Leveraging High School Students as Literacy Tutors: Feasibility and Early Outcomes from the H2E Spring 2026 Pilot

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This descriptive pilot study was conducted in the context of a research-practice partnership with a school district. The findings are not causal and should be interpreted with appropriate caution given the small sample size. They are intended to inform decisions about program expansion and scale.

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THE NEED

Early literacy is one of the most consequential predictors of long-term academic success. Children who enter kindergarten behind their peers in foundational reading skills typically do not catch up over time, and these early gaps tend to compound across the academic years — ultimately reducing the likelihood of postsecondary participation and increasing risk for a range of adverse long-term outcomes (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Despite decades of research underscoring the urgency of early intervention, many young learners, particularly those from under-resourced communities, continue to lack access to the individualized, intensive support they need during this critical developmental window.

High-dosage tutoring has emerged as one of the most effective strategies for accelerating student learning and closing early literacy gaps, with a growing body of evidence demonstrating meaningful gains for students who receive frequent, targeted support (Nickow et al. , 2024; National Student Support Accelerator, 2021). However, widespread adoption of high-dosage tutoring models has been limited by persistent practical barriers — most notably, cost and the availability of qualified instructional personnel. Importantly, research suggests that tutors do not need to be certified professionals to be effective; volunteer and nonprofessional tutors working within structured programs have demonstrated significant positive effects on students' reading skills, including foundational skills in letters and words, oral fluency, and writing (Ritter et al., 2009). Cross-age tutoring (that is, pairing older students as tutors with younger tutees) offers a particularly promising and cost-effective delivery model, with evidence supporting benefits for both the students receiving support and the older students serving as tutors (Pelatti & Piasta, 2017).

THE PROJECT

High School Elementary (H2E) Tutoring

H2E Tutoring was developed with this dual opportunity in mind — leveraging the potential of trained high school students to deliver high-dosage literacy support to kindergarteners at a scale and cost that traditional staffing models cannot easily achieve. The Spring 2026 semester served as a pilot of the H2E model, with the purpose of assessing its feasibility and generating early evidence to inform plans for broader implementation and scale.

Research Questions

RQ1. To what extent is the H2E tutoring model feasible to implement within existing school structures, including scheduling, staffing, and coordination across school levels?

RQ2. How do high school students experience the tutor role, and what programmatic features — such as training structure and scheduling — support their preparation and retention?

RQ3. What early literacy gains are observed among kindergarten students who participate in the H2E tutoring program for nine weeks, and does the program achieve high-dosage tutoring thresholds as defined in the literature? How do teachers perceive the impact of tutoring on students' literacy development, engagement, and attitudes toward reading?

Participants

Twenty-six high school students participated as H2E tutors. Tutors were predominantly in 9th and 10th grade (85%; 23% and 62%, respectively) and 65% were female (see Table 1). Over the course of 12 weeks, on their own time and without academic credit or compensation, the high school tutors completed training over a three week period and provided **daily after-school tutoring for nine weeks** from January - April.

Table 1. H2E Tutor Demographics (n=26)

CHARACTERISTIC	n	PERCENT (%)
Grade Level		
9th grade	6	23
10th grade	16	62
11th grade	3	12
12th grade	1	4
Gender		
Female	17	65
Male	9	35

Note. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Fifteen kindergarten students, selected by school staff, received one-on-one tutoring through the H2E tutoring program. In most cases, tutors used an alternating schedule with a partner tutor to maximize the number of days each kindergarten student received tutoring.

H2E Program, Training, and Ongoing Support

The H2E Tutoring program is designed to provide kindergarten students with consistent, daily one-on-one support during a critical window in their literacy development. Kindergarteners who are falling behind often lack the opportunity to revisit and practice foundational concepts at their own pace within the classroom setting. H2E addresses this gap by pairing trained high school students with kindergarten students who need additional time and individualized support to reinforce foundational reading skills.

Critically, H2E is not simply an add-on tutoring program — it is a structured and comprehensive model explicitly aligned to classroom instruction. During each session, students receive additional practice using components of the University of Florida Literacy Institute (UFLI) Foundations program — the same evidence-based reading program used in their classroom — providing targeted reinforcement of phonological awareness, decoding, fluency, and spelling. Sessions also include a shared book reading component using the Beyond the Book guides from Maya's Book Nook, designed to strengthen oral language development, build background knowledge and vocabulary, and improve concepts about print. Together, these elements ensure that each tutoring session offers a coherent, purposeful extension of the school day — giving young learners the time and individualized support they need to catch up and keep pace with their peers.

