

Project Narrative: *Scaling SOAR United High-Impact Literacy Tutoring in Rural After School
Settings to Improve Reading Outcomes for K-5 Grade Students*

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Introduction

Founded in 1953, the United Way of West Central Mississippi (UWWCM), located in rural Vicksburg, Mississippi (Warren County), is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization with a mission to build a thriving community for all by mobilizing resources that deliver measurable impact. UWWCM is uniquely positioned to tackle Mississippi's literacy challenges by supporting children in community-based, out-of-school settings. For the past four years, UWWCM has implemented and continually refined a high-impact literacy tutoring model called SOAR United (Serving Others by Accelerating Reading) that serves up to 550 at-risk K–8 students in Warren County. SOAR United is based on the SPARK (Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids) tutoring intervention combined with Voyager Passports as the core curriculum, both of which have evidence of effectiveness (Jones, Christian, and Rice, 2016; Wanzek et al., 2017). Services are mostly offered during non-school hours, including after school, weekends, holidays, and summer breaks; because of this students' reading proficiency growth has been promising. The purpose of this mid-phase Education Innovation and Research (EIR) Proposal is threefold: 1) to scale the SOAR United program by forming five regional United Way hubs across 21 rural counties in Mississippi in partnership with the Mississippi Department of Education and the Mississippi Department of Human Services, among others; 2) to train, equip, deploy, and continually support 885 reading tutors who will be capable of providing evidence-based reading instruction in community-based childcare and afterschool settings; and 3) to collect data in a randomized control trial in order to contribute to the literature base and create a national model for a cost-efficient and effective literacy tutoring in rural settings. Few large-scale interventions have demonstrated positive impact in reading proficiency in out-of-school settings via high-impact tutoring, and there is an abundant need for SOAR United to improve outcomes at scale in Mississippi and beyond.

Absolute and Competitive Preference Priorities

This project aims to replicate, scale, and rigorously evaluate an evidence-based, field-initiated innovation which promotes evidence-based literacy to improve literacy outcomes for high-needs students by addressing all of the absolute and competitive priorities articulated by the U.S. Department of Education for this mid-phase competition: *Competitive Preference Priority 1: Returning Education to the States*; *Competitive Preference Priority 2: Education Choice (High-Impact Tutoring)*; and **Absolute Priority: Field-Initiated Innovations: Promoting Evidence-Based Literacy**. These priorities are explained in great detail in sections A.2. and A.3.

A.1 National Significance

A strong academic start is critically important to a child's future: students who are not reading proficiently by the end of third grade can face a myriad of negative consequences, including a higher likelihood to drop out of school, an elevated likelihood to be involved in the court system, lower earning potential, and poorer health outcomes (Fiester, 2010; Hernandez, 2011). In 2024, only a third of US 4th graders (31%) were reading at a proficient level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the Nation's Report Card (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Despite decades of significant investment in interventions designed to address this metric, the nation as a whole has seen little improvement in NAEP reading scores, but Mississippi has demonstrated clear upward momentum in reading achievement. Nationally ranked 49th in 2003 based on the percentage of fourth graders scoring basic or higher on the NAEP up to 9th in 2024, Mississippi has the largest gains in the country. Coined the "Mississippi Miracle," local education agencies have prioritized the science of reading and evidence-based decision making, but the untold piece of the puzzle is the powerful impact community programs have on students' reading achievement. UWWCM is a shining example, providing high-impact tutoring in

out-of-school settings through SOAR United, serving over 2,000 children since 2021.

A.2 Promising Strategies and Innovation

A signature program developed for the Mississippi United Ways Association, SOAR United Tutoring is a literacy-specific initiative based on the science of teaching reading and evidence-based practices through SPARK and Voyager Passports designed to provide high-quality reading instruction for a community's most vulnerable children in grades K-5. High-impact tutoring leads to substantial learning gains for students by supplementing (but not replacing) students' classroom experiences. This literacy intervention is designed to accelerate reading achievement for children by providing the following support for struggling readers at supportive afterschool centers: 1) an evidence-based intervention provided multiple times per week with explicit, systematic academic assistance in reading; 2) a student-centered, personalized, literacy experience at no cost to families; 3) a new book every few weeks matched to their interest, grade, and Lexile® reading level (~12 per year); and 4) a meaningful connection with a role model for academic support and mentoring.

SOAR United tutoring began in Vicksburg/Warren County to combat the negative effects of the pandemic. During the third year of implementation (2023-2024), tutoring was conducted in after-school programs 3-4 days per week across 18 weeks at 6 sites. With each session lasting approximately 45 minutes, more than 50 additional hours of high-quality reading instruction were provided to over 500 participating kindergarten-fifth grade students. Students are expected to show growth from the beginning of the school year to the end, but often, students who struggle or enter a grade behind show minimal if any growth, causing the gap between them and their peers to widen (Dorn et al, 2021). While nearly all of the 248 students with complete data demonstrated growth in this program, 87 exceeded the expected yearly growth, and 25 more than doubled the expected yearly growth. The average growth for was 13.5 months according to iReady Reading scores.

SOAR United is an innovative program and attractive solution for serving rural, high-needs students because it combines community-based out-of-school learning, high-impact tutoring, evidence-based reading instruction, and a data-driven infrastructure to create a replicable statewide innovation rather than simply a copy and paste expansion of existing programs. Rural communities often face teacher shortages, limited access to specialists such as reading interventionists, and fewer enrichment opportunities for students. In fact, the Mississippi Department of Education reported 2,775 unfilled teacher positions in the 2023–24 school year, and 1,475 teachers using emergency or provisional teaching licenses for the 2022–23 school year (Tan, Arellano, & Patrick, 2024). Because of these issues and because many rural schools cannot meet all students’ needs during the regular school day, quality and affordable after school literacy programs are vital for student growth. That, coupled with school breaks and summer months, creates academic and learning losses for students in rural America. Many of these children go home to an empty house because parents are working multiple jobs, long hours, commuting to another area, or have irregular schedules in order to make ends meet. If parents lack academic skills and education themselves, often they feel less confident in assisting their children with their schoolwork.

Students without structured activities are more likely to engage in risky behavior when unsupervised in the afternoons (McMorris et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2018). Quality afterschool programs reduce that risk window for young people, and those who participate in quality afterschool programs are more likely to have better grades and test scores, attend school more regularly, and show better durable skills (Sniegowski et al., 2022). These children are then able to graduate from high school and pursue postsecondary opportunities. In rural areas in Mississippi, towns and communities struggle with population loss and economic stagnation; therefore, investing in children through quality programs like SOAR United is crucial to keeping talent in

the state to build a stronger, more resilient future workforce for Mississippi.

