

## United Way of Santa Barbara County's Fun in the Sun Unites Community Partners for Local Youth

United Way of Santa Barbara County knows it takes a village, and that is what they have done with Fun in the Sun (FITS), a program that serves nearly 250 low-income children ages 7 to 18 for seven weeks each summer in collaboration with up to 70 community partners.

In his years of nonprofit work, President & CEO of United Way of Santa Barbara County Paul Didier has never seen so many organizations in a single community come together for its children. "Every community has strengths and assets to add in improving the life of a child and a family," says Didier. "It's something that is possible in any community, anywhere. Our partners give money, volunteers, resources, and time in order to participate in this community collaborative. FITS pulls these community strengths together in a research-based, organized way to comprehensively impact the children, their siblings, and their parents."

FITS emphasizes reading and writing, with afternoon enrichment that includes activities in science, technology, engineering, arts, and math (STEAM), as well as service learning, character, courtesy, and field trips throughout the summer. During the 2011 program, 82 percent of participants showed gains of 2.1 reading grade levels in reading comprehension, phonics, and vocabulary skills.

FITS uses a computerized reading tool out of several tools called Reading Plus, but stresses that a key component to students' reading success is having program leaders work with participants one-to-one—motivating and coaching them. "We also ensure that reading and writing is happening outside of structured times," says FITS coordinator Courtney Tarnow. "Our youth are encouraged to read at home, and they are writing in journals after field trips. It has to be done on a regular basis, and it has to be regimented."

FITS requires each participant to make a minimum three-year commitment. FITS partners with schools across four districts to ensure the program is reaching the children most in need. The collaboration between FITS and local educators is a key strategy for program success. "Principals and teachers recognize the impact that we are making. They often tell us that they can pick out exactly who the Fun in the Sun kids are at the beginning of the school year from their social and academic behavior changes," says Didier.

FITS families are supported with Parent Empowerment workshops, including financial literacy and positive discipline classes. Participants are not only given two meals a day while at the program, they are also sent home with bags of fresh produce and fruit for the weekends.

United Way of Santa Barbara County estimates that 3,000 youth and their families are still unserved in the community. When asked to give a five- to ten-year goal for the program, Didier says "it's to keep having the impact that we are now having, but on a much larger scale."



**Fun in the Sun's Lunch Bunch program pairs youth with an adult mentor to spend an hour of their lunch time together. The program is a youth favorite that fosters positive adult-child interaction. Over 500 community volunteers are recruited each summer.**

