



United Way of Dane County

## SCHOOLS OF HOPE ELEMENTARY & ACHIEVEMENT CONNECTIONS

Impact Report



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**UNITED WAY**  
Dane County

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*Note: The Schools of Hope Middle School program, which was not funded by AmeriCorps, continues as of the writing of this report to be operated by the Urban League of Greater Madison with major financial support from United Way of Dane County, Madison Metropolitan School District, and the City of Madison. The middle school program continues to provide individualized literacy and math tutoring to nearly 1,000 students annually at 11 middle schools in Madison and Sun Prairie.*



## Introduction

Schools of Hope and Achievement Connections were longtime community efforts aimed at closing achievement gaps and improving academic performance in literacy, algebra and geometry.

Schools of Hope began in 1995 as a civic journalism initiative led by the *Wisconsin State Journal* (WSJ) in partnership with CBS affiliate WISC-TV 3 and grew into a community-wide effort lasting three decades. Convened by United Way of Dane County and in partnership with school districts, teachers, teachers union representatives, higher education and nonprofit organizations representing communities of color, the collaboration demonstrated that trained tutors working in concert with classroom teachers and a consistent, research-based curriculum could measurably and meaningfully support student literacy growth. Achievement Connections grew out of this effort, proving the model could also promote student success in math.

Reading at grade level by third grade is a strong predictor of future academic success in all subjects. Schools of Hope Elementary focused on elementary student literacy, particularly in the early grades, while Achievement Connections prioritized high school student algebra and geometry. Success in these gateway math courses is critical for high school graduation and prepares students for critical thinking and further study in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).

- **Schools of Hope Elementary** mobilized 462 AmeriCorps members and nearly 14,000 community volunteers to support more than 90,000 elementary school students.
- **Achievement Connections** mobilized 251 AmeriCorps members and more than 2,000 volunteers to provide algebra and geometry tutoring for more than 5,000 high schoolers.
- **Community investment** from United Way, federal AmeriCorps funding and the local community totaled \$15.2 million for Schools of Hope and \$7.4 million for Achievement Connections between 1995 and 2026.

Schools of Hope Elementary and Achievement Connections were both supported by United Way and scaled by AmeriCorps, an independent federal agency that funds community service projects across the country, including service positions for AmeriCorps members. Due to reduced federal support for AmeriCorps, which provided both programs sufficient funding to increase scale and scope, both programs ended August 14, 2026.

Schools of Hope Middle School, not funded by AmeriCorps, provides one-on-one and small group literacy and mathematics tutoring, and continues to be operated by Urban League of Greater Madison and supported by United Way.

This report celebrates the history and accomplishments of Schools of Hope and Achievement Connections. While these programs were not resourced to permanently close achievement gaps, they built a collaborative model with communities of color, working with educators, unions, school district leaders, AmeriCorps members, community organizations, community volunteers and children to measurably improve academic performance in literacy, algebra and geometry.

Confirming the emerging research that originally informed our approach,<sup>1</sup> we learned that trained tutors working in concert with classroom teachers and a consistent, research-based curriculum to

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<sup>1</sup> See p. 4 of this report.



support reading and math can materially support students' academic achievement. We hope these programs continue to serve as a model for the community's future efforts to ensure every child can thrive in school, career and beyond.

## Schools of Hope Elementary

### Program Inception

Schools of Hope began in 1995 as a civic journalism initiative led by the *Wisconsin State Journal* (WSJ) in partnership with CBS affiliate WISC-TV 3. Through feature stories, surveys and data analysis, Schools of Hope sought to raise awareness of issues in local public schools and help residents explore solutions.

"Madison's schools, our partners in cultivating our children, are facing some tough challenges," wrote WSJ Editor Frank Denton in a column on the project's kickoff: "How to deal with racial imbalances, how to pay the bills, how to work with their teachers and, most important, how to ensure academic success for all students."<sup>2</sup>

WSJ asked United Way of Dane County to partner on the project and convene local leaders. United Way President Leslie Ann Howard moderated the first meeting August 25, 1995, with members of the Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD) Board of Education, MMSD administration and the teacher's union, Madison Teachers Inc., joining the discussion.<sup>3</sup>

Support for the project grew, with parents, teachers and representatives of businesses, local government and nonprofit organizations joining the Schools of Hope Leadership Team providing insight and strategic direction. As this cross-section of the community continued to meet, the project highlighted growing racial disparities in student success.

"The racial gap in test scores is larger in Madison than any other Wisconsin school system that has a significant enrollment of African Americans," WSJ reported.<sup>4</sup> The paper noted the disparity in third grade standardized reading test scores – a key indicator of students' long term academic and career success – as particularly stark, with nine in 10 white students meeting the standard, compared to just over half of Black students.

When WSJ presented the data at a Schools of Hope Leadership Team meeting in spring 1996, Howard leaned over to 100 Black Men of Madison Founding President Enis Ragland and asked, "If I raise my hand and say United Way will jump on this to work for a solution, will 100 Black Men join us?"<sup>5</sup> Ragland agreed.

Howard and Ragland formed and co-chaired the Schools of Hope Minority Youth Achievement Committee focusing on boosting student achievement and shrinking the racial opportunity gap.

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<sup>2</sup> Denton, Frank (1995, August 27). City's schools need guidance from the people. *Wisconsin State Journal*.

<sup>3</sup> Moe, Doug (2022). *United Way of Dane County 1922-2022: Celebrating a century of innovation, collaboration and positive change*. United Way of Dane County.

