EDITOR'S NOTE
For many students, tutoring provides the supplemental learning they need for academic success. This Spotlight will help you understand the advantages of tutoring as an academic recovery tool; discover how districts can expand access to tutoring; learn from the experts about long-term investment in tutoring; examine initiatives providing support to tutoring programs; explore tutoring strategies that combat learning loss; and more.

Tutoring

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The Rise of Tutoring and Where It Falls Short, in Charts

By Catherine Gewertz

The vast majority of school districts have set up tutoring programs to address unfinished learning, but they’re serving only a small slice of the children who need it, a new survey shows.

The EdWeek Research Center study represents the most detailed national picture yet of how districts are using tutoring to bolster learning opportunities lost during the pandemic. Of all interventions, tutoring boasts a particularly strong research base, but it can be tough to put into practice in all the ways that research shows work best. The survey reflects that difficulty.

The survey of 1,287 district and school leaders and teachers was conducted online between April 27 and May 2. Only a small slice of districts said they’re not offering tutoring.

They report that a hefty chunk of their students need tutoring, but only a small subset of those kids are participating.

Districts are focusing their programs heavily on math and reading, perhaps unsurprisingly, since federal accountability rests most heavily on those two subjects. But they’re also structuring their tutoring to cover any subject where a child needs help, and reserving some focus, also, for science and social studies.

Tutoring programs are, by and large, being held face-to-face, but some districts are using online approaches. Most districts report that their in-person programs are held in groups of four or fewer, a key feature researchers say boosts effectiveness. But many districts conduct sessions in groups of five or more.

Districts are struggling to deliver programs with another key feature linked to effectiveness: having students work with the same tutor week after week. Only one-third said all their students study with the same tutor regularly.

Timing can be pivotal for tutoring programs. They tend to get better participation when they happen during the school day, but fewer than half of districts said their programs are held during that time period, possibly because reworking the daily schedule to embed tutoring can be challenging.

Districts’ tutoring programs lean heavily on their own certified teachers. No surprise there: They’ve got the pedagogical chops, and already-established connections with students.

But they are also the most expensive option, which raises questions about program sustainability. Research has found that paraprofessionals, college students and others, if properly trained and supported, can also be effective tutors. But few districts are going this route.

Most districts focus their tutoring programs on students with the most academic need, but fully half make them available to anyone. A large minority requires tutoring for
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struggling students, but for most, it’s optional.

Few districts are weaving tutoring into the school day for everyone, even though some experts encourage this approach as a good way to improve instruction for all.

District and school leaders and teachers agree that tutoring is an effective intervention, although that picture gets more nuanced under the surface. While three-quarters said tutoring was effective, only one third agreed completely with that description. Four in 10 “somewhat” agreed.

Even though districts rely heavily on the most expensive option—their own teachers—to run their tutoring programs, cost was not among the challenges they cited most often. High on the list are students’ and families’ willingness to participate, and difficulty getting enough tutors. Transportation ranked high, too, probably because many districts hold their sessions outside normal school hours.

**Additional Resource**
To view all the charts that accompany this article, click here.

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6 Takeaways for School Districts To Implement Effective Tutoring

By Catherine Gewertz

Tutoring is a strategy many schools are using—or considering—to help students catch up on learning that didn’t happen during the pandemic. It has a strong research base to recommend it, but it can be tough to put into practice effectively. Here are some key takeaways as districts consider starting or scaling up tutoring programs:

**Effective tutoring programs have certain key characteristics.**

They’re “high-dosage,” or “high-impact,” which means they happen several times a week for 30 to 60 minutes. Students work individually or in very small groups—three or four per tutor—and they work with the same tutor throughout the program.

Sessions held during the school day are ideal, but they can also work if they’re held right after school. Tutors should be well-trained, work closely with their tutees’ teachers, be armed with good, standards-aligned instructional materials, and know how to monitor student progress with data.

**Online tutoring is an option, if it’s done right.**

Research emerging from Europe suggests that virtual tutoring can be effective. But it must be designed according to research-based principals, such as working in very small groups, and maintaining a relationship with the same tutor throughout the program.

**You don’t have to rely just on your own teachers.**

Districts are successfully using a mixture of paraprofessionals, tutors from outside organizations, and high school, college and graduate students alongside their own certified teachers. The Guilford County schools in North Carolina offer an example of this strategy. The district has partnered with two local universities to beef up its tutoring ranks.

**Your tutoring program might boost flow into the teacher pipeline.**

Some districts, such as Guilford County, hope their tutors will catch the instructional teaching bug and build up the teaching ranks. That would mean that investments in tutoring programs could also double as investments in the teacher pipeline.

Such programs might also diversify the pipeline: Guilford deliberately partnered with a historically Black university to channel more teachers of color into its classrooms, and to reflect the diversity of its student population.

**Start small, scale up slowly.**

Many districts are trying to implement tutoring programs that are at much larger scales than those researchers have studied. Starting with subsets of students, or specific grades or subject areas, might help districts work out the kinks as they expand.