Over a 3-week period prior to tutoring, high school students completed six structured training sessions grounded in the science of reading and best practices for one-on-one instruction. Training covered foundational literacy concepts, including phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, and connected those principles directly to the instructional routines tutors would use with their kindergarten students. Tutors were trained to implement components of the UFLI Foundations curriculum and the Beyond the Book guides from Maya's Book Nook, with an emphasis on understanding not just how to deliver the materials, but why each component matters for early readers. The sixth and final training session was dedicated to peer practice, providing tutors with the opportunity to rehearse instructional routines with one another before working with kindergarten students.

Following training, tutors implemented the tutoring program over 9 weeks. Each afternoon, high school tutors arrived immediately after their own school day ended, spent 10–15 minutes preparing, and were checked in by H2E leadership before sessions began. A resource teacher brought kindergarten students to the media center, where each received 20 minutes of one-on-one tutoring before being walked to their dismissal location by their tutor. At least one substitute tutor was scheduled for every session to ensure no kindergarten student missed tutoring due to a tutor absence.

H2E program leaders with expertise in early literacy provided tutor support on a rotating basis, ensuring that at least one was present during every tutoring session. Each H2E program leader offered in-the-moment modeling, coaching, and support, as well as post-tutoring feedback to help tutors refine their delivery.

This consistent, hands-on guidance ensured fidelity to the instructional approach and helped tutors build confidence in providing clear, explicit instruction and supportive corrective feedback as challenges arose. On days when additional tutors were present beyond those scheduled, tutors used a structured observation form to observe their peers during live tutoring sessions. All tutors noted that this experience allowed them to see different instructional techniques in practice — an informal but valuable form of professional learning that many reported incorporating into their own sessions with students.

The H2E program also incorporated a family engagement component at the conclusion of the tutoring program. Each kindergarten student was sent home with three books and their corresponding Beyond the Book guides, along with a letter introducing families to the materials and providing access to additional free literacy resources. This intentional bridge between school and home ensures that the literacy support students received during the program extends beyond the classroom — equipping families with tools to continue fostering reading development at home.

Measures

Tutor Surveys

To assess tutor experience, preparedness, and program perceptions across the pilot, three surveys were administered to high school tutors at key points throughout the program. The post-training survey captured open-ended feedback on what helped tutors feel prepared, what additional support they needed, and any remaining questions they had about tutoring. The mid-program reflection survey used a Likert-scale format to assess tutors' confidence leading instructional activities, comfort with student engagement and behavior management, perceived impact on student learning, and satisfaction with program support — along with open-ended questions about what was going well, challenges encountered, and suggestions for improvement. The end-of-program survey gathered tutor input on proposed program adaptations for future iterations, as well as reflective questions about tutors' motivations for participating, the influence of the experience on their interest in teaching as a career, and whether they would continue tutoring beyond any service hour requirements.

Student Outcome Measures

Student literacy outcomes were measured using the Star Early Literacy assessment, part of the Formative Assessment System for Teachers (FAST) — a suite of computer-adaptive screening and progress monitoring tools widely used in Florida schools to assess foundational literacy skills in pre-K through third grade students. Star Early Literacy was administered to all kindergarten students at three points during the school year — beginning of year (BOY), middle of year (MOY), and end of year (EOY) — providing a longitudinal view of student growth across the academic year. Because the H2E tutoring program was implemented during the spring semester, the MOY assessment serves as the pre-tutoring baseline and the EOY assessment captures performance following the nine-week program, allowing for a focused examination of growth during the tutoring window.

Teacher Surveys

To supplement the Star Early Literacy outcome data and capture classroom-level perspectives on student progress, a brief survey was administered to kindergarten teachers at the end of the program. Teachers were asked to identify the reasons each student was selected for tutoring, characterize the student's literacy progress since beginning the program, and describe any changes in classroom engagement and attitude toward reading. Teachers also rated their perceptions of the overall effectiveness of the tutoring program for each student and provided open-ended comments about the aspects of the program they found most beneficial. It is worth noting that teachers did not observe tutoring sessions directly and did not meet with H2E program leadership to discuss student progress during the pilot — meaning their perceptions of student growth, engagement, and attitude were formed independently through their own classroom observations. Surveys were completed for 8 of the 15 participating kindergarten students.