<sup>4</sup> Hall, Andy (1996, April 28) Success for All? *Wisconsin State Journal*.

<sup>5</sup> Moe, Doug (2022). *United Way of Dane County 1922-2022: Celebrating a century of innovation, collaboration and positive change*. United Way of Dane County.



Original members included heads of City of Madison and Dane County government and representatives from Allied for Children's Education, Centro Hispano, Dane County Juvenile Court, Greater Madison Chamber of Commerce, Madison Area Technical College, Madison Jewish Community Council, MMSD, Madison Teachers Inc., University of Wisconsin –Madison, United Refugee Service, Urban League of Greater Madison, WISC-TV 3 and WSJ, as well as an MMSD high school student.

The committee identified eight factors that influence student success: cultural competency and diverse staff composition, class size, peer support, teacher support, family involvement, curriculum, school safety and homework. Alongside MMSD and University of Wisconsin–Madison, United Way staffed subcommittees for each focus area, gathering quantitative data and surveying teachers, parents, students, school district administrators and community-based organizations to develop a set of community-wide recommendations.

"We've learned that the most important factors that determine a child's academic success include an ability to read by third grade and to do algebra by ninth grade," a report by the Minority Youth Achievement Committee concluded.<sup>6</sup> They developed a goal to increase several metrics of success for students of color by June 2000, including meeting or exceeding state standards on the third grade reading test, and identified five strategies to get there:

- Test more third graders' reading levels, improve Kindergarten readiness and ensure students complete algebra before 10<sup>th</sup> grade.
- Encourage small class and school sizes.
- Use trained tutors working in concert with classroom teachers to motivate students to do schoolwork and see academic achievement as important, both in one-on-one and classroom settings.
- Implement a consistent phonics-based literacy curriculum with in-class assessments, and train teachers in how to teach reading based on that curriculum.

United Way zeroed in on the tutoring strategy, spurred on by research shared by Committee member and MMSD Psychologist Dr. Barbara Marwell showing that an eight-week tutoring program in New York using trained tutors working in the classroom with the curriculum and the teacher had a positive impact on children's reading ability.<sup>7</sup> United Way recruited 30 volunteer tutors to serve in the Lowell Elementary summer school and Atwood Community Center's Safe Haven program, with plans for expansion in the fall, and for MMSD and the UW-Madison School of Education to evaluate the effectiveness of the approach.<sup>8</sup>

United Way and MMSD co-wrote and secured a grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) to launch a VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) program to scale the tutoring program, seeking to leverage VISTA members to provide one-on-one tutoring while also recruiting, training and coordinating community volunteer tutors. VISTA, now part of AmeriCorps, is a federal national service program often described as the domestic Peace Corps. Members commit to 10 months of full-time service in exchange for a living stipend,

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<sup>6</sup> United Way of Dane County (1999). *Schools of Hope Minority Youth Achievement*.

<sup>7</sup> Moe, Doug (2022). *United Way of Dane County 1922-2022: Celebrating a century of innovation, collaboration and positive change*. United Way of Dane County.

<sup>8</sup> Hall, Andy (1997, June 10). Volunteers sought to help raise reading skills. *Wisconsin State Journal*, 1B.



health benefits and an education award that can be used to repay student loans or pay for future education.

Securing the highly competitive grant — one of only 16 awarded nationwide — was a testament to the program model's strengths, focusing on community collaboration, volunteer mobilization and effective coordination of tutoring services. The first Schools of Hope VISTA team was in place for the 1998-1999 school year.

The program's launch received significant public attention. A front-page WSJ article called for 400 reading tutors — “the largest volunteer recruitment drive in the 161-year history of public education in Madison.”<sup>9</sup> One week later, the paper reported a “deluge” of respondents: over 500 community members, including parents, retirees and university and high school students, had reached out to United Way to volunteer.<sup>10</sup> Businesses also offered their support, including Demco Inc., donating 1,200 books for distribution to students, expanding access to reading materials and supporting literacy development.

The VISTA program launched with a strong foundation, serving 18 MMSD schools with the highest level of students in poverty and establishing the infrastructure necessary to grow and sustain community-based tutoring services for decades. VISTA members proved to be a key factor in Schools of Hope's tutoring program's success, providing critical capacity-building resources that would lay the foundation for the program's eventual expansion.

## Promising Results

The early success of Schools of Hope established the synergetic results of bringing together communities of color, schools, nonprofits and volunteers, creating a sustainable framework to effectively address student literacy needs.

In its first year alone, the initiative achieved remarkable results. A total of 462 tutors were recruited, trained and placed in classrooms grades K-3 throughout the year to support reading. This included 350 tutors recruited through United Way's Volunteer Center and 80 America Reads work-study students from the UW–Madison, Edgewood College and Madison Area Technical College. More than 1,000 elementary school students received additional opportunities to strengthen their reading skills through volunteer tutoring support.

In the fall of 2000, a five-year progress report showed that since the WSJ launched its Schools of Hope project, the percentage of students not meeting state standards in reading had shrunk for all racial and ethnic categories, including from 28.5% to 16.38% for Black students, 22.5% to



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<sup>9</sup> Hall, Andy (1998, September 13). 400 tutors sought to teach kids reading. *Wisconsin State Journal*, 1A, 10A.