By partnering with state agencies, nonprofits, researchers, and community-based afterschool programs, SOAR United will strengthen the social fabric of the communities where it takes place. This strong literacy program is already helping to prepare the next generation for college and skilled jobs, but fundamentally, ensuring all students in these pilot communities gain invaluable literacy skills to improve their quality of life. This is an opportunity of a lifetime for students in rural Mississippi because SOAR United levels the playing field for children to thrive.

A.3 Absolute Priority - Field-Initiated Innovations: Promoting Evidence-Based Literacy

SOAR United seeks to replicate a field-initiated, evidence-based intervention to improve student achievement and attainment for high-needs students with a few context-specific differences. An innovative approach to after-school literacy support, SPARK, which was partially funded by United Way, was later expanded as Future Forward. This program, developed in Milwaukee through a community partnership, combines one-on-one tutoring with family engagement strategies. Trained paraprofessional tutors provide regular reading instruction to K–3 students, and a family liaison works with parents to encourage at-home literacy activities. Two RCTs have evaluated SPARK/Future Forward. In the first trial (i3 grant) in 2016, over 500 K–3 students across several high-need elementary schools were randomly assigned to SPARK (tutoring + parent outreach) or control. Tutoring was high-dosage as students received 90+ to 120+ sessions of one-on-one tutoring over one to two years, typically during or after school in coordination with school staff. The implementation was strong, with most students receiving the intended frequency of tutoring. SPARK had a positive and statistically significant impact on reading achievement. By the final evaluation, SPARK students scored +0.23 SD higher in early literacy skills, up to 0.20SD in reading (measured by Renaissance Star Reading) than control students, and missed 4.5 fewer

days of school (Jones, Christina, and Rice 2016; Jones and Christian, 2021; Jones et al., 2024).

The combination of high-impact tutoring plus family engagement appears to be a potent strategy. Program documents note that Future Forward is one of the few tutoring interventions that actively involves families and home reading practice. This multi-faceted model achieved ESSA “strong evidence” level and has since been expanded (with an EIR federal grant) to multiple states. Like SPARK/Future Forward, high-impact tutoring in reading coupled with family engagement strategies will be provided for high-needs students with the SOAR United model. However, these tutoring sessions will strictly be in after-school, out-of-school settings in rural communities.

Several What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) Practice Guides were used to develop SOAR United. The WWC Practice Guide “Assisting Students Struggling with Reading: RTI and Multi-Tier Intervention in the Primary Grades” (2009), recommends providing intensive, systematic instruction in foundational reading skills in small pods to students who score below benchmark on a universal screener (What Works Clearinghouse, 2009, p 19). SOAR United screens all students and curates small-cohorts based on students’ needs as well as strengths to provide the intensive, systematic instruction needed to target deficits and accelerate grade-level learning. Additionally, the “Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten through Third Grade,” guide recommends helping students to develop awareness of segments of sounds in speech and how they link to letters, as well to teach students to decode words, analyze word parts, and write and recognize words (What Works Clearinghouse, 2016). SOAR United uses a curriculum based on these recommendations and students practice phonemic awareness and phonics. Lastly, the “Structuring Out of School Time to Improve Academic Achievement,” guide recommends adapting instruction to small group needs (What Works Clearinghouse, 2009).

SOAR United is designed as a supplemental reading program working alongside a school’s

core reading program rather than replacing it; truly a second dose of effective reading instruction. SOAR United uses Voyager Sopris Learning's Voyager Passport, a scripted, evidence-based (Tier 1 Strong under ESSA) curriculum that ensures students receive explicit, systematic reading instructional support in a small group format that is individualized based on reading needs and areas of concern. A randomized controlled trial study found it improved reading by 0.38 SD (Wanzek et al., 2017). SOAR United is one of the only programs in the country using this rigorous curriculum in out-of-school programs with a variety of community educators at the helm. Voyager Passport is a comprehensive intervention system for K-5 students who demonstrate difficulty learning to read and/or reading to learn. Voyager Passport systematically integrates the five essential components of reading (i.e., phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension) into an easy-to-deliver, cohesive routine. Student interest is sparked by engaging topics and text, both narrative and expository, that builds critical domain knowledge. Voyager Passport optimizes learning time and ensures student success by adhering to an effective model of instruction. The five components of this instructional model include: 1) Teach, Model, and Probe; 2) Guided Practice with corrective feedback as necessary; 3) Independent Practice to reinforces the concept or skill with decreasing amounts of support from Academic Guide; 4) Cumulative Review; and 5) Formative Assessment. Voyager Passport is organized into 12 engaging Adventures per grade-level, with 10-lesson units in each Adventure, for a total of 120 lessons which is used across the three service periods (spring, summer, and fall) of academic assistance.

A.4. Competitive Priority- Return Education to the States and Expand Education Choice

The structure of SOAR United and this proposal directly supports efforts to return education to individual states. A powerful example of how localized control can transform a state's educational landscape is Mississippi's Literacy-Based Promotion Act (LBPA), enacted in 2013,

which aims to ensure all students read proficiently by the end of third grade. The law requires schools to identify struggling readers early through annual literacy screenings and to provide targeted, evidence-based interventions and support. Students who do not demonstrate sufficient reading skills by the end of third grade may be retained, with additional intensive reading instruction provided. SOAR United supports the LBPA as it is the premier source of intensive instruction in out-of-school settings in Mississippi. The community stakeholders involved in this work are aware children are behind in literacy and are willing work hard to close the literacy gap in communities by collaborating with local education agencies to ensure students have every resource needed to thrive. One third grade student enrolled in SOAR United in rural Warren County, Mississippi, grew 24 months in reading achievement in a nine-month span. This child went from being behind his grade-level peers by almost two years to on track for grade-level proficiency. He is one example of the life-changing work SOAR United is doing every day.

More state ownership and oversight of education allows program providers like SOAR United to tailor standards to local demographic, economic, and cultural needs. SOAR United will be a model for the nation as to how a community can take ownership of out-of-school programming in order to support the educational process for its neediest students and bring generational changes.

B. Strategy to Scale

B.1 How Strategies Address Barriers to Reaching Scale

By leveraging resources, partnerships, and best practice, SOAR United seeks to expand to 21 counties in Mississippi (all with locale codes of 32, 33, 41, 42, or 43) through EIR funding, but barriers to reaching scale exist. UWWCM recognizes several factors may impede access to and participation in the proposed rural afterschool literacy intervention. Geographic isolation and lack of reliable transportation are significant barriers for many families, limiting consistent attendance

and engagement. Socioeconomic challenges, including limited financial resources and competing family responsibilities, may further restrict participation from low-income households. Limited broadband infrastructure in rural areas may hinder communication, family engagement, and access to digital literacy tools. Other tutoring programs struggle to scale, especially in rural areas in Mississippi, because of tutor recruiting, training, and retention issues; a heavy emphasis on virtual tutoring; and a lack of attention to parent engagement. SOAR United can mitigate all these barriers.