**Build deep roots, not a quick one-off.**

Some experts are urging schools to imagine tutoring as far more than a quick fix for students in academic crisis. As a permanent addition to schools’ instructional strategies, tutoring could help support and challenge all students.
Online Tutoring Can Be Effective, Research Shows

By Catherine Gewertz

School districts across the country are turning hopeful eyes to tutoring programs as a way to help children recover academically from the COVID pandemic. Research shows that well-designed face-to-face tutoring can be a powerful ally. But there was little evidence that it could be done effectively online.

That’s starting to change. Two new studies from Spain and Italy offer encouraging signs that tutoring online can work to help children complete unfinished learning.

The findings are particularly noteworthy now, as schools search for as many good learning-recovery options as they can find. COVID-19 has not disappeared, and though the likelihood of widespread school closures appears to be low right now, it might not stay that way.

A paper published last month by researchers in Spain documents the effects of an online math tutoring program provided for about 175 socioeconomically disadvantaged students 12 to 15 years old in Madrid and Catalonia in the spring of 2021, when schools had reopened after COVID-19 shutdowns.

The tutors were math teachers who’d undergone 15-20 hours of additional training in skills that included tutoring techniques. Each tutor worked with groups of two students for eight weeks. After school, when students were at home, they went online to connect with their tutors for three 30-minute sessions per week. They worked on math skills and concepts, but the tutors also helped students build good work routines and supported their emotional well-being.

The researchers found that compared to a control group, students in the tutoring program had higher standardized test scores and grades, and were less likely to repeat a grade. They also were more likely to report putting increased effort into their schoolwork.

Researchers estimated that the rise in the students’ grades was equivalent to the bump that six additional months of learning would produce.

Test scores, attendance, rise after tutoring program

A paper published in February 2021 focuses on an Italian tutoring program delivered by volunteer university students to middle school students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds in the spring of 2020, when schools were shut down.

The 523 tutors were from a Milan university; the 1,000 student recipients were from 76 schools all over Italy. The students completed online, self-paced training modules designed by pedagogy experts. Those same experts supported the tutors in their work during the program.

Each tutor was assigned to one student, and worked with that student for the entire program, connecting online three to six hours per week, for a total average of about 17 hours over the course of the program, which covered math and language arts.

Using pre- and post-tutoring tests and surveys, the researchers found the program improved students’ scores on standardized tests, their attendance, the amount of time they devoted to homework, and their sense of well-being.

Those effects didn’t vary by the type of device the students used; the impacts were the same for students who used smart phones as those who used laptops or other computers. But whichever device they used, effectiveness did drop for students who struggled to keep a good internet connection.

An American team of researchers, led by Matthew Kraft at Brown University, found only modest effects from an online tutoring program administered to Chicago middle school students in the spring of 2021. They theorized that impacts were small because students received only about three hours of tutoring over the 12 weeks of the program.

Interesting insights about online tutoring are emerging from a big research project based at Brown University’s Annenberg Institute for School Reform. Launched in 2020, the National School Support Accelerator Project is working with 12 pilot sites around the country as they scale up different models of tutoring. The project has also built a range of support tools to help districts launch good-quality tutoring programs.

Annenberg Institute director Susanna Loeb, who supervises the Accelerator project, said its pilot sites are developing online and in-person models, structured in a variety of ways. Those building virtual programs have noticed that they tend to work better if the student is at school during online sessions.

The dynamics behind that effect aren’t yet clear, but Loeb said it seems less important for the tutor to be on campus than for the student. If that model works, it could ease one of the biggest stumbling blocks in bringing tutoring programs to scale: hiring enough tutors.

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Tutoring is on the brink of a national inflection point. School districts are channeling big chunks of their federal COVID-relief money into tutoring programs, relying on research that shows that the strategy can be a powerful ally in completing unfinished learning. Billions of dollars—and millions of children—are on the line.

With the stakes so high, experts are urging districts to reframe their thinking about tutoring. Please, they say: Imagine it not as a quick fix in a crisis, but as a long-range investment strategy to improve instruction.

Tutoring has soared on districts’ radars as pressure mounts to help students recover from two years of pandemic-driven learning disruptions. In a survey by the EdWeek Research Center in April and May of 2021, 97 percent of district leaders said tutoring was already being offered—or soon would be—to about one-third of their students. That’s 17 million of the country’s 51 million K-12 students.

In November, 62 percent of the nation’s 100 biggest school districts said they planned to offer tutoring, according to the Center on Reinventing Public Education, which has been tracking districts’ responses to COVID-19. By February, that number rose to 72 percent. On April 5, a group of heavy-hitting funders unveiled a $100 million project to scale up tutoring nationally. Districts can draw on billions in federal COVID-relief money to support learning-recovery programs.