<sup>10</sup> Hall, Andy (1998, September 20). Hundreds hear call for tutors; Reading volunteers deluge schools. *Wisconsin State Journal*, 1A.



0% for Southeast Asian students and 9.7% to 2.9% for Hispanic students.<sup>11</sup> For United Way President Leslie Ann Howard, the results “demonstrated that our community can have an impact on important societal issues.”

Four years later, those early results held strong. MMSD data showed even greater progress had been made among Black third-graders, with the rate of those reading at “minimal” level on the primary language arts assessment falling to 5.1% by 2004.<sup>12</sup> Southeast Asian students maintained 0% of third-graders reading at minimal level; that number had risen slightly to 3.9% for Hispanic third-graders. White third-graders too had seen a drop in minimal reading scores since 1995, from 4.1% to 1.8%.

“So many students have been lifted out of the bottom category across the board that the racial achievement gap essentially has been eliminated in this one category in this one grade level,” WSJ quoted Howard. “This shows children of color can succeed in our schools, and our community can have an impact.”

Superintendent Art Rainwater told the WSJ that “for those kids for whom an ability to read would prevent them from being successful, we’ve reduced that percentage very substantially, and basically, for all practical purposes, closed the gap.” District officials considered Schools of Hope one factor contributing to these results, along with smaller class sizes, expanded teacher training and a focused literacy curriculum. Rainwater said while the district’s ultimate goal was to move all children into the top two categories (proficient and advanced), moving children out of the lowest category gave them a better shot at future academic success.

“It really is remarkable that the Madison School District is raising the achievement levels for all students, and at the same time they’re closing the gaps,” Dean at the UW–Madison School of Education Julie Underwood told the WSJ in 2006 following a presentation by the Wisconsin Center for Education Research (WCER) to the Schools of Hope Leadership Team.<sup>13</sup>

WCER’s results confirmed disparities between white and minority students at the lowest level of the third grade reading test had essentially been eliminated. Underwood said she’d heard of no other urban district so significantly reducing the racial achievement gap without letting the test scores of white students stagnate or backslide. WCER Director Adam Gamoran described Madison as bucking the national trend of growing racial inequality in school achievement.



Photo by Roger L. Turner.

<sup>11</sup> Gramling, Jonathan (2000, November 2). Report cards mixed on students of color. *Madison Times*.

<sup>12</sup> Erickson, Doug (2004, September 24). One racial gap has closed up. *Wisconsin State Journal*, A1, A9.

<sup>13</sup> Hall, Andy (2006, May 2). Work on education gap lauded. *Wisconsin State Journal*, B3.



## Expanding and Adapting

Since receiving its first VISTA grant in 1998, United Way of Dane County has served as the lead grantee for Schools of Hope. Beginning in 2005, the federal grant shifted to a cost-share model, with United Way committing local funding to ensure the program's continuation. Schools of Hope remained one of United Way's signature initiatives for more than two decades, with its Board prioritizing substantial financial support and staffing leadership.

From 2002 through 2018, United Way partnered with Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) of Dane County and later Centro Hispano to administer the program before bringing operations back in house in 2018 to keep the program running as Centro re-prioritized its strategies. During this time, the program recruited five new school-year bilingual AmeriCorps tutors to better meet the needs of the student population: between 1999 and 2009, the number of Hispanic students enrolled in MMSD schools grew 167%, with a 255% increase in the number of English language learners across all 16 Dane County school districts over the same time period.<sup>14</sup>

While the program initially served only MMSD, Schools of Hope leadership found that just as they were eager to expand the program's impact across Dane County, schools were eager to adopt the Schools of Hope model. Schools of Hope began serving the Sun Prairie Area School District in 2005, the Verona Area School District in 2006 and the Middleton-Cross Plains Area School District in 2010.

The program's tutoring capacity struggled to keep pace with rising demand. With nearly 900 students waitlisted in 2011, United Way was "in desperate need of volunteers."<sup>15</sup> Program Coordinator Kathy Hubbard pointed to an increase in teachers utilizing Schools of Hope volunteers in their classrooms as a main driver. "The teachers have told us they see changes in (students') behavior in the classroom."

In 2013, WSJ reported on the results of a 2-year study of Schools of Hope by UW-Madison researcher Annalee Good confirming that students receiving the full program — those working individually or in groups of two with a tutor for at least 15 hours of weekly sessions throughout the school year — made larger gains in reading than their peers.<sup>16</sup> However, just 8.3% of participating students received the full program the previous year.

Schools of Hope leaders acknowledged challenges administering the full program to students, including new school limits on the number of times and when students could be pulled out of core classroom instruction for tutoring, as well as limited volunteer availability during the prescriptive times allowed for tutoring. In 2015, Schools of Hope made significant efforts to adapt to these challenges, consolidating its MMSD school sites from 32 to 22 to deploy more AmeriCorps members and shift them from part-time to full-time schedules in the remaining schools. AmeriCorps members spent more time tutoring, from 5-8 hours a week to 15 to 20 hours a week, helping fill in gaps volunteers could not.

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<sup>14</sup> United Way of Dane County (November 2008). *Schools of Hope Mobilization Plan*.

<sup>15</sup> Defour, Matthew (2011, January 26). 'We are in desperate need.' *Wisconsin State Journal*

<sup>16</sup> Schools of Hope is working, should expand (2013, February 10). *Wisconsin State Journal*, E1.