RESULTS

Tutor Results

Tutor attendance data provides a strong indicator of operational feasibility (RQ1). Across the nine-week program, tutors averaged a 93% attendance rate during tutoring sessions (range 76–106%) and a 90% attendance rate during the three weeks of training. Collectively, the 26 tutors contributed 599 days of service at the elementary school. Two tutors attended more sessions than they originally committed to, and six attended every session they had pledged. These figures suggest that when high school students are given structured roles and clear expectations, they can serve as reliable instructional supports — a critical feasibility consideration for leaders evaluating whether this staffing model is viable at scale.

Surveys collected at three points across the program reveal a consistently positive tutor experience (RQ2). Following training, the large majority of tutors reported feeling well-prepared — understanding the purpose of instructional activities, daily procedures, and their role in supporting young readers. By the program midpoint, confidence across most instructional dimensions remained high, with tutors expressing strong agreement that materials were easy to use and that they felt well-supported by program leadership. Challenges were most evident around session predictability and student engagement, reflecting the inherent variability of working with kindergarteners — a finding that is not unexpected in real-world implementation and may point to areas for additional coaching support in future iterations (see Table 2).

End-of-program responses shed further light on tutor motivations and retention potential (RQ2). Tutors joined primarily to give back to the community (56%), fulfill service hour requirements (32%), or gain teaching and tutoring experience (28%). Importantly, 80% said they would definitely continue tutoring even if their service hours were already fulfilled, and an additional 12% said they probably would — indicating the experience held meaningful personal value beyond the service hour incentive. All 26 tutors said they would recommend the program to a friend, and all but two expressed interest in returning the following year.

Table 2. Percentage of H2E Tutors Agreeing or Strongly Agreeing with Selected Survey Items at Post-Training and Program Midpoint

SURVEY ITEM	POST-TRAINING	MIDPOINT
Preparedness & Confidence		
Overall preparedness to tutor effectively	85%	92%
Feel confident leading UFLI activities	85%	92%
Understand how to support struggling students	85%	92%
Materials & Program Support		
Materials and activities easy to use	85%	96%
Feel supported by program leadership	—	96%
Session Experience		
Sessions usually go as planned	—	73%
Students generally seem engaged	—	62%

Note. indicates the item was not included at that timepoint. Post-training survey n=13; midpoint survey n=26. Percentages reflect the proportion of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with each item. Survey wording differed slightly between timepoints; comparisons are directional.

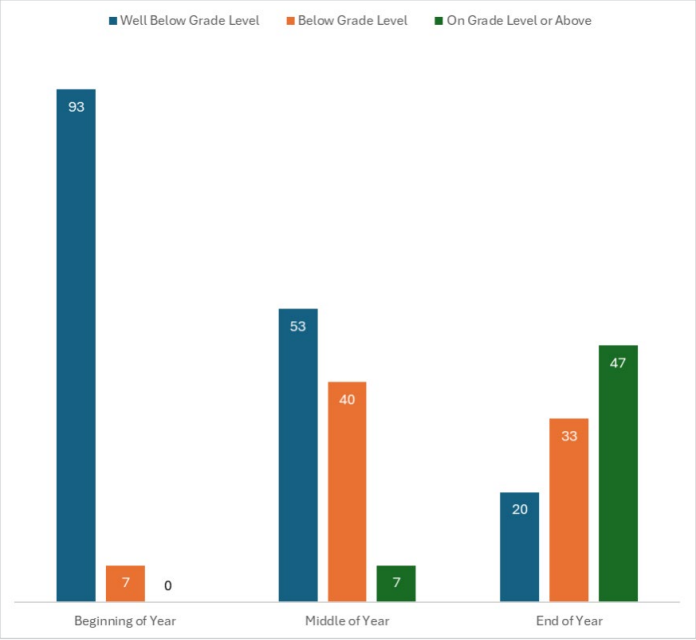
From the tutor perspective, 92% reported at the program midpoint that they believed tutoring was making a positive difference in their students' reading skills — a perception that aligns with the student outcome data presented in the following section (RQ3). With respect to dosage, the program's structure of 20 minutes of daily one-on-one tutoring, five days per week for nine weeks, met the threshold for high-dosage tutoring as defined in the literature (National Student Support Accelerator, 2021), and was delivered with consistency as reflected in the strong tutor attendance rates throughout the program.