What’s still unclear in the flurry of activity is how well districts can translate the promise of research on tutoring—which can deliver months of additional learning time—into good-quality programs. Studies are clear on what matters, but it’s far from easy to do.

Effective tutoring, often shorthanded as “high-dosage” or “high-impact” tutoring, should happen several times a week for 30 to 60 minutes, in very small groups, with the same tutor, ideally during the school day. Tutors should be well-trained, work closely with their tutees’ teachers, be armed with good, standards-aligned instructional materials, and monitor student progress with data.

“Districts are onto something with tutoring, but the question is whether it’s possible to pull it off in this moment,” with so many challenges already on their plates, said Bree Dusseault, who leads the district-tracking work at the Center on Reinventing Public Education.

A critical juncture: Doing it not just quickly, but right

The idea that this is an important moment cuts both ways for tutoring’s future. If schools imagine tutoring as a quick fix, and pay little attention to design and scale, their programs are unlikely to take root and show positive results, experts say. But tutoring planned carefully, and embedded in districts’ inner workings, could help rebuild learning post-pandemic and improve it for the long haul.

“We’re talking about something that has the power to be transformative,” said Michael Duffy, the president of the GO Foundation, which is working with eight schools to build tutoring programs. Good programs, he said, can be permanent fixtures of school life that support all children, from those struggling academically to those who need more-challenging work.

Even though district leaders are under pressure to help thousands of children immediately, they might want to consider starting tutoring programs small, and scaling up slowly, said Matthew Kraft, who studies tutoring as an associate professor of education and economics at Brown University.

Many districts are trying to implement tutoring on scales that are “multiple orders of magnitude” larger than the programs that have shown promise in research studies, he said. Starting with a focus on subsets of students, or specific grades or subject areas, can help districts work out the kinks as they expand their capacity, Kraft said.

But they need to go deep, too, and recognize that top-quality tutoring programs require changes in the way schools operate. Daily schedules might need to change. New partnerships need to grow: between teachers and tutors, districts and outside organizations like AmeriCorps. New systems must emerge to hire, train, pay, and support tutors, and to follow students’ progress.

Without this kind of “organizational com-
Aiming for long-term change in North Carolina

Guilford County Schools, in North Carolina, is building a tutoring program that’s drawn notice for its attention to research-based design and practice. The district has restructured fundamental operations to make a home for the program, setting up a special department devoted to hiring, training and supporting its tutors, and tracking students’ participation and progress.

The district started small, hiring eight college students in the fall of 2020 and focusing on math tutoring in its Title I middle and high schools, since that’s where research suggested the biggest academic impacts of COVID had landed, said Faith Freeman, who oversees Guilford’s tutoring program.

This spring, the program has grown to 500 paid tutors—a blend of high school students, undergraduate and graduate students, community members, and teachers—who work with 4,000 of its 70,000 students. They’re working on math K-12, literacy and science K-8, and middle-school social studies, Freeman said.

To choose students, the district uses an algorithm that blends risk factors such as grades, test data, course failures, and absenteeism. Students are “highly recommended,” though not required, to attend tutoring sessions, Freeman said. Schools must hold sessions at least weekly, but are encouraged to hold them two to three times per week, she said.

Choosing who gets tutoring is still hotly debated. Some favor providing tutoring to all students, to destigmatize being “chosen,” and to ensure that no one falls through the cracks. Others, like Guilford, intentionally target high-need groups, since scarce resources must be used sparingly.

Most of Guilford’s 126 schools have clusters of students who are being tutored. Each school can schedule programs in ways that suit them best. Some have dedicated tutoring blocks in their schedules, while others have tutors work with students, off to the side, during regular class time.

Ninety-two percent of the district’s tutoring occurs in-person, during the regular school day, but some happens after school or virtually, Freeman said. (Much is still unknown about the effectiveness of online tutoring, but promising studies are starting to emerge.)

There is less flexibility in other aspects of Guilford’s program. Tutors must work with the same group of students over time, which research shows boosts effectiveness, since it builds relationships that support instruction. Tutors must also work weekly with teachers, observing instruction, debriefing on students’ needs and progress, and planning next steps, Freeman said.

A long-term commitment, with long-term questions

Guilford’s program is currently supported largely with federal COVID-relief money, which runs out in 2024, a timeline that has made many districts gun-shy about making multiyear instructional investments. But Freeman said the district sees tutoring as a long-haul commitment and instructional-support strategy, even though its leaders are not yet sure how they’ll pay for it two years from now.

Families tell teachers and district leaders about the positive effects tutoring has had on their students, Freeman said. (The district doesn’t yet have complete data on its impact on achievement.) The program is creating jobs in its community, and making tutoring available for many who can’t afford it privately, she said.

The district’s program also supports graduate students at local universities, since it funds those positions for students who are paid to tutor in Guilford. It also sees its program as an investment in the teacher pipeline. It chose North Carolina A&T State University, a historically Black institution and a prodigious producer of Black engineers, as one of its tutoring partners, both to mirror the diversity of its own student population, and, hopefully, channel more teachers of color into its classrooms.

