Students get biomedical research experience in high school

Fri, Mar 27 2015, 08:00 PM EDT

By LAUREN LEA
News 4 San Antonio

SAN ANTONIO -- San Antonio is home to a unique program that's creating the next generation of scientists.

Students from 30 high schools around the area attend the Voelcker Biomedical Research Academy and it is so successful, it could one day be duplicated at medical schools across the country.

What makes this program so unique is high school students are learning to do the same kind of work as professional students at the UT Health Science Center.

Andrew Kamali is already getting hands-on experience like a real biomedical researcher, even though he's only a sophomore at Fox Tech High School.

"It's an amazing opportunity that is one of the greatest experiences of my life currently," Kamali said.

He wants to focus on neuroscience, so this summer, as a Voelcker Academy scholar, he'll work one-on-one with a mentor to learn how to research and create experiments.

"Not a lot is known about the brain compared to the rest of the body and I love the idea of being able to learn things that maybe other people haven't," he said.

Over a three year period, scholars like Kamali attend intense, seven weeks-long summer sessions and events once a month during the school year. Dr. Lora Watts is his mentor.

"I think most people focus on becoming a physician or a dentist and a lot of people don't really focus on what a real research scientist does. So it really gives the students that true experience," Watts explained.

The Max and Minnie Tomerlin Voelcker Fund gifted the school a $675,000 dollar grant so the academy will continue for another three years.

"They get the experience of research in a lab. They get clinical exposure. They get leadership development courses," explained Dr. Irene Chapa.

All Voelcker Academy scholars have gone on to a four year college and about 97 percent are in a STEM, or science, technology, engineering and math, program.