This program seeks to meet the needs of ALL K-5 students, including those who are struggling readers and/or from neediest families as highest on the priority list for support, by providing an intensive, individualized educational opportunity conducted in real-time afterschool settings. Students with Individualized Reading Plans (IRP) as well as Individualized Education Plans (IEP) will be included in this intervention, which is designed to be meaningful for all needs. The average Mississippi Kindergarten Readiness scale score was 507 across all 21 counties included in this project, well below the Target Score of 530. While 46.1% of 3rd graders from these communities met the Literacy Based Promotion Act requirements on the 3rd Grade Assessment in May of 2024, 53.9% did not -- higher than the state average failure rate of 16%.

High quality, well-trained tutors, called Academic Guides, are a key to removing barriers for students because they are key to supplemental support in afterschool settings. Because tutor sources can vary from community to community (ie a community college or university would provide access to college students, but in a rural community without a college), SOAR United intentionally casts a wide net to recruit tutors - high school and college students, teachers and teacher assistants, retired educators, and existing childcare staff are eligible. To serve as an Academic Guide, training and onboarding involve formal Voyager Passports training, as well as nanocourses through The Community Educator Learning Hub developed by Arizona State

University’s Mary Lou Fulton College of Teaching and Learning Innovation (ASU). The Learning Hub is an award-winning online learning platform designed to support caring adults and teens as they help children learn with a catalog of on-demand nanocourses to break down the competencies of teaching and learning into easy-to-understand tips and strategies. Developed by world-class ASU faculty and nationally-recognized community organizations, these resources for instructional upskilling have been designed for community educators such as tutors, family members, and volunteers, as well as utility for paraeducators, pre- and in-service teachers, and other school support staff. Lastly, Academic Guides engage in monthly curriculum check ins, regular data-driven decision-making sessions to ensure individualized support for students and have access to curriculum support in regular virtual office hours weekly, which contribute to tutor retention.

SOAR United takes an innovative, intentional, and strategic approach to parent engagement. When parents are involved, students are more engaged. Parents will receive at least 10 strategies related to the instruction tutors provide per service period (30 per year) to extend the learning into the home and community in the format they choose - text, email, or paper - and they will be invited to one parent session per service period (three per year), which will include a shared reading experience with students, and a student success ceremony per service period (three per year) because student growth deserves celebration. These ceremonies will recognize students with great program attendance and success, with additional awards chosen by tutors.

B.2. Adequacy of Management Plan to Achieve Objectives

The management plan with timeline, milestones, as well as responsible partner(s) found in Table 1 ensures UWWCM and team will achieve the objectives on time and within budget.

Table 1. Management Plan and Timeline for Responsible Partners

Milestones	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Responsible
Needs assessment/ action plan	X				UW
Recruit childcare/afterschool facilities	X	X			UW

serving K-5 th grade students to participate					
Work with sites to recruit tutors with messaging and interviewing protocol	X	X	X	X	UW/MDHS
Onboard and train tutors	X	X	X	X	UW/ASU
Prepare, test, refine data tools	X				RAND/CFM
Random assignment	X				RAND
Conduct Star Reading assessment and progress monitoring (BOY, MOY, EOY)	X	X	X	X	UW
Create Pearl student/tutor accounts	X	X	X	X	UW/Pearl
Family engagement activities/outreach development and implementation	X	X	X	X	UW/MDHS/MDE
Tutor/student relationship-building activities development	X	X	X	X	UW
Conduct pilot study	X				UW/Pearl/RAND
Measure implementation and cost		X	X		RAND
Measure impact		X	X		RAND
Execute communication plan to replicate/scale	X	X	X	X	ALL
Execute dissemination plan (webinars, briefs, toolkit, peer-reviewed reports)			X	X	ALL
Key Institutions: United Way (UW); Mississippi Department of Human Services (MDHS); Mississippi Department of Education (MDE); Arizona State University’s Community Educator Learning Hub(ASU); RAND; Children’s Foundation of Mississippi (CFM); Pearl					

B.3 Applicant’s Capacity to Bring Project to Scale on a National and Regional Level

UWWCM and partners have an extraordinary track record and the capacity to scale this project on a regional and national level for four reasons. First, there are local and national United Ways in need of an intervention like SOAR United to better serve their communities and the United Way is a national network. Second, the SOAR United model provides guidance for hiring staff, training materials, an evidence-based curriculum, tutor capacity building, tutor-student relationship activities, and parent engagement activities. All of these will be included in the Implementation Toolkit, described more thoroughly in the dissemination plan. Third, using Pearl allows SOAR United to collect and analyze data in to monitor and scale the program. Student-level data is often missing in community programming. Fourth, this project will generate evidence by RAND who will study program elements most closely connected to student outcomes for replication.

This application represents a true public/private partnership with a consortium of partners, including two state agencies, five regional United Way hubs, and an internationally known research partner in RAND, among others. UWWCM has the capacity to bring SOAR United to scale after leading several large-scale grant projects related to high-impact tutoring.

[REDACTED] is the [REDACTED] of the UWWCM, serving a five-county area. With sixteen years of experience in the local education system and eleven at [REDACTED] UWWCM, she brings passion and a unique set of skills to her service area and Mississippi. A Vicksburg native, she currently oversees the success of the Excel by 5 Coalition, the Campaign for Grade LevZel Reading Coalition, and the Middle School Coalition. [REDACTED] also serves as the [REDACTED] for the ALICE: Financial Hardship Study, along with serving as a [REDACTED] for the Mississippi Head Start Association, a governor-appointed member of the Mississippi State Early Childhood Advisory Council, as well as the Mississippi Early Childhood Development Coalition.

[REDACTED] currently serves as a [REDACTED] for the Mississippi United Way Association and is the [REDACTED] of SOAR United. She has 18 years of experience as a teacher, literacy coach, grant writer, program evaluator, and program director - designing, delivering, and evaluating professional learning opportunities to improve classroom instruction, out of school programming, and ultimately literacy achievement among PreK-12 learners. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Additionally, [REDACTED] has led a large-scale federal research study through the Office of Special Education Programs as [REDACTED] and has served as a literacy consultant for

national organizations, state-level organizations, school districts, and nonprofit agencies, specifically related to planning, implementing, and scaling evidence-based literacy practices and interventions. [REDACTED] was recognized by the *Council for Learning Disabilities* with the [REDACTED] [REDACTED] for her dissertation on vocabulary instruction in [REDACTED].