As districts around the country consider and plan their own tutoring programs, they’ll probably need to draw on a variety of tutors, Kraft said: certified teachers, who carry the highest price tag, as well as paraprofessionals, college students, and outside tutoring organizations.

Because so many are launching big programs so quickly, their impact might be disappointing, sparking a backlash, Kraft said. He urged districts to plan carefully, think long-term, and resist quick conclusions.

“It would be premature to decide whether or not to stay the course on tutoring based on the experience of trying to scale it up over one to two years in the midst of a pandemic,” he said. “It’s a human-intensive endeavor, and hard to standardize with fidelity in a top-down kind of way. It’s going to take time and dedication, and commitment to iteration and improvement.”

Start your day with us.
Tutoring Best Practices To Promote Equity in Schools and Districts

Build equity into the framework of your tutoring program

Anything worth doing is worth doing right. And the stakes are high for schools to get it right with tutoring.

Our most vulnerable students—low-income students, students of color, those receiving special education services, and English learners—were disproportionately impacted by pandemic-related learning disruptions. They stand to gain the most from effective school tutoring programs and have the most at risk if tutoring isn’t designed with these student populations in mind.

Build equity into your district’s tutoring program at the systemic level with these three tutoring best practices.

**Universal tutoring is a more equitable practice.**

**Best Practice #1:** Embed Tutoring into the School Day

Scheduling can be a bear in the best of times, and teaching all state-mandated standards in the available time is a constant challenge for teachers. So, it’s no surprise that tutoring often gets added to the end of the school day, before the morning bell rings, or during the weekend.

Consider this. Embedding tutoring into the school day ensures that all students have equal access to this support. Students won’t worry about potential conflicts outside of the school day, such as afterschool jobs or caring for younger siblings or relatives, which lower-income students are more likely to do.

Economically disadvantaged children, who are disproportionately students of color, are also more likely to benefit from tutoring during the school day when they might have easier access to devices, a reliable internet connection, and a quiet and stable learning environment.

**Best Practice #2:** Make Tutoring Available to All Students

For high-dosage tutoring—defined as 1-on-1 or small groups 3-5 times per week—to have the greatest impact on underserved students, we have to get as many of them as possible working with tutors. Some districts implement tutoring programs to remediate or provide targeted intervention, only serving the students who are most behind.

Universal tutoring is a more equitable practice.

A 2021 research brief by EdResearch for Recovery (a partnership of education researchers at Brown University, Georgetown University, and Harvard University) describes universal tutoring as tutoring “where all students in a grade or school receive tutoring.”

The brief explains that not only does universal tutoring remove the stigma that tutoring is punishment for underperforming, it “could address the needs of the mid-performing students, and may provide a vehicle for high-performing students in underserved communities to excel.”
But let's be honest. It's often not feasible or affordable for many districts to provide high-dosage, high-quality tutoring to every student. You might need a system to determine who will and won't get tutoring. How can you do it equitably?

Consider these options for district-wide tutoring that is open to all students, even if not all are required to participate:

- Let students opt out of tutoring, rather than opt in. Enrolling students in tutoring as the default and requiring them to opt-out will keep the enrollment high. Behavioral research shows that people are more likely to move forward with pre-selected options. By automatically enrolling students in tutoring, underserved students are more likely to try it, although some may opt out.

- Rather than asking students to volunteer for tutoring, invite parents and caregivers to sign their children up. Involving students' families will not only get more students signed up for tutoring, but the additional level of buy-in and support will make the tutoring that much more effective.

### Deep Curricular Knowledge

It might feel like common sense to say that teachers make the best tutors. But have you considered that they are also best-positioned to support students facing the largest opportunity gaps?

Many underserved students show up to tutoring sessions unable to recognize their needs, let alone advocate for them. Tutors who are experienced teachers know what students need because they know curricular content like the back of their hand.

For this reason, Mathematics Instructional Supervisor Dr. Michelle Dyson of Prince George's County Public Schools, Maryland, made it a priority to have tutors when partnering with Carnegie Learning to implement their High-Dosage Tutoring services.

“A lot of times, kids will act like they don't know why they need tutoring,” says Dr. Dyson. “Or they'll just say, ‘My parents are making me do this,’ so it's important to have teachers who understand precisely what students should be learning at their grade level and present those concepts clearly while monitoring for understanding.”

Carnegie Learning’s tutors go a step further and partner with districts to understand their scope and sequence so that students’ engage with on-grade-level learning that's connected to what they're learning in the classroom. This accelerates learning for students who just need the right, efficient support to catch up. What's more, tutors can administer regular formative assessments via data-driven software, which helps them deliver even more effective tutoring.
Turbo-Power Your Tutoring with Proven Software

Our High-Dosage Tutoring services come with all the evidence-based best practices...

Plus boosters.