In 2016, WSJ pointed to the re-emergence of the gap Schools of Hope had originally helped close: 58% of Madison's Black third-graders ranked "below basic" in English Language Arts, compared with 13% of white students.<sup>17</sup> The Schools of Hope team subsequently determined the program could have the greatest impact on students on the cusp of meeting literacy standards, as opposed to "minimal" readers who needed more intensive intervention. The program shifted its focus from lifting third-graders out of the lowest literacy ranking (who would be supported by school literacy specialists) to moving fourth-graders from basic to proficient.

In response to COVID-19 interrupting school and Schools of Hope practices in early 2020, AmeriCorps members expanded their activities beyond tutoring, shifting to provide virtual learning support in classrooms, creating student daily work checklists and assisting with basic needs drives at schools. This flexibility demonstrated the program's ability to quickly adapt to evolving community needs during an unprecedented time.

It also became clear during the pandemic that AmeriCorps members' living stipends failed to keep up with the rising cost of living in Dane County. A 2022 Schools of Hope Steering Committee identified pay as the single largest barrier to participation in the program. United Way chose to supplement members' stipends to enable the program to continue to attract and support talented, dedicated service members.

Over time, changes in the focus of AmeriCorps funding guidelines and declines in available funding led to decreased capacity to support multiple districts. When the program concluded in August 2026, Schools of Hope was serving only elementary schools in MMSD.

## Supporting Initiatives Developed

### Behavioral Health

Beginning in 2005, United Way joined school and community partners, parents and health systems in multi-year efforts to bolster access to behavioral and mental health services within the schools and community. These initiatives followed the Schools of Hope model of convening Leadership Teams to coordinate resources and monitor program implementation.

Community conversations on youth success centered around "disconnected" students who have lower attendance, involvement and sense of belonging at school. Disconnected Dane County middle and high school students on average reported not just lower grades and lower aspirations after high school, but also higher rates of substance use and thoughts of depression

<sup>17</sup> Erickson, Doug (2016, January 24). Success, but more needed; Effort has helped student scores, but a big racial achievement gap remains. *Wisconsin State Journal*, A1, A6.



and suicide.<sup>18</sup> Juvenile crimes were rising twice as fast as for adults.<sup>19</sup>

In 2006, United Way convened a group of community leaders in a Delegation on Disconnected and Violent Youth to identify strategies to improve truancy, dropout and graduation rates. The highest levels of anger, depression and anxiety among students were found in middle schoolers, putting them at risk of disconnecting from school. This led to a focus on interventions starting in 6th grade.

The Delegation's recommendations included investments to increase the early identification and treatment of mental health issues. United Way invested in the expansion of two school-based programs – Cognitive Behavioral Interventions for Trauma in Schools (CBITS) to provide screening and treatment for 6<sup>th</sup>-graders experiencing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and depression – and FACE-Kids to provide treatment and prevention group services to students with a range of mental health needs. Meanwhile, MMSD revamped and enhanced services to students and families.

MMSD's 9<sup>th</sup> grade truancy rate dropped by 42% between the 2005-2006 and 2009-2010 school years; middle and high school dropout rates also declined.<sup>20</sup>



### Summer Learning Loss

United Way co-created the Read Up! Summer Initiative in 2014 with the Madison Public Library, MMSD and the UW-Madison Morgridge Center for Public Service. Research showed summer learning loss in the early grades amplified achievement gaps for children from low-income families over time,<sup>21</sup> and that a voluntary summer reading program could prevent subsequent declines in reading achievement scores for children of all family income levels.<sup>22</sup> Children set reading goals for the summer and got to choose 5 free age-appropriate books to take home, engaging with University volunteers in literacy activities throughout the summer.

The Initiative launched at two MMSD Community Learning Centers, providing over 250 K-5 students with over 1,800 books. A 2016 analysis of students' reading scores found that more than 75% of Read Up! participants maintained or increased their reading levels over the summer, with 67% of participants maintaining or increasing reading scores the previous summer.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Dane County Youth Assessment (2006, October 18). *Focus On*, Volume 1, Number 2.

<https://www.dcdhs.com/documents/pdf/Youth/YouthCommission/youth-2005-engage.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> United Way of Dane County (2007). *Delegation on Disconnected and Violent Youth Mobilization Plan*.

<sup>20</sup> United Way of Dane County (2010). *Evaluating results in treating behavioral health issues in children – an Achievement Connections strategy*.

<sup>21</sup> Alexander, Karl L. et al (2007 July). Summer learning and its implications: insights from the Beginning School Study. *New Directions for Youth Development*, Volume 2007, Issue 214.

<sup>22</sup> Kim, James S. (2006). Effects of a voluntary summer reading intervention on reading achievement: Results from a randomized field trial. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Volume 28, Issue 4.

<sup>23</sup> United Way of Dane County (2016). *Academic Success Agenda to Action*.