Pearl is the trusted technology partner supporting the design, delivery, and evaluation of the SOAR United Tutoring model. Pearl's Tutor Management System (TMS) and Data Hub provide the digital infrastructure needed to operate, monitor, and scale high-impact tutoring programs across multiple counties and community sites. Through Pearl's secure, FERPA-compliant platform, United Way and participating sites can manage tutor onboarding, scheduling, attendance, and student progress in one integrated system. The platform automates data collection from each tutoring session, capturing dosage, attendance, and outcomes, so that program leaders, evaluators, and funders have a clear, real-time picture of student growth and program impact.

The Mississippi Department of Human Services (MDHS) is positioned to support the SOAR United Mississippi Program with the Mississippi LIFT Resource & Referral Network. MS LIFT is a system of 50 brick and mortar family resource centers strategically positioned throughout Mississippi. In addition, there are three mobile resource units that allow the network to reach the most rural locations in our state. With over 300 staff members that support child care, families, and children with special needs, the MDHS network is poised to assist SOAR United. Through the MS LIFT R&R Network, MDHS can provide space for training sessions, free resources for SOAR United participants, and assist with recruiting childcare staff to the program. The MS LIFT R&R Network locations across the state can provide quiet rooms for tutoring as all locations have designated training rooms. The R&R Centers will serve as a location for tutoring for students not enrolled in after-school programs but parents want to self-enroll in the program (homeschool,

private school) and as a centralized, localized resource hub for childcare centers and families participating in the project. The MS LIFT R&R Network is fully staffed with trained individuals who are able to assist children and families with projects and resources. See Appendix A for a map of R&R centers accessible to communities included in this expansion project.

Even with the “Mississippi Miracle,” the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) acknowledges students from rural and poverty areas need more help than others and community partners can fill an important role in closing the gaps. The leadership at MDE fully supports the SOAR United initiative as it scales across the state. MDE will be working with SOAR United in outreach, family engagement, connecting literacy resources through the state’s literacy coaches, and other partnerships to ensure this project’s success. Collectively, this public/private partnership will be contributing data and evidence from this high-impact tutoring model with hopes this is a model for other rural communities in Mississippi and across the nation.

The Children’s Foundation of Mississippi (CFM) will support local efforts to scale SOAR United in order to improve outcomes for children statewide by supporting local communities in connecting to existing resources, convening stakeholders, and supporting messaging campaigns. CFM’s efforts are known to influence state policies, bring stakeholders together around worthy projects, and support the evidence-based practices of quality programs.

RAND, a nonprofit and non-partisan research organization, brings a robust research infrastructure that supports 1,100 researchers and 800 staff. This infrastructure spans data storage, security and analysis, seven methods centers for rigorous qualitative and quantitative approaches, large scale research survey services, and grant management resources. The research team on this project specializes in education research and has successfully fielded large-scale RCTs and implementation research that has met WWC Standards Without Reservations for a variety of

funders, including U.S. Department of Education EIR projects.

The above partners are dedicated to institutionalizing SOAR United long after EIR funding, for example, by embedding it within MDE's literacy initiatives, MDHS's afterschool funding streams, or UW fundraising campaigns. Linking state partnerships will sustain this work and continue implementation and adaptation after EIR funding ends.

B.4 Mechanisms to Broadly Disseminate Information and Support Replication

Several tools will be developed to broadly disseminate information about SOAR United across Mississippi and America to multiple target audiences to contribute to the national landscape on high-impact tutoring for K–5th grade students in rural, out-of-school settings. First, an integrated communication toolkit will allow partners and stakeholders to communicate with parents the importance of high-impact tutoring, high quality afterschool programming, and literacy instruction as well as to present findings and research widely across sectors and platforms. The toolkit will include infographics, presentations, social media posts, and policy briefs. Second, a project website and resource hub (together to form an implementation toolkit) will be available starting in Year 2 to allow open access to program design elements, parent engagement strategies, literacy support, recruiting tips, staff/tutor training resources, success stories, and voices from the field, with the goal to share project implementation strategies and outcomes to encourage adoption of SOAR United. Third, local showcases, literacy nights, and student celebrations will be held to expand awareness among local education agencies, families, and community organizations.

Finally, at the conclusion of the RCT study, we will leverage RAND to disseminate research findings through peer reviewed publications in leading journals, such as Journal of Literacy Research, Journal of Research in Rural Education, and Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis. RAND researchers regularly attend practitioner and research conferences to ensure a

wide set of audiences understand the findings. Conferences include the annual conferences for the Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness, Association for Education Finance and Policy, National Association of Superintendents, and National Association of Elementary School Principals. Further, RAND has a dedicated Communication and External Affairs department that widely disseminates findings from research projects through targeted emails to researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, outreach to media, and through supporting researcher-led Op-Eds. RAND will also work with UWWCM and partners to field a series of webinars aimed towards practitioners and policymakers that will introduce SOAR United and the research results.

Dissemination roles are as follows: UWWCM will oversee the dissemination strategy, coordinate communications, and ensure brand consistency, while RAND and the Children's Foundation of Mississippi will prepare evaluation briefs and research reports. Pearl will provide data and project transparency, and community partner sites will host events and promote resources through their networks. All partners, including MDHS and MDE, will leverage state and regional networks to amplify resources via newsletters, webinars, and technical assistance channels.