Add evidence-based software to your tutoring package to further increase the speed and depth of student learning. Students will blast off to grade level and beyond with support from our adaptive programs and our certified tutors who use the data from the software to tailor instruction.

A Rising Tide

High-dosage, high-quality tutoring will only accelerate learning for our marginalized students if we make sure to implement best practices that intentionally and systemically promote equity. And as your school district implements tutoring programs with equity in mind, all students will benefit—academically, socially, and emotionally. You'll notice the difference in the classroom, in the hallways, and on assessments. As the saying goes, a rising tide lifts all boats. Let's raise the tide for all students by raising the bar for tutoring!
A new multimillion-dollar effort will fund K-12 tutoring projects, experiment with new models, and bring more clarity to what works and what doesn’t—and create a tutoring network connecting dozens of districts and some states.

Unveiled April 5, the venture will be run by a newly created organization, Accelerate, and will receive its initial funding from The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Arnold Ventures, the Overdeck Family Foundation, and Kenneth C. Griffin, who leads Citadel, an investment firm. So far, the partners have raised $65 million out of a target of $100 million.

The effort will be led by CEO Kevin Huffman, formerly a Tennessee state superintendent of education. Janice Jackson, the former leader of the Chicago Public schools will serve as executive chair.

“The goal, if we’re successful 10 years from now is that high-quality tutoring will be a part of what students can expect to get in a school system. That can only happen if we figure out how to do it well, if we figure out some of these staffing challenges,” Jackson said. “And it can’t cost $3,000 per student.”

Students need intensive help, but the blueprint for how is unclear

The organization will immediately begin to seek districts, tutoring providers, and states to join its network. It envisions working with about a dozen districts and two to three states.

The need for tutoring programs that work at scale is clear. Study after study finds that students’ learning growth slowed during the pandemic exacerbating already-yawning opportunity gaps among students. And the final of three rounds of federal pandemic relief funding for schools directed districts to put at least a fifth of their cut of the funding into tutoring and other evidence-based ways of catching students up.

As recently as his State of the Union address, President Joe Biden called on districts to prioritize tutoring, and for others to volunteer to tutor.

“We can all play a part: Sign up to be a tutor or a mentor,” he said.

But nearly two years after the pandemic first hit schools, several big challenges with tutoring at scale have become readily apparent.

- **Staffing.** Many districts have reported challenges finding tutors, although the shortage is not as severe as bus drivers, substitutes, and other positions. Still, the same forces that have caused widespread disruption to the labor market are complicating districts’ ability to hire and adequately compensate tutors.

- **Capacity.** Earlier this year, providers have struggled to begin programs as the rapid spread of the omicron variant led to massive staff outages. And some state initiatives, like the New Jersey Tutoring Corps, have relied extensively on outside partners in part because school districts often simply did not have the bandwidth to oversee programs with fidelity.

- **Uptake.** As with extended learning and summer school options, many tutoring programs are voluntary, and it’s not always clear that the students who most need additional help are getting it. For logistical reasons and flexibility, tutoring is often offered as an voluntary add-on rather than integrated into the regular school schedule.

- **Lack of research on online tutoring.** Most of the research on tutoring doesn’t reflect the constraints that school districts face to get programs up and running now. And very little of it specifically looks at online tutoring, which is increasingly being considered by districts.

The online-tutoring landscape is particularly variable. Some of the biggest online providers are effectively offering on-demand homework help with a tutor, not the kind of sustained mentorship much of the prior research has pointed to as a successful practice. And other providers that built their reputations on in-person tutoring are now experimenting with hybrids, like ed-tech software that draws on artificial intelligence or other forms of computer learning, to supplement traditional modes.

Partly because of the multitude of options, the new organization’s leaders say they will
work with partners that are launching both in-person and online tutoring models.

“Some kids, in some subject areas, in some settings need small, in-person, high-dosage tutoring. Some may do really well with hybrid where they're some bit online, and some bit reinforced in person,” said Huffman. “Some students might do really well with tech-enabled tutoring if there’s a program that’s well researched and works for them.”

A research—and philanthropic—agenda

But the end goal, the leaders say, is shaping the marketplace to support effectiveness and taking the burden of quality control off overtaxed school and district leaders.

“There all these actors out there with no incentive to research their programs and see how effective they are,” Jackson noted. “We need to bring some parameters into this space. If I hear one more [online tutoring company] saying, ‘We went from X to Y million of students signed up’ as a marker of success, I’ll be ready to jump out the window. We need to make sure they’re closing these gaps.”

There’s already a subtext that schools and districts aren’t spending their relief funds quickly enough or wisely, she noted; the project could help counteract that narrative.

“One of my concerns is that public school systems were struggling with finances before the pandemic, and I don’t want this infusion of cash to be seen as wasted. I want to be able to do things to show its effectiveness,” Jackson said.

The new project will contain a significant research component: The University of Chicago will work with the new organization to conduct a random-experiment study as part of the project, though details about how that will work aren’t yet available. Accelerate will also work with the Annenberg Institute at Brown University, which has launched its own tutoring-research initiative.