## Attendance

The HERE! Every Child Every Day Initiative was born out of discussions on worsening chronic absenteeism in Madison. Research from the National Center for Children in Poverty found that chronic absence in kindergarten is associated with lower academic performance in first grade for all children, while among children in poverty chronic absence in kindergarten predicts the lowest levels of educational achievement at the end of fifth grade.<sup>24</sup> During the 2012-2013 school year, 1 in 5 kindergarteners were chronically absent (missed 10% or more of the school year), including 62% of Black kindergartners, while 33% of students eligible for free and reduced lunch were chronically absent.<sup>25</sup>

In 2014, United Way partnered with MMSD and the City of Madison to invest in local grassroots projects serving 883 students in 7 MMSD schools. Chronic absenteeism across schools dropped modestly for Latino and multiracial students (from 25.7% to 22.2% and 33.8 to 33.3%, respectively), while Leopold Elementary decreasing its overall rate from 47.6% to 33.3%.<sup>26</sup>

## Program Impact

As Schools of Hope expanded to serve more students, program leaders sought to better understand the program's impact and to identify opportunities to strengthen the program and improve its effectiveness. From 2015-2024, University of Wisconsin-Madison's Wisconsin Center for Education Research (WCER) served as the program's evaluation partner. WCER conducted multiple evaluations over the years, assessing program implementation practices and its impact on students, staff and AmeriCorps members across all participating districts.

There are limitations to any evaluation in determining whether an intervention caused a particular outcome. Over the 25-year history of Schools of Hope, the metrics by which community leaders measure success — grade-level standards and assessments to determine students' achievement, including those administered by school districts and the state — have frequently changed, making it difficult to meaningfully compare these benchmarks across time.

Additionally, WCER and Schools of Hope chose not to implement an experimental design for program evaluations due to the ethical implications of withholding tutoring from students in need. Rather, WCER collected and analyzed quantitative data (survey responses from school district staff and students, student demographics and literacy assessment data) and qualitative data (literature review, focus groups with AmeriCorps members and regular reports on AmeriCorps member activities) to determine Schools of Hope's alignment with the intended program model (best practices of trained tutors working in concert with classroom teachers and research-based curriculum aligned with district needs) and, ultimately, its efficacy in improving student literacy.

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<sup>24</sup> Chang, Hedy N. and Romero, Mariajosé (2008, September). Present, Engaged, and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades. *National Center for Children in Poverty*. [https://www.nccp.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/text\\_837.pdf](https://www.nccp.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/text_837.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> United Way of Dane County (2014). *Academic Success Mobilization Plan*.

<sup>26</sup> United Way of Dane County (2016). *Academic Success Agenda to Action*.



## Evaluations consistently found that Schools of Hope:

- **Aligned with existing research** suggesting students benefit from small group instruction tailored to meet individual students' needs and practices that encourage student agency and ownership.
- **Aligned with school district needs and priorities and the curriculum and goals of schools.**
- **Served its target population** (students on the cusp of proficiency, at risk of failure, students of color and/or students from low-income settings).
- **Was in regular communication with partner districts** through meetings, trainings and strategic planning sessions.
- **Had a positive influence on student literacy**, particularly in evaluations following 2015.

Highlights of WCER's evaluations include the following outcomes:

### 2015

- 97% of staff reported that the tutoring program **has a positive impact on students' academic skills and knowledge.**
- 94% of staff reported that the tutoring program **has a positive impact on students' engagement with school.**
- The program had **mixed impact on students' scores** on district-administered assessments, depending on the approach to analysis.

### 2018

- 90% of staff reported that the tutoring program **has a positive impact on students' academic skills and knowledge.**
- 96% of students said **they feel they read better because of their tutor.**
- 57% of students **met or exceeded their growth benchmarks** on district-administrated assessments.

### 2021

- 92% of staff agreed that the tutoring program **has a positive impact on students' academic skills and knowledge.**
- 90% of staff agreed that the tutoring program **uses quality tutoring strategies.**
- 88% of students said **they feel they read better because of their tutor.**
- 57% of students **met or exceeded their growth benchmarks** on district-administered assessments.

### 2024

- 89% of students said **their tutor made them feel their schoolwork mattered.**
- 88% said their tutor **helped them keep trying when work was difficult.**
- 87% said **they liked working with their tutor.**
- 52% of students **met or exceeded their growth benchmarks** on district-administered assessments.



As the program celebrated its 20-year anniversary, Madison's News 3 Now featured Michelle Bozeman and her children, all five of whom received tutoring through Schools of Hope. Freshman LaDell Cannon shared that in middle school he struggled to complete his homework, but since enrolling in the program, he'd experienced "less stress, better grades and just, like — you're just proud of yourself, period."<sup>27</sup>

## State & National Recognition

Schools of Hope was recognized nationally as a leader in school-community tutoring initiatives and AmeriCorps programming. The program was included in a 2009 Congressional budget justification, and was featured in a 2010 report by America's Service Commissions and Innovations in Civic Participation, "Transforming Communities through Service: A Collection of 52 of the Most Innovative AmeriCorps Programs in the United States."<sup>28</sup> The report noted Schools of Hope's exceptional partnerships, grassroots origins and potential for replication, stating that "the Schools of Hope Project received frequent visits and inquiries from other communities interested in replicating the program," including in California, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, Washington, West Virginia and Wisconsin.

Schools of Hope and longtime Director Emily Greene earned recognition at both the national and state levels. In 2008, President George W. Bush highlighted Greene and Schools of Hope at the White House as an example of AmeriCorps service in action.<sup>29</sup> In 2026, Serve Wisconsin honored Greene with the Marty Stein Friend of National Service Exemplary Supporter Award, recognizing her 25 years of service since first joining the program as an AmeriCorps VISTA.



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<sup>27</sup> Simon, Matthew (Nov 9, 2015). 'Schools of Hope' celebrates 20 years of making a difference. Vimeo. <https://vimeo.com/145100973>

<sup>28</sup> America's Service Commissions and Innovations in Civic Participation (June 2010). Transforming communities through service: A collection of 52 of the most innovative AmeriCorps programs in the United States.