Kindergarten Student Results

Fifteen kindergarten students received targeted literacy support through the H2E tutoring program during the spring 2026 pilot (RQ3). Most students were tutored 20 minutes a day, five days per week, with an average attendance rate of 91%. Over the nine-week program, students received a combined 180 hours of extra support — an average of 12 hours per student. This level of dosage is consistent with the definition of high-dosage tutoring, which requires a minimum of three sessions per week (National Student Support Accelerator, 2021) and was delivered not by certified teachers but by trained high school students — making the dosage achieved here particularly noteworthy from a feasibility standpoint (RQ1).

Academic outcomes across the beginning, middle, and end of the year assessments suggest that the tutoring period was associated with meaningful literacy gains for most participants (RQ3). At the beginning of the year, 93% of students were performing well below grade level and just 7% were below grade level, with no students meeting grade-level standards. While some incremental improvement was evident by the middle of the year — with 53% well below grade level, 40% below grade level, and 7% reaching on-grade-level performance — the most pronounced gains emerged following the nine-week tutoring program. Nearly all students showed increases in Star Early Literacy scale scores from the middle of the year to the end of the year, and the average Student Growth Percentile of approximately 53 indicates that students, on average, grew faster than comparable peers statewide during the tutoring window. More than half of students had growth percentiles exceeding the 60th percentile — a level that typically requires targeted intervention to achieve. By the end of the year, 47% of students met or exceeded grade-level standards, and the share of students performing well below grade level dropped dramatically from 53% to just 20% during the tutoring window, as illustrated in the figure below. Among the seven students who scored at the lowest performance level at both the beginning and middle of the year, five advanced to higher levels by end of year, including three who reached on-grade-level performance. While a small number of students showed limited growth — an expected finding in any real-world implementation — the overall pattern of results provides an encouraging signal for policymakers and school leaders considering broader rollout of this tutoring model (RQ1).

Figure 1. 47% of H2E Participating Kindergarten Students Met or Exceeded Grade-Level Standards at the End of the Year Compared to None at the Beginning of the Year



Note. n=15 kindergarten students. Percentages reflect the proportion of students at each performance level at each assessment timepoint. Figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding. The most pronounced shifts in proficiency occurred between the middle and end of the year, coinciding with the nine-week H2E tutoring program.

Teacher survey responses, available for 8 of the 15 participating students, provide additional classroom-level perspective on the impact of the tutoring program and further corroborate the assessment findings (RQ3). Teachers reported that their students met or exceeded expectations for literacy progress since beginning tutoring — with three teachers indicating that students exceeded expectations, reflecting growth beyond what they had anticipated. Teachers rated the program as very effective for four students and somewhat effective for three, with no teachers reporting limited or no impact. Classroom engagement during whole-group UFLI instruction increased for all eight students, with three teachers noting students were noticeably more active, confident, and willing to participate. Attitudes toward reading also improved across the board, with four students showing a much more positive orientation toward literacy activities and the remaining four showing at least some improvement.

Open-ended comments were particularly illustrative of the program's impact — teachers noted gains in students' ability to sound out and write words, improved confidence, and genuine enjoyment of tutoring sessions. One teacher noted that a student is now able to complete weekly UFLI assessments independently by sounding out and writing each letter sound, while another noted that a student reached the 78th percentile by end of year. While these responses represent a subset of the full student group and should be interpreted with appropriate caution, they offer meaningful qualitative support for the quantitative outcomes observed in the Star Early Literacy data.

KEY TAKEAWAYS & IMPLICATIONS FOR SCALE

The H2E spring 2026 pilot provides meaningful early evidence that a high school tutor-to-kindergartener model is not only feasible but capable of producing substantive academic gains for young learners. Across both the tutor and student data, the pilot demonstrated that this model can be implemented with fidelity: tutors showed up consistently, students received high-dosage support, and literacy outcomes improved markedly over the course of the program. It is important to note that the pilot was conducted at a single site with a small student sample (n=15), and findings should be interpreted accordingly.