Accelerate’s supporters have a long history of K-12 education philanthropy. The Gates Foundation has supported hundreds of millions of dollars in projects to boost teacher quality, use of effective curriculum, and learning. Arnold Ventures, formerly the John and Laura Arnold Foundation, has supported blended-learning initiatives in schools. (Education Week currently receives operating support from the Gates Foundation.)

The Overdeck Family Foundation, meanwhile, has helped fund statewide tutoring programs in Tennessee and New Jersey, among other investments.

High-Dosage Tutoring is Effective, But Expensive. Ideas for Making It Work

By Stephen Sawchuk

One-on-one tutoring is the original “personalized learning,” dating back centuries. Along with the Socratic seminar, it may be among the oldest pedagogies still in existence. And as it turns out, it is probably the single most powerful strategy for responding to learning loss.

Increasingly, top education researchers agree that tutoring programs for students who lost ground over the last six months should be a top priority for federal investment. There is potential, they say, for such a program to help ease unemployment. After all, the economic downturn means there’s a glut of talented college graduates and other degree holders who might be interested in tutoring part or full-time in exchange for a stipend or salary.

These advocates stress the realities of basic equity for the nation’s most underserved children. Tutoring, after all, is what advantaged parents routinely seek out for their children—and will continue to do as the pandemic continues. (In fact, some well-heeled parents are already putting together “learning pods”—essentially small tutoring groups—with other families.) Why should it be any different for other children?

Why is tutoring so effective?

The research on high-dosage tutoring—generally defined as one-on-one tutoring or tutoring in very small groups at least three times a week, or for about 50 hours over a semester—is robust, and it is convincing. On average, the effect sizes are among the largest of all interventions seen in education.

And tutoring seems to work for a range of subjects. Two recent meta-analyses looking specifically at tutoring within the context of struggling readers in the elementary grades and elementary math programs found evidence of success for both content areas.

Which is why any district that can afford to begin robust tutoring programs should, researchers say.

“For the level of problems districts are likely to be seeing coming into their doors with the minimum of six months of learning at home, I think it would be malpractice to do anything less than tutoring,” said Robert Slavin, a professor at Johns Hopkins University and director of the Center for
Research and Reform in Education, who has studied the topic extensively.

Just why tutoring seems to be so effective is harder to pinpoint empirically. But the theory of action is clear: In such small groups, teachers can better customize teaching to the specific content gaps a student has missed or the prerequisite skills they need to practice. And it’s easier for a student to develop a relationship with a tutor they see at dedicated hours several times a week.

“The magic of tutoring of course seems to be this individualized ability to both diagnose, and hover, in ways that just lead to real progress,” noted Emily Freitag, the CEO of Instruction Partners, a nonprofit working with districts in several states to develop COVID-19 instructional plans.

Plus, it boosts students’ confidence as they begin to make progress. “The lowest-performing kids tend to sit quietly in school and hope no one will notice them. With tutoring, there’s an adult who gets to know them and cares about them deeply and gives them loads of opportunity to let them show that they can succeed,” noted Slavin.

**How much does tutoring cost?**

The wrinkle is that tutoring comes with a high price tag, primarily in the form of hiring and training tutors, especially in a one-on-one setting. One study of a Chicago high-dosage math tutoring program found that it cost on the order of $3,800 a student over a school year, though economies of scale could potentially bring that figure down if it’s expanded.

Such is the strength of the research on tutoring that other countries are underwriting tutoring as a core strategy to put kids back on track.

In Britain, the Parliament has set aside 1 billion pounds (about $1.27 billion) for extra pupil services, of which £350 (about $442 million) will be specifically reserved for tutoring programs in primary and secondary schools. The funding will help schools procure tutoring at a reduced price, with the government giving a stamp of approval to those providers with evidence that their approach works. (A secondary tier will identify programs that lack effectiveness data but use features associated with better learning outcomes, said Robbie Coleman, the acting director of the National Tutoring Programme.)

The Netherlands also approved new funding for interventions, though it will be up to schools to decide whether to use the funding for tutoring or other pupil services.

Many U.S. researchers are pressing Congress to follow suit. So far, it has not approved funding beyond the CARES Act for specific interventions.

The AmeriCorps program, for example, has long supported tutoring among other types of community service, staffed by young volunteers who are paid a stipend. But its reach is limited by the annual federal budgeting process, and while there have been proposals to expand it as part of a national pandemic response, so far none of them have advanced.

Among states, Maryland appears to be the only one to earmark some of its CARES funding for tutoring; officials there said $100 million would be allocated, but the state has not made available any additional details. A Tennessee summer tutoring program, privately funded by former Gov. Bill Haslam and his wife, was administered through the Boys and Girls Clubs using college students. Theoretically, districts could use some Title I funding for tutoring, though districts often have already allocated that money into other continuing costs like salaries for classroom aides.