<sup>29</sup> Office of Public Affairs (2008, September 8). *President Bush Renews His Post-9/11 Call to Service; Honors the Compassion of America's Volunteers.*



# Achievement Connections

## Program Inception

When the Minority Youth Achievement Committee made recommendations to support students of color, it not only set its sights on improving third-grade reading but also raising GPAs and ensuring success in key “gateway” courses like algebra. As Schools of Hope celebrated its success in closing the literacy gap for students of color, the community continued calling for equal efforts for older students.

In 2000, while almost 70% of white MMSD students had taken algebra by the end of ninth grade, less than 30% of Black and Hispanic students had done so.<sup>30</sup> In 2004, only 30% of Black MMSD sophomores scored at proficient or advanced on state standardized tests in math, while 82% of their white classmates met those levels.<sup>31</sup>

While several organizations operated supportive programs at the middle school level, local leaders sought a more coordinated opportunity to serve more students. Urban League of Greater Madison took the lead on a Schools of Hope Middle effort, coordinating academic support and enrichment programs in MMSD middle schools, with MMSD providing technical assistance and program support to ensure that volunteers tutored students in alignment with the curriculum students were receiving in the classroom. Students received one-on-one and small group tutoring services during the regular school day and afterschool enrichment programs including Centro Hispano’s Juventud.

Acting on the recommendations of the 2006 Delegation on Disconnected and Violent Youth and feedback from 200-plus Dane County parents and youth, the Leadership Team decided to expand Schools of Hope to MMSD ninth-graders in 2007, offering support in all subject areas, with an emphasis on math.

The following year, Schools of Hope recruited more than 490 volunteers to tutor over 900 students in math. MMSD saw the 10<sup>th</sup> grade algebra completion gap narrowing, with 65% of Hispanic students and 50% of Black students meeting this benchmark during the 2007-2008 school year.<sup>32</sup>



In 2010, United Way received its first AmeriCorps grant focused solely on tutoring students in mathematics. This investment provided the infrastructure necessary to move administration of the math tutoring program, now called Achievement Connections, to United Way, helping to expand and sustain math tutoring services by recruiting, training and supporting a dedicated corps of tutors. United Way would go on to house the program for the next 16 years, partnering with UW-Madison’s Morgridge Center for Public Service as recognized leaders in the community and on campus to deliver quality volunteer

<sup>30</sup> Gramling, Jonathan (2000, November 2). Report cards mixed on students of color. *Madison Times*.

<sup>31</sup> Erickson, Doug (2004, September 24). One racial gap has closed up. *Wisconsin State Journal*.

<sup>32</sup> United Way of Dane County (November 2008). *Schools of Hope Mobilization Plan*.



tutoring to MMSD students. The initial grant funded 10 volunteers serving as math tutors under United Way's broader Mobilizing Skilled Volunteers program, operating in four MMSD high schools and Middleton High School.



When the previous AmeriCorps grant was not renewed, Achievement Connections leadership sought to restructure the program to continue serving three high schools in 2013. The change also presented the opportunity to redesign some programmatic components, including aligning more closely with teachers' curriculum.

The following year, United Way was awarded its first AmeriCorps grant to specifically grow Achievement Connections, with lessons learned from the Mobilizing Skilled Volunteers program. United Way established a formal partnership with the UW–Madison Morgridge Center for Public Service to help recruit and support AmeriCorps members and tutors. Partnering with the university helped attract more tutors with strong math and STEM

backgrounds, growing the number of tutors from 10 to 20 full-time members and allowing Achievement Connections to once again serve five high schools.

## Program Impact

WCER, a longstanding partner through Schools of Hope efforts, also served as the evaluator for Achievement Connections. There are limitations of any evaluation in determining whether an intervention caused a particular outcome. WCER and Achievement Connections chose not to implement an experimental design for program evaluations due to the ethical implications of withholding tutoring from students in need. Rather, WCER collected and analyzed quantitative data (survey responses from school district staff and students, student demographics and math assessment data) as well as qualitative data (literature review, focus groups with AmeriCorps members and regular reports on AmeriCorps member activities) to determine Achievement Connections' alignment with the program model, best practices of trained tutors working in concert with classroom teachers and curriculum and district needs and, ultimately, its efficacy in improving students' academic performance and graduation.

The 2025 evaluation of program years 2021-2024 found that on average, across all MMSD sites:

- Achievement Connections succeeded in reaching its target population, serving students who are economically disadvantaged; enrolled in special education, English learners or students of color; and have low academic performance in math.
- **High school completion rates were higher** for Achievement Connections students than for non-Achievement Connections students.
- Students showed **measurable gains in a Math Habits survey**, including engagement, confidence and learning habits.
- Students had **the same or higher rates of mathematics GPA stability** in the school year compared to overall high school students.
- Focus groups with AmeriCorps members revealed that **students showed progress** over the course of tutoring sessions, completing their homework, grasping lessons and in



some cases graduating out of needing tutoring, and highlighted moments when **students expressed excitement or pride in math.**

Results from individual program years include:

#### **2021-2022**

- Students receiving any Achievement Connections tutoring across all four years of high school had a **90% graduation rate**, compared to 88% for non-participating students.
- 98% of students receiving 15 hours or more of tutoring showed **improvement on their Math Habits survey.**
- 70% of Achievement Connections participants **maintained or improved their math GPA** between semesters 1 and 2, compared to 72% district-wide.