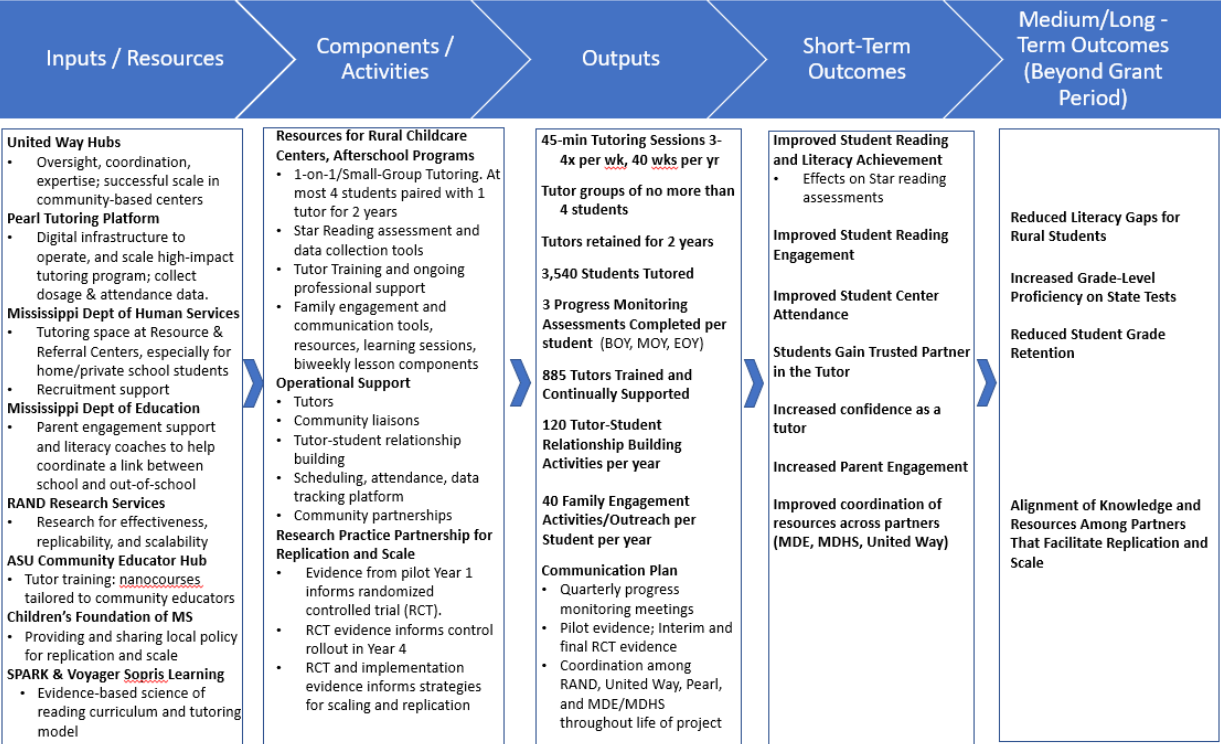
C. Quality of the Project Design

C.1. Conceptual Framework for the Proposed Research

Figure 1 provides a detailed visualization of the conceptual framework that undergirds SOAR United and the associated research. This conceptualization represents a replication and scaling of the SPARK intervention (Jones and Christian, 2021) coupled with a robust set of resources. UWWCM will provide oversight for SOAR United, its scaling, and the associated research. UWWCM's connections and stature in the community, in conjunction with the additional United Ways serving as hubs, will bring together a variety of peer community-based centers to tailor SOAR United to local communities with collaboration from the Mississippi Department of Human

Services (MDHS) and Mississippi Department of Education (MDE). The tutoring services and data collection will be robust with the coordination of the widely used tutoring platform, Pearl. RAND will provide rigorous research and evaluation services to inform replication and scale.

Figure 1. SOAR United Conceptual Framework



SOAR United, based on SPARK and Voyager Passport, will be a robust intervention that trains tutors for 1-1 or small group tutoring, and wider family engagement by the centers and tutors. SOAR United will provide three sets of resources: (1) Resources for Rural Childcare Centers and Afterschool Programs; (2) Operational Supports; and (3) support from a Research Practice Partnership. Together, these resources will drive program outputs, such as implementing the tutoring program with fidelity (e.g., hiring and continually supporting a cadre of 885 tutors; providing students with intensive, 45 minute tutoring support three to four times a week for 40 weeks a year for two years; progress monitoring through three waves of the validated Renaissance Star formative assessment; 120 tutor-student relationship activities that run the gamut from daily

check-ins, kickball games, and shared reading experiences and family engagement activities in the form of 10 reading strategy tip sheets and three in-person literacy learning). In addition, SOAR United will build relationships among the tutors, students, SOAR United, and the community and advance parent engagement to build an ecosystem of support to improve student literacy and reading outcomes. RAND will provide evidence to inform replication and scale through implementation research involving surveys, qualitative research, and the RCT so that UWWCM and its associated partners can use evidence from the Year 1 pilot to inform rollout during the RCT; evidence from the RCT will inform the control rollout in Year 4. Evidence from the research will identify the components needed to replicate and scale SOAR United in other contexts.

After two years, these efforts will provide measurable improvement in student literacy and reading skills as measured by the Renaissance Star exam, improved student engagement in literacy and reading, and improved center student attendance. These effects will be mediated in part by stronger tutor-teacher relationships and improved family engagement with centers. SOAR United will deepen connections and shared resources among UWWCM, MDE, and MDHS which will be crucial for the continuation and scaling of SOAR United. Though not possible to measure in the relatively short time frame of the project, these proximal results will set students up to boost grade-level performance in literacy and reading which will reduce grade-level retention and help close the achievement gaps of rural students. Further, as the connections among UWWCM, MDE, and MDHS solidify, the organization will be poised to continue the efforts beyond the project period.

C.2 Goals, Objectives, and Outcomes are Clearly Specified and Measurable

We have defined the following goals and objectives (Table 2), tied to measures and roles, evaluation milestones and timelines (Table 1), and evaluation plan measures (Appendix D).

Table 2. Specified Goals, Objectives and Outcomes

Short Term Outcome	Measurable Objectives	Long Term Outcome
Goal 1: Students participate in tutoring sessions		
(1) Improved Student Reading and Literacy Achievement Measures: Star reading assessment, program data via Pearl	1.1: 80% of tutored students achieve expected growth score on STAR 1.2: 90% of tutoring sessions are 45-min long 1.3: 90% of centers hold 4 tutoring sessions per week 1.4: 90% of centers hold tutoring sessions for 40 weeks per year 1.5: 80% of tutoring sessions include no more than 4 students 1.6: Hire 885 tutors 1.7: 90% of expected number of students enroll in tutoring sessions 1.8: 90% of students complete 3 progress monitoring assessments/year	*Reduced Literacy Gaps for Rural Students *Increased Grade-Level State Test Proficiency *Reduced Student Grade Retention
Goal 2: Students engage in reading		
(2) Improved Student Reading Engagement Measures: Center staff measures of reading engagement.	2.1: 80% of students are rated an average of “true” by center staff on reading engagement items	*Reduced Literacy Gaps for Rural Students *Increased Grade-Level State Test Proficiency *Reduced Student Grade Retention
Goal 3: Students attend community/tutoring centers		
(3) Improved Student Attendance at Centers Measure: Center attendance data via Pearl	3.1: 80% center student attendance rates per year	*Reduced Rural Gaps *Increased Grade-Level State Test Proficiency *Reduced Student Grade Retention
Goal 4: Students build positive relationships with tutors		
(4) Students Gain Trusted Partner in the Tutor Measures: Program data on student/tutor relationship building activities;	4.1: 90% of centers complete 120 student-tutor relationship building activities per year 4.2: 90% of tutors participate in relationship building activities/year 4.3: 80% of students participate in relationship building activities/year 4.4: 90% of tutors rate relationships	*Reduced Literacy Gaps for Rural Students *Increased Grade-Level State Test Proficiency *Reduced Student Grade Retention
observations; student surveys (grades 3-5), tutor surveys	4.5: 90% of students rate relationships with tutors as “positive” 4.6: 80% of tutors retained for 2 years	
Goal 5: Tutors attend training sessions and tutoring sessions		

