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Student learning and well-being on the rise through unique university-school partnership

Marking a milestone anniversary in their joint effort to support the needs of local students, teachers and families, UC Santa Barbara's Gevirtz Graduate School of Education and the Harding University Partnership School (HUPS) are celebrating their successful 15-year collaboration.

Launched in January 2010, the partnership brings Gevirtz School faculty researchers and graduate students to the Harding campus, within Santa Barbara Unified School District, to provide research-based best practices and services to benefit student learning and well-being.

Over the past three academic years, from 2021-2024, the partnership has focused on specific areas with the most pressing support needs: mathematics, literacy and social-emotional learning. The efforts have achieved notable gains.

In mathematics, associate professor [Rachel Lambert](#) and Gevirtz student researchers created the GAMEs (Growing Access to Mathematical Engagement) Project to provide enrichment and intervention using non-digital math board games to improve math learning for third- and fourth- grade students. The GAMEs program has received overwhelming support from teachers and students alike, increasing

student interest in math and making it fun.

And metrics demonstrate, the program has been successful. The GAMEs Project increased math scores on the STAR assessment by an average of one grade level, and the math fact fluency test showed average growth greater than 13%.

In literacy, associate professor [Diana Arya](#), head of the Community-Based Literacies Project, and UCSB undergraduate students worked with fourth-grade students to provide intensive small group and one-on-one literacy support. Student progress in literacy was measured by the Critical Reading Assessment, and the results showed an average of one year grade level growth in reading comprehension.

For social-emotional learning, the Strengthening Minds & Hearts program, led by assistant teaching professor [Arlene Ortiz](#) and graduate students, provides individual mentoring and counseling to students with mild to moderate social-emotional needs. This additional support allows for more students to receive individualized attention than what is typically possible with Harding's current mental health staff.

Another major achievement at Harding was the implementation of the outdoor "classroom," which transformed the pre-kindergarten asphalt playground into a nature playscape.

Gevirtz School's assistant director of outreach, Devon Azzam, provided guidance and assistance for grant applications and project implementation to complete the outdoor classroom project. Azzam also conducted a research study before and after the playground transformation to examine the effects of the environment on patterns of play. One key finding was that the new naturescape increased opportunities for literacy and language development.

"These results show the overwhelming benefit that our work with the Harding community has for students at HUPS," said [Jeff Milem](#), dean of the Gevirtz Graduate School of Education. "We are proud to partner with Santa Barbara Unified School District in doing this great work."

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