-peer tutoring to other grades, so that we can see a broader impact.”

Principal, Hartsfield Elementary

Success in school and in life starts early

If children do not enter school ready to learn, read proficiently by fourth grade and transition in and out of middle school, they are unlikely to graduate on time, go to college or vocational school and positively contribute to their communities.

The Reality

1 in 5 students in the Greater Houston area does not graduate from high school.
50% Less than 50% of Houston’s third graders have the reading skills necessary for success in fourth grade.
51% of children in Harris County live in low-income families.

UNITED WAY BRIGHT BEGINNINGS

53% of United Way Bright Beginnings centers have achieved national accreditation, compared to approximately 5% of all child care centers in Houston.

Over 10 years, United Way Bright Beginnings alumni scored higher than their peers on 45 of 51 standardized tests.

In third grade, United Way Bright Beginnings alumni scored “advanced” on their state reading exams at nearly twice the rate of their peers.

UNITED WAY READING TOGETHER

95% of teachers report that United Way Reading Together has improved their students’ reading fluency, comprehension and grades.

100% of teachers report that United Way Reading Together has improved students’ attitudes about reading.

UNITED WAY BRIGHT BEGINNINGS

Compelled by overwhelming research indicating that investing in early childhood education yields tremendous returns through greater success in school and life, United Way and ExxonMobil created United Way Bright Beginnings in 2002.

Early experiences shape whether a child’s brain develops strong skills for future learning. In fact, 90% of brain development happens before kindergarten. United Way Bright Beginnings reaches at-risk children during this critical time.

United Way Bright Beginnings is an innovative early education program designed to help children from lower-income families achieve social, emotional, physical and cognitive milestones and enter school ready to succeed.

Over the past 12 years, United Way Bright Beginnings has given more than 6,600 children the strong foundation they need to start and succeed in school. As United Way Bright Beginnings students have entered elementary school, they have excelled, outperforming their peers on achievement tests, demonstrating greater language abilities, and earning higher math and reading scores.

UNITED WAY READING TOGETHER

Students become better readers with support from volunteers

A key predictor of future academic success is the ability to read proficiently by the fourth grade. Unfortunately, many students are behind in reading and those who cannot read proficiently by the fourth grade typically don’t catch up.

In 2012, United Way of Greater Houston launched United Way Reading Together to ensure that students are reading proficiently by the time they enter fourth grade. The innovative initiative connects second- and third-grade students with adult volunteers who help them improve their reading and comprehension skills. The reading buddies spend one hour each week, for a period of eight to 12 weeks, reading with a student. The extra support and encouragement helps the students catch up with their peers.

Since its launch, United Way Reading Together has grown from two to five schools and has tripled the number of volunteer and student pairs to 150.

“It was fun and I got to know my buddy. She was funny and caring. She had faith in me and she helped me with words when I was struggling.”

Anthony, Buffalo Creek Elementary

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Peer-to-peer tutoring boosts students’ reading skills and confidence

We know that some students learn best when tutored by their peers. In fall 2013, United Way launched peer-to-peer tutoring as another means to achieve academic success. The yearlong peer-to-peer tutoring program trains academically-borderline students to tutor students who are a year behind in reading. Both the fourth- and fifth-grade tutors and the second- and third-grade tutees benefit from the experience.

As the students work on improving their skills, they each gain a boost in confidence and feel more connected to school. The tutors also develop leadership skills while helping their younger peers. During the 2013-14 school year, more than 150 students participated at schools in the Houston, Aldine and Spring Branch school districts. Researchers at Texas A&M University Education Research Center are evaluating the program to track student progress from year to year.

“It’s always fun and exciting. This is the MOST EXCITING PART OF MY DAY!”
Brian, tutor, Kujawa Elementary

United Way summer learning initiatives

Collaborative projects prevent learning loss

During summer vacation, many students tend to forget some of the academic skills they learned in the previous school year. Research shows that students from lower-income neighborhoods experience the greatest decline when they re-enter the classroom in the fall.

United Way invests in collaborative projects that focus on preventing summer learning loss by engaging more than 1,500 students in activities that reinforce academic skills.

“My students are more motivated to learn. Their attitudes about reading have changed for the better.”
Teacher, Buffalo Creek Elementary

SUMMER LEARNING

More than 120 students used critical thinking and STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) skills to design and engineer more than 1,400 digital games. At the end of the summer, they faced off in a Digital Game Jam, a race to create an original game in less than an hour.

More than 400 students repurposed household materials to learn about electricity, motion and STEM concepts.

100 summer book clubs kept students engaged in reading at 33 sites across our community.

PEER-TO-PEER TUTORING

94% of teachers say that peer-to-peer tutoring has improved their students’ attitudes about reading.

83% of teachers reported improved reading skills among peer-to-peer tutoring students.
Access to books can make a difference in reading skills

Children who lack access to books usually lag behind in reading. Providing children with reading materials is crucial because it helps them develop basic reading skills, such as letter and word recognition and comprehension. Unfortunately, lower-income children are less likely than their middle class peers to have access to books. Access to books in the home, schools and libraries can also vastly improve children’s reading performance and skills and their attitudes about reading, as well as improve the length of time they read, resulting in high academic achievement. Studies also show that access to print materials leads to more shared reading between parents and children.

13 books → 1 child
In middle-income neighborhoods, there are 13 age-appropriate books to every one child.

1 book → 300 children
The corresponding ratio in lower-income neighborhoods is one book for every 300 children.

Parents
Parents play an important role in their children’s education. After months of community conversations, United Way of Greater Houston decided to invest in high-quality parent education and engagement programs at reading sites to educate and encourage parents to participate in the academic success of their children.

“It is very important that we, as parents, educate ourselves. It is up to us whether our children achieve their dreams, and we can do it if we dedicate the time they need and also educate ourselves.”
Guadalupe, participant in parent education class

In 2013-14, United Way provided a variety of programs to schools in our reading programs, including family learning events, parent classes and in-depth case management. We supported 2,500 parents and 3,500 children through these services. As a result, those parents feel more comfortable in their child’s school and feel better prepared to support their children in school.

10,000 books!
United Way helps students build their own libraries by giving them books to take home. Students receive books through United Way Reading Together, peer-to-peer tutoring, Summer Learning Initiatives and our annual Reading Rally. United Way distributed more than 10,000 books to students last year.

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Thanks to United Way, last year:

55,580 children flourished in quality child care
166,600 youth benefited from character development programs
22,760 children benefited from after-school programs
86% of students in United Way programs were more successful in school
31,250 students were mentored by caring adults

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