Short Term Outcome	Measurable Objectives	Long Term Outcome
(5) Increased confidence as a tutor Measures: Program data on tutor training sessions; tutor attendance data via Pearl; tutor surveys	5.1: 95% of tutors attend training 5.2: 95% of tutors attend tutoring 5.3: 90% of tutors rate themselves as “confident” tutors 5.4: 90% of tutors engage in ongoing professional learning by completing at least 10 ASU nanocourses per year 5.5: 90% of tutors participate in monthly curriculum support sessions	*Reduced Literacy Gaps for Rural Students *Increased Grade-Level State Test Proficiency *Reduced Student Grade Retention
Goal 6: Parents attend and participate in engagement activities		
(6) Increased Parent Engagement Measures: Program data on parent engagement activities; parent focus groups	6.1: 90% of centers conduct 40 engagement/outreach activities per year 6.2: All centers have at least 20% of parents engage in half of parent engagement sessions 6.3: At least 50% of focus group parents feel informed and engaged	*Reduced Literacy Gaps for Rural Students *Increased Grade-Level State Test Proficiency *Reduced Student Grade Retention
Goal 7: Partners engage in knowledge sharing and continuous improvement activities		
(7) Improved coordination of resources across partners (MDE, MDHS, United Way) Measures: Program data on partner meetings; partner interviews	7.1: At least 2 staff from each partner attends quarterly progress monitoring meetings 7.2: At least 2 staff from each partner attends briefing on pilot study 7.3: At least 2 staff from each partner attends briefing on year 2 RCT 7.4: At least 2 staff from each partner attends briefing on year 3 RCT 7.5: Most interviewed partner staff feel that partners have coordinated to share knowledge and resources	Alignment of Knowledge and Resources Among Partners That Facilitate Replication and Scale

C.3 Designs of the Project Addresses the Needs of the Target Population

The design of this project directly addresses the needs of the target population, rural K–5 students who face significant barriers to literacy achievement, by providing evidence-based, high-impact afterschool tutoring tailored to their context. SOAR United incorporates individualized literacy instruction aligned with state standards, delivered in small groups to ensure personalized attention. By combining high-quality tutoring with context-specific support, the project is designed to build capacity and programmatic access in rural communities and improve reading outcomes

while reducing participation barriers, ensuring that all students have the opportunity to succeed.

D. Quality of the Project Evaluation

RAND will collaborate with the UWWCM to field an impact, implementation, and cost evaluation of SOAR United that is designed to meet *What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) Standards Without Reservations*. RAND will pilot and refine interview, observation, and survey instruments in a Year 1 pilot study. In years 2 and 3, RAND will lead a blocked, cluster randomized controlled trial (RCT) evaluation, implementation research, and cost analysis as the program expands to three additional hubs. In Year 4, RAND will analyze the results as UWWCM provides tutoring services to the control group. Table 3 lists the evaluation research questions.

Table 3. Research Questions

Research Question (RQ)	Type of RQ
<i>Impact Study</i>	
RQ1. What is the two-year effect of SOAR United on student reading scores and subdomains as measured by the Renaissance Star assessment?	Overall: Confirmatory Subdomain: Exploratory
RQ2. What is the two-year effect of SOAR United on student engagement in reading and literacy?	Confirmatory
RQ3. What is the two-year effect of SOAR United on student attendance at centers?	Confirmatory
RQ4. What are one year effects for the above and how do effects vary by student demographics, special program participation, grade-level, and prior reading achievement?	Exploratory
RQ5. How are dosage, tutoring group size, and tutor characteristics related to child outcomes?	Correlational
RQ6: What is the per-pupil cost and cost-effectiveness of SOAR United compared to a business-as-usual (BAU) condition?	N/A
<i>Implementation Study</i>	
RQ7. To what extent are the key components of SOAR United implemented with fidelity as outlined in the program logic model?	
RQ8. What is the relationship of fidelity of implementation of SOAR United to student overall reading scores and student engagement in reading?	
RQ9: To what extent does SOAR United produce positive student-tutor relationships, tutor confidence, family engagement, and improved coordination of resources across partners in contrast to BAU conditions?	
RQ10: What facilitators and challenges to fidelity of implementation, scale, and replication exist, and how can they be addressed?	

As we detail below, the above research questions will provide evidence of effectiveness of SOAR United on valid and reliable outcomes and provide detailed information on the elements of SOAR United and the approach that will facilitate replication and scaling in other contexts.

D.1 Producing evidence that meets WWC Standards Without Reservations

Randomized Controlled Trial Design: RAND will field a rigorous blocked, cluster RCT *to provide evidence of effectiveness that meets WWC Standards Without Reservations*. The RCT will begin in year 2 (school year 2027-2028) when SOAR United will expand to five United Way hubs in Mississippi; and will continue through year 3 (school year 2028-2029; two years total). Afterschool partners that will implement SOAR United take many forms including faith-based institutions, libraries, local resource centers, and other non-profits. Within each hub, RAND will randomize half the partners of each type to implement the SOAR United and the other half to continue in a business as usual (BAU) condition. For example, within a hub, half of faith-based partner centers will be randomized to SOAR United or BAU. By blocking on partner type within a hub, we can ensure balance on key moderators of outcomes and grow precision by accounting for more variation in the outcome. To the extent that there are single types of partners within a hub, we will place the singletons in a separate block and randomize within that block.

RAND will set the sample of students and staff at the beginning of the RCT in Year 2. Students who sign up to attend the centers by the end of July 2027 and the center's associated staff will be considered analytic sample and will be rigorously tracked throughout the study. After the sample is set, centers will be randomly assigned to the SOAR United or BAU condition. Students and staff who enter the center after randomization ("joiners") will not be considered part of the study because their decisions to attend the center can be based in part on the availability of tutoring services. Students and staff who start at a BAU center and move to a SOAR United center (or vice-

versa) will be tracked. Our main estimates will retain the original randomization, regardless of switching behavior (intent-to-treat estimates). If a substantial number of students switch conditions, we will use the original randomization assignment as an instrument for actual exposure to SOAR United to estimate exploratory complier average treatment effects per WWC guidelines. Consistent with best practices, we will pre-register the study and identify one confirmatory outcome per domain as the primary test of our logic model. Additional exploratory outcomes will require further research to substantiate any observed effects. Students in K-5 at the beginning of year 2 will be able to contribute to one-year (exploratory) impact estimates and students in K-4 in the beginning of year 2 will contribute to two-year (confirmatory) impact estimates.