Still, there are some ways to lower the price tag of tutoring. Paraprofessionals and unpaid volunteers appear to be generally as good as certified classroom teachers in providing tutoring, and they are much less costly to hire, according to several studies.

(One way to think about this apparent contradiction: It can take years to learn how to effectively teach a class of 25 or more students. But many people can be trained in a relatively short time to be a good one-on-one tutor.)

There is one catch in the research, though: Unpaid volunteers are generally much less effective tutors than paid ones.

**How would tutoring work in a remote environment?**

Far less is known, researchers acknowledge, about the best way to make tutoring translate into a remote-learning session.

Engagement is among the core challenges, both in terms of building a relationship with each student and keeping the tutoring interactive in the absence of traditional materials like white boards, or when circumstances dictate telephone tutoring rather than a video format, said Christine SySantos Levy, special projects coordinator for Johns Hopkins School of Education’s Center for Research and Reform. (She helped administer a pilot online tutoring program in eight Baltimore schools over the summer.)

City Year, a nonprofit organization that
provides tutoring to approximately 38,000 students in 29 cities, is already planning to offer updated training to its corps of tutors. Those will include both core community engagement skills and pedagogical ones, like how to “check for understanding” in an online setting, rather than in a classroom.

“We want [tutors] to see themselves as a practitioner in both spaces,” said Stephanie Wu, the organization’s chief impact officer. “The skills are really different, and the content needs to be prepared differently.”

**Putting It All Together**

*Consider cost-effectiveness.*

One-on-one tutoring has the strongest evidence of effectiveness, but costs the most and reaches the fewest students. Some studies show that larger tutoring groups of two to four students, while less effective than one-to-one arrangements, still pay dividends for learning. At least one study on one-to-four afterschool tutoring found learning benefits for only Black students who participated, however.

Thus, this is a significant gray area in the literature. Districts will need to weigh their priorities and, potentially, test and modify their approaches. One idea is to begin tutoring with larger groups of students needing extra help—perhaps four at a time—and monitor carefully to see if their learning responds. If they don’t appear to be making progress, then it may be time to move them into one-on-one settings, suggested Slavin of Johns Hopkins University.

“I would keep careful track of how students are progressing,” he said. “A lot of kids will be successful at one-to-four [groups] but there may be kids who are not, and I would reserve one-to-one for those who are not.”

Matthew Kraft, an associate professor of education and economics at Brown University, favors a different approach: Keeping the group size down to two students per tutor, but holding costs down by employing college students or paid volunteers and keeping the focus on strong program leadership, design, and curriculum.

**The details matter.**

Quality matters. The research on tutoring indicates that it needs to be sustained, regular, and woven into the fabric of the school day, rather than once a week or exclusively after school. Repeated contact of at least three times a week, or 50 hours over four months, should be the baseline.

Many districts have attempted to do tutoring on their own, in afterschool programs and homework tables, or as part of federally required interventions under the former No Child Left Behind Act. But these low-dosage tutoring efforts generally don’t have the same impact as high-dosage tutoring. Typically, they have fewer quality-control parameters in place, are not sustained, or have variable attendance rates.

Districts can be flexible about the source of tutors—using a mix of classroom teachers, teaching assistants, and paid volunteers—but they should hold their tutors to regular attendance and give them some training on foundations in their subject, the curriculum they’ll be expected to use, and engagement strategies.

*Coordinate teaching and tutoring to the extent possible.*

Reading and Math, Inc., a nonprofit that deploys about 1,500 tutors nationally through AmeriCorps in more than a dozen states, includes a robust support system for tutors. They’re paired with an internal coach at the school site, usually a content expert, as well as a master coach from the organization.

“They get really high-quality initial and follow-up training to help them be the best that they can be. We know that training one time does not help educators implement evidence-based practices,” said Anne Sinclair, the chief learning officer for the organization.

Together, the internal coach and master coach participate in monthly meetings to examine data and share results with classroom teachers, so teachers know which content and skill gaps kids are working on. It is also a way to ensure that what’s happening in core instruction and in tutoring dovetail rather than conflict.

Britain’s National Tutoring Programme is taking a similar approach.

“Something that’s really important to us is that the tutoring is well-coordinated with the classroom teaching,” Coleman said. “The worst thing that can happen from a teacher’s perspective, and an impact perspective, is when you have teaching and tutoring that collides.”

ROBBIE COLEMAN
Acting director, National Tutoring Programme
To Get Tutoring Right, Connect It to the Classroom

By David M. Steiner & Ethan Mitnick

Meet Emma, a 4th grader. Last year, her school building was closed, and she attended only about half her distance-learning classes. Based on her performance on an assessment administered at the beginning of the school year, she is required to participate in a math-tutoring program to help her catch up. But instead of helping Emma feel more successful, tutoring creates additional stress. In class, Emma is learning about adding fractions with like denominators, but in tutoring, she’s working on finding the area of rectangles. There is no connection to her classroom work, and as a result, tutoring isn’t helping Emma.