Taken together, however, these findings suggest the model is ready for thoughtful expansion — with several key considerations for school and district leaders as they plan for broader implementation. Teacher survey responses further underscore the value of maintaining strong communication between program leaders and classroom teachers, as teachers were well-positioned to observe changes in student confidence, engagement, and skill development that assessment data alone may not fully capture — suggesting that a formal teacher feedback mechanism should be built into any scaled implementation.

Teacher Pipeline and Dual Enrollment Potential

One of the most promising structural features of the H2E model is its use of high school students as tutors, which addresses one of the most persistent barriers to scaling tutoring programs: cost and staffing. The pilot demonstrated that high school students can serve as reliable, high-attendance instructional supports when given structured training and clear expectations. As leaders consider scaling, formalizing the tutor role through a dual enrollment or elective course credit framework could strengthen the pipeline considerably.

Embedding tutor participation within a credited course — such as an education pathway, child development, or community service elective — would provide an institutional incentive for recruitment and retention, reduce reliance on voluntary participation, and allow for more systematic tutor preparation and evaluation. The fact that nearly one in four tutors reported being more likely to consider teaching as a career further underscores the potential of this model to serve dual purposes: delivering academic support to young students while cultivating the next generation of educators.

Delivery Model and Scheduling Considerations

The pilot's core delivery model — 20 minutes of daily one-on-one tutoring, five days per week — proved workable within a school-day context and met the threshold for high-dosage tutoring (National Student Support Accelerator, 2021). A critical feature of the model is its explicit alignment to classroom instruction through the UFLI Foundations curriculum and Beyond the Book shared reading guides — an intentional design element that should be preserved in any replication effort, as it ensures tutoring reinforces rather than duplicates or contradicts what students are learning in the classroom. The program also fostered an informal peer learning culture among tutors through structured observations — on days when additional tutors were present, they used an observation form to observe peers in practice, an experience tutors found valuable and that required no additional resources or coordination to implement.

For broader implementation, leaders should also consider how this model fits within existing school schedules and whether variations in delivery (e.g., small group tutoring, increasing session length to 30 minutes if the frequency of sessions is reduced, or before- and after-school sessions) could extend reach while maintaining high-dosage thresholds and without sacrificing instructional quality. Flexibility in scheduling will be particularly important when scaling across multiple school sites or grade levels, where logistical coordination between high schools and elementary schools will require intentional planning around bell schedules, transportation, and supervision.

Considerations for Scale

Several factors identified in this pilot should inform a scaling framework. First, tutor training was a critical component of the model — tutors completed six structured training sessions over a three-week period before working with students, and attendance at training was high. This investment in preparation was further reinforced through structured peer observations during the program, which created opportunities for tutors to refine their practice by observing one another — a low-cost, scalable form of ongoing professional learning worth preserving in future iterations. Any scaled model should preserve this investment in preparation, as it likely contributed both to tutor effectiveness and to the high attendance and commitment rates observed. Second, the program's success depended on strong coordination between the high school and elementary school, suggesting that a dedicated program coordinator role may be necessary as the model expands. Third, while the student sample in this pilot was small (n=15), the consistency of growth across most students is an encouraging signal; a larger implementation would benefit from a more formal evaluation design to establish stronger evidence of impact.

Next Steps for the H2E Program

The following next steps will guide the continued development, evaluation, and expansion of the H2E program:

- Explore dual enrollment or elective credit pathways to formalize and sustain the high school tutor pipeline.
- Pilot the model at one or two additional school sites in the 2026–27 school year to test replicability across different school contexts.
- Develop standardized training materials and program coordination protocols — including guidance on sourcing and implementing both the UFLI Foundations curriculum and Beyond the Book shared reading guides — to support consistent implementation at scale.
- Establish a more rigorous evaluation framework — including a comparison group — to build a stronger evidence base for broader policy adoption.
- Preserve and expand the family engagement component — including take-home books, Beyond the Book guides, and family resource letters — as a low-cost strategy for extending literacy support beyond the school day and strengthening school-family partnerships.

- Engage school leaders, counselors, and district curriculum staff early in planning to align the tutoring model with existing literacy initiatives and scheduling structures.
- Develop a systematic teacher feedback process — including end-of-program surveys and mid-program check-ins — to capture classroom-level observations of student progress and strengthen the evidence base for program impact across future implementations.

The H2E pilot has laid a strong foundation. With intentional investment in infrastructure, partnerships, and evaluation, this model holds real promise as a scalable, cost-effective strategy for improving early literacy outcomes across the district and beyond.

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