Kids help their peers improve reading skills
United Way's Learning Together program has made large strides

Nikolas Rustrian, 9, playfully covers the eyes of Avarie Cauthen, 8, during their reading program at Terrace Elementary.
Nine-year-old Julianna Razo watched with wide eyes as her young partner stumbled while sounding out a tricky word. Julianna waited a few seconds before explaining to 8-year-old Desirae Ibarra that the word was "palace."

The girls work together twice a week in an after-school program at Terrace Elementary in Spring Branch ISD designed to help struggling readers gain confidence and skill.

Piloted this school year with nearly 140 students at six Houston-area campuses, United Way's Learning Together program puts older students in charge of tutoring younger peers – in this case, fourth-graders oversee second graders. All 30 participants started about a grade-level behind, but they have made tremendous gains, educators said.

Not only are they reading better, they're raising their hands to speak in class more, they're checking out harder books from the library and they're more confident when reading aloud.

"The best way to know you've mastered something is to be able to teach it," explained Terrace Elementary Principal April Blanco.

Blanco identified improving reading scores as the top priority when she took the helm of Terrace last school year. In 2012-13, 75 percent of her third-graders and 65 percent of fifth-graders passed the state reading assessment.

When students can't read on grade-level, academic problems begin to compound and students quickly fall – and tend to stay – behind, experts say. As vocabulary and sentence structure becomes more complex, problems often surface among older children previously thought to be competent readers. If students continue
struggling in fourth and fifth grades, they can't keep up in other classes and their confidence takes a hit, educators said.

"These kids were below level and they were kind of stuck," Blanco said.

While some students need intense intervention, peer-to-peer mentoring works well for students who are just a little behind, organizers said.
"These are the bubble kids who never get chosen for anything," said Najah Callander, manager of community investment for United Way, which sought to make the after-school program easy to implement with schools only required to provide space and support. Children are sent home with up to 20 new books that they can keep.

Prior to serving as tutors, the older students — struggling readers themselves — are given specific instruction on how to teach their younger peers, such as warming them up with small talk and prompting them to ask engaging questions as they read the books aloud together, alternating pages. Afterward, students write about the tutoring session in their journals, which builds writing skills.

After the session, the older children reflect with program organizers on which techniques worked.

"She's really getting good," Julianna said of her partner's reading skills.

Desirae beamed, adding that the tutors are "really nice and they give you stickers."

But, Julianna interrupted: "The most important thing is you make new friends."