#### **2022-2023**

- Students receiving any Achievement Connections tutoring across all four years of high school had an **89% graduation rate**, compared to 86% for non-participating students.
- 93% of students receiving 15 hours or more of tutoring **showed improvement on their Math Habits survey.**
- 77% of Achievement Connections participants **maintained or improved their math GPA** between semesters 1 and 2, compared to 76% district-wide.

#### **2023-2024**

- Students receiving any Achievement Connections tutoring across all four years of high school had a **91% graduation rate**, compared to 85% for non-participating students.
- 96% of students receiving 15 hours or more of tutoring **showed improvement on their Math Habits survey.**
- 72% of Achievement Connections participants **maintained or improved their math GPA** between semesters 1 and 2, matching the district-wide rate.

#### **2025-2026**

- 80% of Achievement Connections participants **maintained or improved their math GPA** between semesters 1 and 2, compared to 76% district-wide. (Other data points for this program year are not available due to cessation of federal funding in 2025).



## Lessons Learned

Schools of Hope and Achievement Connections demonstrated that individual, school-based tutoring is a powerful tool that can continue to bring community and students together, supporting academic success and long-term generational change. Most important is trained tutors working in concert with classroom teachers and research-based curriculum in early grades.

The core principles of an effective community tutoring program remain, particularly design and dosage:

- Strong school/community partnerships with leadership from communities of color
- Science of reading curriculum
- Professional development in that curriculum for teachers
- Trained tutors aligned with classroom teachers and curriculum
- Intentional teacher/student selection
- Effective in-school coordination
- Sufficient frequency and dosage
- Collaborative data monitoring/continuous improvement

Numerous factors influence students' achievement beyond what any tutoring program alone can address. For example, Madison and Dane County have experienced significant demographic shifts since the founding of Schools of Hope and Achievement Connections, including increases in the number of children from low-income households and English language learners. More students began reporting mental health concerns that get in the way of learning. Additionally, the focus of literacy curricula in MMSD and across Wisconsin has shifted from the "balanced literacy" approach of the last two decades to the "science of reading" approach recognized as best practice and now codified into Wisconsin law through Act 20.

The ongoing impact of the pandemic should also be noted, and will require expanded instructional time, targeted support for disadvantaged students and sustained investment in both academic and social-emotional learning.

Over the years, WCER evaluations and volunteer-led delegations and steering committees identified program strengths and opportunities for improvement, recommending shifts in implementation and strategic direction. We present the following takeaways for future literacy and math tutoring efforts:

### Model

- Ensure tutoring aligns with overall school goals and district curriculum, including science of reading for literacy.
- Utilize trained tutors working in concert with classroom teachers and the research-based curriculum.
- Embed a dedicated tutor coordinator in the school building to ensure equitable student identification, proactive staff communication and tutor support.
- Provide in-school, classroom-based tutoring multiple times a week.
- In addition, strategies that address school attendance, behavioral health and summer learning loss are needed to comprehensively improve achievement.



- Further, school-based strategies such as class size, expanded teacher training and research-based curriculum are important.

### **Partnerships**

- Buy-in from partnering school districts is necessary at every level, from the superintendent to district administrators, principals, teachers and unions to ensure smooth program implementation. Visible, active support at higher levels of administration reinforced the program's importance to subsequent levels.
- Proactively seek to define student selection criteria, scheduling of tutoring sessions and the role of tutor coordinators, ensuring mutual understanding with teachers, tutors and tutor coordinators.
- Requiring schools to apply to participate in Schools of Hope greatly increased the level of support tutor coordinators experienced at schools.
- Identify a dedicated staff liaison at each school to promote effective partnership.

### **Tutors and Tutor Coordinators**

- Actively recruit diverse and representative tutors and tutor coordinators from the community.
- Recruit bilingual tutors to meet students' language needs.
- Initial tutor coordinator training should balance content (including how students learn) and community-building.
- Ensure tutors and tutor coordinators receive training on district standards and curriculum before in-school implementation.
- Ensure tutors understand the critical role of their training and partnership with the classroom teacher and curriculum.
- Support tutors and tutor coordinators with training on providing students with social-emotional support, to help improve student self-esteem and confidence.
- Support tutors and tutor coordinators with training on managing student behavior.
- Place tutor coordinators at a single site, rather than moving between schools.
- Provide tutors and tutor coordinators with information about students' initial reading levels and progress to help inform tutoring approach, deepening connection with classroom teacher and curriculum.



## AmeriCorps Members

The AmeriCorps members who chose to spend a year or more in service to their community and our country are celebrated for giving their time, energy and passion to students, volunteers and school communities. We thank them for mobilizing the community's caring power to close gaps and open opportunities to ensure that all students can be successful in Dane County.

Testimonials gathered from educators and AmeriCorps alumni as Schools of Hope and Achievement Connections ended demonstrate the positive impact these programs had on students and teachers, as well as AmeriCorps members themselves, most of whom were young adults early in their careers. The experience inspired many AmeriCorps members to pursue teaching or other careers supporting young people.