RAND will rigorously track the attrition. As the main student outcomes of interest are literacy achievement as measured by formative assessments and center attendance that will be collected via centers, we anticipate attrition to be low, balanced between treatment and control group, and within WWC's conservative threshold. RAND has ample experience administering large scale surveys and through the combination of incentives and follow-up procedures have been able to achieve response rates that also meet the conservative WWC threshold. RAND will also calculate baseline balance on student demographic characteristics, baseline measures of reading achievement on the Star assessment, and baseline measures of outcomes.

Valid and Reliable Outcomes: All outcomes used in the RCT, presented in Table 4, will meet WWC validity and reliability standards. As part of the provided services, centers will assess students on the Renaissance Star Reading assessment three times a year (beginning, middle, and end of year), which will be used to answer RQs 1 and 4. Baseline measures will be the spring 2026-2027 school year administration (spring prior to RCT) for students who will be in grades 1-5 in the first year of the study and in the fall of the 2027-2028 school year for K students.

Table 4. Valid and Reliable Outcomes in the RCT

RQ	Outcome	Measure	Validity/Reliability
RQ 1, 4	Reading/Literacy	Renaissance Star Reading	alpha=0.97-0.94; (Renaissance Learning, 2024)
RQ 2, 4	Student engagement in reading/literacy	Reading Engagement Index	Alpha = 0.92 (Wigfield et al., 2008)
RQ 3,4	Student attendance in center	Daily attendance	Admin data valid/reliable by WWC
RQ 5	Dosage, tutor group size, platform use	Pearl platform data	Admin data valid/reliable by WWC

To answer RQ2, center staff will rate each student’s engagement in literacy and reading with the Reading Engagement Index (REI, Wigfield et al., 2008) and we will adapt the instrument for literacy practices in earlier elementary grades and estimate Cronbach’s alpha to determine eligibility. The pilot will be used to ensure the adaptation is appropriate and reliable. We will ensure that analogous staff assess the students in the treatment and control conditions. To answer RQs 3 and 4, we will use administrative data on daily attendance from the United Way centers. Attendance will be aggregated to the year level to understand whether SOAR United causes students to access after school services to a greater extent. As most students are directly transported school to the center, this measure is also a proxy for attendance in school. Finally, to answer RQ5, Pearl will provide session level data on student attendance, group size, and platform use. RAND will aggregate and correlate these variables to understand how tutor session characteristics are correlated with the outcomes of interest.

Sample and Power Calculations: The RCT will enroll about 2,600 students across five hubs in rural Mississippi. The students served by the program will largely be low-income and low-performing students in reading. According to Census data, 55% of households with children ages 5 to 13 struggle to make ends meet in the areas that the centers serve (United for ALICE, 2025). According to state data, only 43% of students in these areas are proficient in reading on the state standardized tests by third grade and only 36% are kindergarten ready.

We conceptualize a three-level block, clustered randomized controlled trial with students nested in centers nested in provider type-hubs blocks. As it is impossible to know the number of blocks prior to recruitment, we conservatively estimate power by blocking on the five hubs. Based on program data, we assume that there is an average of 20 students per center and 26 centers in each of the five hubs. The result is a minimum detectable effect size of 0.11 standard deviations (SDs) on student outcomes (see Appendix C for details). We are well powered because SPARK, the program off which SOAR United was designed, saw effects of 0.20 standard deviations (SD) on the Renaissance Star and 0.16SD on attendance (Jones and Christian, 2021; Jones et al., 2024).

Data Analysis: RAND will obtain individual level student data from the United Way including baseline measures of the outcomes. The following model will be used, where Y_{ich} represents the

$$Y_{ich} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 SOAR_{ich} + \mathbf{X}_{ich} \boldsymbol{\beta}_2 + \alpha_b + \varepsilon_{ich} \quad (1)$$

outcome of student, i , in center, c , in hub, h ; $SOAR_{ich}$ is an indicator for whether a center was randomly assigned to SOAR United; \mathbf{X}_{ich} is a vector of student background characteristics and baseline measures of the outcomes; α_b are block fixed effects, and ε_{ich} is a random student-level error term. Standard errors will be clustered by center due to the nesting of students in centers.

RAND will also look for differential effects by the characteristics listed in RQ 4:

$$Y_{ich} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 SOAR_{ich} + \beta_2 SOAR_{ich} * X_{ich} + \mathbf{W}_{ich} \boldsymbol{\beta}_3 + \alpha_b + \varepsilon_{ich} \quad (1)$$

where all elements are the same as equation 1 except now we include an interaction term between $SOAR_{ich}$ and the subgroup of interest, X_{ich} . In this model, β_2 represents the differential effect of SOAR United on the subgroup of interest and β_1 represents the effect of SOAR United on the reference group. We will calculate $\beta_1 + \beta_2$ which will be the effect of SOAR United on the subgroup of interest. Standard errors will be clustered by center. In all analyses, missing outcome data will not be imputed. However, if necessary, we will impute missing baseline data via multiple

chained imputation (Raghunathan et al., 2001), an allowable technique under WWC guidelines.

D.2. *Evaluation to provide guidance about effective strategies for Replication and Testing*

Answers to our research questions will inform guidance about effective strategies for replication and testing SOAR United by gathering comprehensive data to measure main effects of program outcomes (RQ1, 2, 3); key student and contextual moderators (RQ4); the relationship between fidelity of implementation of program elements (e.g., dosage, tutor-student relationships) and impact (RQ7, 8); cost (RQ6); the value-add of SOAR United over BAU conditions (RQ9) and program elements most critical to replication and scale and mitigation strategies for implementation challenges that threaten fidelity (RQ10). These findings will inform broader lessons for SEA, LEA and community-based organizations beyond the study to scale and replicate SOAR United. In addition, data from the implementation study will inform continuous improvement of SOAR United. *Implementation Analysis:* The implementation study will address RQs 7-10 by gathering interview, focus group, and survey data from multiple stakeholders with different roles and perspectives on implementation, as well as data from in-person observations of tutoring sessions, program data and documentation, and program data from the Pearl platform to provide a comprehensive picture of implementation processes, fidelity, challenges, and enablers. Appendix D provides a full list of implementation data sources, samples, how they map to the measurable objectives in Table C.2, and to research questions. When sampling is necessary (e.g., tutors, parents) we will sample participants across the variety of contexts (e.g., childcare centers, faith-based centers) to understand variation in implementation, challenges, and facilitators.