School systems across the country are making major investments in tutoring. A recent review of school year 2021-22 district plans by the Center for Reinventing Public Education found that 52 percent of districts are planning to use federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds to help students make up instructional time, and for many districts, this involves providing tutoring.

The research base tells us that, when done right, tutoring can significantly boost students’ success. There is also powerful evidence that addressing unfinished learning should take a learning acceleration approach that focuses on strategically preparing students to tackle grade-level content rather than (impossibly) trying to remediate all missed content.

“Students are likely to learn more,” write the authors of an EdResearch for Recovery white paper on high-dosage tutoring, “when their tutoring sessions complement and are responsive to their classroom grade-level instruction.”

As educators who advocate such tutoring and work with states and districts to accomplish it, we know that a critical question is: How do we make tutoring connect closely to what is taught in the classroom? Without such a connection, Emma and many other students will be far less likely to benefit from tutoring.

School system leaders who are launching tutoring programs can take deliberate steps to fold core existing instructional resources right into their tutoring plans. Using high-quality instructional materials that are already the basis for classroom instruction in tutoring sessions helps streamline the work of leaders, teachers, tutors, and students while helping ensure that tutoring effectively accelerates student learning. Curriculum-based diagnostics such as Eureka Math Equip help identify critical content to reinforce in tutoring what will best prepare individual students for upcoming lessons. Additionally, using high-quality materials in tutoring benefits tutors and students alike because of the familiar look, feel, and instructional approaches of the materials.

Access to these materials helps guide all tutors’ acceleration efforts regardless of their prior experience. Novice tutors can preview upcoming lessons and content from the curriculum with students, while more experienced tutors can leverage diagnostic data to identify students’ unfinished learning and deliver individualized, just-in-time support.

Some high-quality materials providers such as Zearn Math and Amplify have already begun to create supplemental, aligned resources that are easy for tutors to use, such as scripts and step-by-step guidance. These tools help ensure that what students are working on in tutoring aligns with what they are doing in class. Even when their instructional materials are not yet adapted for use in tutoring, school and district leaders should still make a plan to use these resources in tutoring.

Here are some specific steps that leaders can take to connect tutoring to classroom instruction.

First, pay attention to details. For instance:

- Determine what you want tutors to focus on. Prioritize curriculum-embedded data sources. Identify diagnostic assessments from within your materials (such as the Eureka Math Equip mentioned above) that can be used to pinpoint the content to be taught and to monitor the efficacy of the tutoring. Establish a set of clearly defined milestones and goals including dates when you will review the data with the tutors for any mid-course corrections.

- Diagnostics may point to the need to reinforce foundational-skills math content and provide practice with decoding and vocabulary. In each case the skills should be needed for access to current grade-level work.

- Ensure tutors have access to the right materials. Whether digital or print materials, tutors need easy access to these resources. This may require a procurement process and assigning staff members to distribute print materials and/or logins to tutors.
Second, invest in your people. You can:

- Include tutors in teacher professional learning. Whenever possible, have tutors attend curriculum-specific professional learning and training alongside teachers. This will build a shared investment in the materials and better prepare tutors with the knowledge and skills they need to accelerate instruction.

- Hire a training partner/vendor. A trusted professional learning provider can conduct training and coaching for tutors on the instructional materials you are using, especially if your materials do not contain specific resources for tutors. This may be available through your curriculum vendor or from external professional learning organizations.

- Identify and use in-house educators who can support your tutors. Teachers or leaders who have been trained on the curriculum can provide ongoing site-based support and coaching for tutors on the use of the curriculum or serve as tutoring-program supervisors.

Several agencies and organizations launching tutoring initiatives have taken steps to align their tutoring programs with core instruction. Here are two examples:

- The Arkansas education department’s elementary and secondary division and Gary Community Ventures’ Learning League (based in Colorado) are leveraging Zearn for use in their tutoring programs to accelerate classroom instruction. Tutors receive robust training from SchoolKit on Zearn.

- The Texas Education Agency has released a list of vetted tutoring content providers. The materials on this list align to the core instructional materials being provided as open educational resources to Texas districts as part of the TEA’s COVID Recovery Supports.

The result is a coherent package of high-quality materials for districts wishing to align their instructional materials to those used in tutoring.

In addition to streamlining their own efforts, when educators connect tutoring closely with classroom instruction and high-quality materials already used in classrooms, they can change the tutoring experience for students like Emma. Rather than being an exercise in frustration, tutoring that’s classroom-connected boosts confidence and academic ability in and out of school.

That’s when students get the full power of tutoring, an urgently needed intervention.

David M. Steiner is the executive director of the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy, which currently supports multiple state agencies and districts in accelerating instruction for all students. Ethan Mitnick is the president of SchoolKit, a professional learning organization that provides content-area-specific trainings for leaders, teachers, and tutors.
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