

Study finds Schools of Hope program helps raise student achievement



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Community leaders are hopeful that a new study showing a local elementary school tutoring program is raising student achievement will grow the number of participating teachers and volunteers.

The two-year study of the Schools of Hope program conducted by a UW-Madison researcher largely affirmed that elementary school students in the program made larger

strides in reading than similar peers who did not participate.

However, the study focused on students who received the full program — in which one volunteer tutor works closely with one or two students for 15 or more weekly sessions in a school year.

Only 8.3 percent of students who participated last year received the full program, according to the United Way of Dane County, which coordinates the project with the Madison School District.

A quarter of students received individualized tutoring, but for fewer than 15 sessions. The remainder of the 6,132 students either didn't complete the program or were tutored in larger groups.

About 60 percent of the district's elementary students participated in the program last year. Participants were predominantly low-income or minority students.

The program currently has a need for 100 more volunteer tutors, who would help offer the full program to more students, United Way president Leslie Ann Howard said.

"To get the biggest impact, we need to do it based on the model," Howard said.

Annalee Good, the UW-Madison researcher, recommended tutors work as many as three students at a time to expand the reach of a limited number of tutors.

But the study also found that students in kindergarten who participate in Schools of Hope tutoring sessions made fewer gains in reading than similar peers. Students in grades 1-4 made significant gains over peers, while results in fifth grade were mixed.

Expectations for student literacy in kindergarten were less stringent than in later grades, and kindergarten teachers had difficulty conveying to tutors what type of curriculum to use, interim superintendent Jane Belmore said.

The district's new 4-year-old kindergarten program, which will allow 5-year-old kindergarten to focus more on reading, and a new district-wide reading curriculum could help improve reading, she added.

The study found almost all district teachers who have students participating in the program are satisfied with it. But Howard said there are still classrooms where the full program isn't being implemented, possibly because teachers or principals are newer to the district or haven't fully embraced the program.