Throughout my year of service, I **tutored the students who had the most "challenging" behaviors—those who experienced traumatic events**, including witnessing community violence, caretaking for their older siblings' babies, separation from parents due to incarceration, and immigration through refugee status. I became fascinated with how **our relationship helped the children not only improve in math and reading, but also improved their overall mood regulation, trust in others, and behaviors**. My year at Schools of Hope inspired me to become a mental health counselor, and I have been working as a mental health counselor in Chicago since 2020." – Rachael, Schools of Hope Alumna (2013-2014)

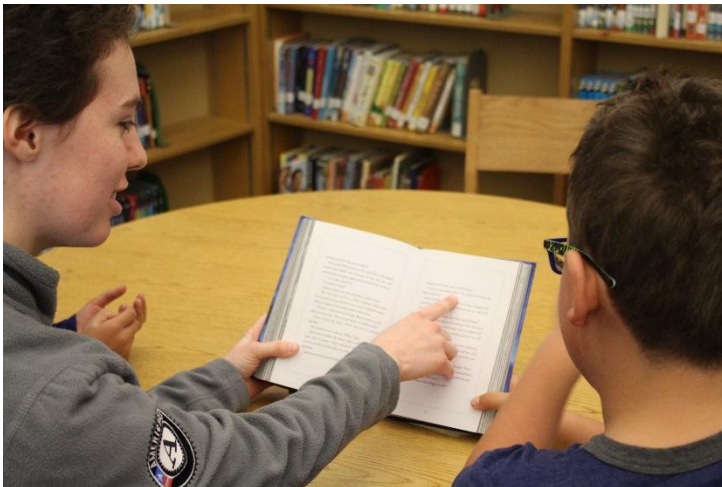
"My son, Michael, cut his teeth as an educator from 2014-16 as an Achievement Connections tutor here at Memorial and **went on to get his teaching certification** and now teaches science at Lodi High School. **His story is not unique**. Many former AmeriCorps members ... have gone on to become teachers." – Ben Radloff, Vel Phillips Memorial Principal, 2025



"Schools of Hope was **one of the most impactful experiences in my life**. (It) pushed me on the path to becoming a special education teacher. Since my time in AmeriCorps, **I have been in education working in the same community where I served**. Many of the students I worked with in Schools of Hope became students at my middle school." – Lauren, Schools of Hope Alumna (2010-2012)



**"Schools of Hope brought great joy to my students.** Every time that Heather [3rd year AmeriCorps member] walked through my door, the students with whom she worked would get a big smile on their face and run towards her. When working with her, **you could see their confidence grow** with every skill she taught them. Their reading levels have increased throughout the year, and their love of reading has as well. When my students found out that Heather couldn't work with them anymore, they were devastated. She truly made reading attainable for them." –Brianne, Sandburg Elementary Teacher, 2025



"Students show an increased self-confidence after attending the tutoring sessions from Achievement Connections. **It is clear to see the positive and encouraging impact they have on students.** The students appreciate their help as well; they often praise their tutors and how much they have learned from them. I noticed that **their confidence toward the math content has changed and improved.** The students are ready for the new content and are more engaged during class discussions." – Janice, LaFollette High School Teacher, 2025

**"Schools of Hope gave me the opportunity to serve my community amid the unprecedented challenges of the pandemic, and it gave me an essential understanding of what public service truly means** in practice. Not a day passes when I do not think of the connections I made with the students I taught, the educators I served, and the members who served with me. My time with Schools of Hope inspired the public interest work I have done in law school, and **it continues to motivate me to spend my career working in the public interest.**" – Ethan, SOH Alumnus (2020-2021)



## Looking Ahead

In April 2026, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction announced plans to place literacy coaches at 50 public schools and four private schools over the next two years as part of ongoing efforts under Act 20 – 2023 state legislation emphasizing “science of reading” literacy instruction. MMSD has developed its next strategic plan, MMSD: Excellence Together, to guide decision making and resource allocation through 2031.

The Schools of Hope Middle School program, which was not funded by AmeriCorps, continues as of the writing of this report to be operated by the Urban League of Greater Madison with major financial support from United Way of Dane County, Madison Metropolitan School District, and the City of Madison. The middle school program continues to provide individualized literacy and math tutoring to nearly 1,000 students annually at 11 middle schools in Madison and Sun Prairie.

United Way of Dane County remains committed to supporting students and families across the learning continuum through our Plan for Community Well-Being, from early childhood and family stability to out-of-school-time tutoring and mentoring. We will continue to champion trained tutors working in concert with classroom teachers and a consistent, research-based curriculum to best improve academic outcomes through tutoring interventions across the myriad of community programs.

To learn more about United Way's Plan for Community Well-Being and Youth Opportunity strategies and collaborations going forward, please visit [unitedwaydaneco.org](https://unitedwaydaneco.org). To support effective student support programs, [give here](#). To volunteer, visit [volunteeryourtime.org](https://volunteeryourtime.org).

Schools of Hope and Achievement Connections show what’s possible when a community rallies around student success and believes every child can succeed in our schools. Thanks to dedicated organizations representing communities of color, media and businesses, nonprofit and school leaders, and thousands of AmeriCorps members, classroom teachers and community volunteers, these programs will continue to serve as a model shaping future work.



## In Appreciation

In addition to AmeriCorps members and community tutors, community partners, classroom teachers and school leaders, many volunteers supported Schools of Hope and Achievement Connections by serving on leadership teams, delegations and committees providing strategic direction and program oversight over nearly three decades.

These individuals represented a broad array of institutions across the community, including schools, grassroots organizations, higher education, police departments, hospital systems, unions, nonprofits and local and state government, lending their expertise. We honor them here and thank them for believing that all our community's children can succeed academically, and taking action to implement an effective community response.

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