RQ7 will assess how well the program met its measurable objectives and goals, which will help us interpret main program effects and allow us to identify which program goals and objectives are most related to improvements in student literacy and reading achievement and engagement and

center attendance. We will analyze program documentation, surveys, and Pearl platform data to create indicators for each objective described in Table 2 in section C.2. We will aggregate these indicators at the center, hub, and program levels to create fidelity measures for each goal. We will inspect these descriptive statistics, analyze how levels of fidelity vary across hubs and across center type (e.g., faith based or childcare centers) and perform hypothesis tests to compare responses. RQ8 will identify which goals and objectives are most related to improved literacy and engagement in reading and which are most critical to replication and scale, and at which levels of fidelity. We will perform correlations of fidelity indicators with student outcomes, descriptively examine how they vary across program context, and perform simple hypothesis tests to compare across subgroups. We will analyze the surveys, interviews and focus groups to qualitatively describe perceptions of the relationship between fidelity and outcomes.

In RQ9 we will describe the extent to which SOAR United produces positive student-tutor relationships, tutor confidence, family engagement, and improved coordination of resources across partners in contrast to BAU conditions. We will analyze the observation, survey, interview, and focus group data and compare and contrast across treatment and control conditions. RQ10 will analyze the observation, survey, interview, and focus group data to understand facilitators and constraints to replication and scale and identify mitigation strategies to support implementing the SOAR United program elements most related to improved student literacy outcomes.

Cost Effectiveness: Policymakers require information about program cost and cost-effectiveness to inform decisions about whether, where, or how to implement. To answer RQ 6, RAND will conduct a cost effectiveness where RAND will enumerate the costs using the ingredients method (Levin and McEwan, 2001). With this method, RAND will identify the costs of inputs into both the SOAR United and control groups. These inputs will be identified via document reviews and

through the addition of key questions in protocols for interviews with staff and tutors, interviews with UWWCM and Pearl staff, and through the addition of key questions in tutor and staff surveys which will clearly elicit the difference between the treatment and BAU conditions. After identifying the inputs, RAND will cost out each input using the “Cost Out” tool developed by Columbia Teacher’s college and the new version of the tool due out later this year as well as public sources such as the Bureau of Labor Statistics. After calculating the incremental costs, RAND will calculate cost effectiveness ratio to aid the comparison of SOAR United to other interventions.

D.3 Fidelity of Implementation

The design of the evaluation plan is informed by the three key components as illustrated by the logic model in Figure 1. *Resources for rural childcare centers and afterschool programs* include the tutoring sessions based on Voyager’s science of learning-based curriculum, small group tutoring sessions, and very low tutor turnover. Based on evidence, we recommend at most four students are paired with 1 tutor for the full 2-year program (Robinson & Loeb, 2021). Tutoring sessions are recommended to be 45 minutes long and held 3-4 times per week, 40 weeks per year. Past experience suggests that 80% of students should attend tutoring sessions and 90% of students should complete 3 progress monitoring assessments per year. SOAR United provides tutors with initial training and ongoing professional support which includes an initial training session, at which we expect 95% tutor attendance, complemented by 95% tutor attendance at tutoring sessions. United Way will provide tutors with ongoing monthly curriculum support sessions; we expect 90% of tutors will participate. We expect 90% of tutors will complete at least 10 Arizona State University Community Educator courses. Using a pre-post survey we expect that 90% of tutors will rate themselves as “confident” in tutoring at the end of the 2-year program. We anticipate that 90% of centers will conduct 40 parent engagement or outreach activities per year, that all centers

will have at least 20% parents engage in half of parent engagement activities, and at least 50% of parents who participate in focus groups will feel informed and engaged.

Operational support for tutoring centers involves hiring 885 tutors from the local labor market. SOAR United provides substantial support to build positive tutor-student relationships through activities other than tutoring. Building relationships outside of tutoring interactions can increase student engagement and make tutoring sessions more productive. We expect that 90% of centers complete 120 student-tutor relationship building activities per year and that 90% of tutors and 80% of students participate and rate their relationships as “positive” via end of year surveys.

Research practice partnerships will ensure that partners continuously work together to share, align, and codify knowledge and resources that facilitate replication and scale. Our past experience suggests that at least 2 staff persons from each partner should attend quarterly progress monitoring meetings and annual briefings to share pilot study and RCT feedback. In addition, we expect that partner staff feel that partners have coordinated to share knowledge and resources and that the feedback informs strategies for scaling and replication.

The key **outcomes** of SOAR United are: **(1) Students:** improved reading and literacy achievement, engagement, and center attendance. We expect that 80% of tutored students will achieve expected growth score on STAR and 80% of students are rated as “true or above” on the reading engagement index by center staff and that 80% of students attend centers yearly; **(2) Tutors:** a rise in confidence in tutoring and full program retention 90% of tutors will rate themselves as “confident” in tutoring and will be retained throughout the 2-year program.

D.4 Implementation and evaluation to provide guidance for replication

The SOAR United model and theory of change is based on SPARK tutoring intervention and the Voyager Passport curriculum. Numerous program elements make it ideal for replication and

scale in other contexts. First, SOAR United coordinates existing, vital community resources—community centers, faith-based centers, childcare centers—across multiple service provider partners to provide cohesive, coherent evidence-based literacy instruction to families. Second, SOAR United’s intensive tutor training and curriculum grounded in the science of reading enables program leaders to recruit tutors directly from the local workforce and train them to be competent, confident, instructors that stay for the full 2 years of the program and cultivate strong, positive relationships with their students. Third, SOAR United invests in building strong, positive tutor-student relationships through activities other than tutoring. The trust and camaraderie that emerge from those activities can improve student attendance and engagement and tutor retention and make the tutoring sessions more productive. Fourth, SOAR United focuses on using multiple approaches to engaging parents in supporting their child’s attendance at local centers, and development of literacy skills. Fifth, SOAR United’s partnership with Pearl provides a low-burden way for tutors, center directors, community liaisons and hub directors to collect and analyze data about program implementation and student performance, to monitor local goals and objectives.

Finally, all outcomes used to answer RQs 1-4 will meet WWC validity and reliability standards (WWC, 2022). All measures have face validity, have the necessary reliabilities of at least 0.60, are not overaligned to SOAR United because they are third-party measures, and RAND will ensure that all survey measures are collected in the same way in treatment and control condition. All center-based assessments and administrative data will be collected the same way for all students in the usual course of business. The robust overall impact analyses and subgroup analyses combined with the implementation data will provide program leaders regionally and nationally with detailed data on what works for whom, under what conditions, and why to draw broader lessons to support future replication and scale of the most effective program elements with fidelity.

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