

## Union City students get after-hours help District's tutoring program 'booming'

UNION CITY -- About 40 minutes after Union City Elementary School dismissed its students for the day, teacher Carrie Zuck still was teaching, and first-grader Sydney Wood still was sounding out words.

Julie Dibert, project director for Union City Community Schools' 21st Century after-school program, walked into Zuck's classroom and smiled as Woods worked with her teacher and a handful of students worked silently on computers.

"I just see these kids getting one-on-one help, and their parents aren't paying a dime for it," Dibert said. "It's so exciting."

About six months after receiving a five-year, \$450,000 grant from the Michigan Department of Education, Union City's afterschool program is booming. Just at the elementary school, enrollment tops out at 100 students each day -- about a fourth of the school's total enrollment -- dwarfing last year's average of about 20.

The 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant, usually awarded to larger, urban districts, was described by school leaders in August as a coup for this small district of about 1,100 students. And now, Union City's close-knit ties are allowing the free afterschool program to take root at a time when families are coping with stretched budgets.

"I think because we are a smaller district, there is more buy-in," Superintendent Patrick Kreger said. "Our board, our principals, our staff, our parents; they're all extremely supportive."

Union City Community Schools contracts with Community Unlimited, a Union City-based nonprofit group, to provide programming before and after school at the elementary school, middle school and high school. Community Unlimited pays teachers about \$20 an hour to stay until about 5 p.m. each weekday.

Community Unlimited partners with the United Way of Branch County, United Way of Greater Battle Creek and the Community Foundation Alliance of Calhoun County.

In addition to "disguised learning" activities such as geocaching and ice-fishing, students are given time to finish their homework with the help of teacher tutoring. The district also provides a free meal and transportation home.

"I get more help here than I would at home," said 15-year-old Austin Wert, who was working on a weather and climate assignment at Union City High School. "If I'm home, I can just watch TV."

Union City also was able to draw recently retired Val Rossman, a former Battle Creek Public Schools physical education teacher, to preside over a "River Runs Through It" fitness and earth science curriculum for 21st Century students.

"I think the really unique thing, and what is really contributing to (the afterschool program's) popularity is that we're listening to what kids want to do and tweaking things accordingly," said Ronna Steel, Union City's director of curriculum, instruction and assessment.

Steel said the grant also required the district to keep track of the educational performance of students taking part in the 21st Century program to gauge its impact.

"The beauty of it is that we know these kids are being fed and being taken care of," Kreger said. "School is a safe place, and for a lot of our students, it's the most stable place in their lives."