EDITOR’S NOTE
Tutoring is a proven way to support student learning. This Spotlight will help you evaluate your district’s current methods; discover information on expanding and strengthening your schools’ approaches; assess what features are shown to be related to effectiveness; get ideas for combating high-cost initiatives; and discover considerations and strategies for designing high-impact tutoring programs.

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What Would a National Tutoring Program Look Like? Can We Afford It?

By Stephen Sawchuk

A “pay it forward” system of tutoring—recent college graduates who tutor high school students, college students who tutor middle school students, and so on down to elementary school—could be the linchpin behind a federally funded effort to expand tutoring programs.

The cost? Perhaps about $5 billion to $15 billion annually, concludes a research paper that sketches out a blueprint to make a 100-hour tutoring program embedded in the school day a reality for thousands of students.

Researchers have coalesced around the idea of a national tutoring corps as a way to address what’s expected to be widespread regression in learning due to the widely variable quality of remote instruction and sporadic attendance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Research on small one-to-one or one-to-small group (no more than three students) tutoring consistently finds robust effects in both reading and math, even when using paraprofessionals or trained college students. A Johns Hopkins researcher proposed a Marshall Plan for tutoring funded partly through federal Title I funding for needy students. A project out of Brown University is using a network of pilot sites to study tutoring protocols to improve training and resources. Philanthropies have funded some local demonstration programs. Nations, including Great Britain and the Netherlands, have plowed some state funding into tutoring programs.

What’s been largely missing from the conversation is this: What mechanics would need to be in place to make such a program work? “We have very little understanding of even what it would look like to scale tutoring, let alone what it would cost. And without that information, it’s really hard to have a constructive conversation or debate about whether we can—or whether it’s even possible,” said Matthew Kraft, one of two authors on the paper.

Scaling, in particular, is a huge concern here. The K-12 landscape is chock full of efforts that had strong effects in small-scale studies, but lighter impacts after rapid growth. (Class-size reduction in the 1990s, Head Start, and some of the federal Investing in Innovation grantees come to mind.) The reasons for that fall-off in effectiveness probably run the gamut from publication bias to less fidelity to implementation.

The paper from Kraft and Grace T. Falken amounts to a sophisticated thought experiment to try to avoid some of those pitfalls.

Getting an idea like this funded is, admittedly, a long shot. Congress has had trouble getting a second coronavirus economic-stimulus package off the ground. And any major education program of this nature would surely stimulate a lot of conversation on Capitol Hill.

“’In terms of this actually happening, I’m not super hopeful on that,” said Sarah Cohodes, an associate professor of economics and education who did not contribute to the paper but supports the idea of expanding tutoring programs. “But I also think it can be a blueprint for school districts and a local partnership for a college, or a state willing to adopt this as a strategy, or making it part of a teacher-training program.”

“While I do think that federal funding would be the most important way to do it, there are other ways,” she said.

How much would such a program cost?
The blueprint’s estimated cost, ranging at $5 billion to $15 billion, would probably depend on program uptake and expansion, which could take decades.

How much is $15 billion, anyway? It helps to consider this figure within what the federal government currently puts into education. If funded at that amount, such a program would immediately become one of the largest federally funded K-12 initiatives. The Education Department’s single largest program, Title I, clocks in at about $16 billion, while special education state grants are funded at about $14 billion.

That seems like a lot, and it is. But it’s also dwarfed by the generally much higher cost of higher education aid programs. Federal student assistance programs cost about $33 billion annually; direct student loans are funded at $77 billion.

And it’s necessary, added Cohodes, to consider alternatives that could end up to be just as costly, or potentially more so.

“What would it cost if for the next three years we had two additional months of schooling? What would it cost if we extended the school day from 9 to 3?” she said.

And there’s the counterfactual, too, of long-term costs if an investment is not made: “What are the long-term impacts if we let children drop out or not complete their educations?”

Would it be mandatory? No. The blueprint conceives of this as a voluntary program for teachers, schools, and students. Schools serving Title I students, or those in the bottom quartile of performance, would get the chance to participate. Importantly, the paper suggests districts would not have to provide a “match” to participate or only a minimal amount.

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Tutoring

By Stephen Sawchuk

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grant one to one,” Kraft said. “There is some value to asking districts to chip in, but I would say that should be a very lower percentage, maybe a sliding scale between 10 percent and 15 percent.”

**Who would do the tutoring?** The paper suggests that high school students could work with elementary students, perhaps as part of an optional elective. College students would tutor middle school-aged students as part of work-study requirements, while freshly minted college graduates could work with high-school aged students, perhaps funded by an expansion of the Americorps program. (Various proposals to that end have been floating on Capitol Hill.)

**How flexible would the program be?** Pretty flexible. While curriculum alignment to students’ needs and district priorities is important, the blueprint doesn’t envision requiring any particular approach. (Drama over curriculum ended up weakening both the federal Reading First program and, much later, the Common Core State Standards.) Plus, districts could choose how to select, shape, and train providers; those districts in rural areas could potentially use online tutoring.

Administering such a program could be tricky, and the paper sketches out what kind of staff would be needed to make this work—generally, a district coordinator and another to address issues at the school site. There’d be a new Education Department office to help out, too, and networking to help schools and districts iterate, adapt, and improve quality control on their programs.

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**Schools Are in Desperate Need of Tutors. But Qualified Ones are Hard to Find**

By Elizabeth Heubeck

The pandemic took an unprecedented toll on K-12 learning. From the onset of COVID-19 through the end of the 2020-21 academic year, students experienced up to nine months’ worth of unfinished learning, with historically disadvantaged students hit hardest.

Tutoring is considered one of the most effective strategies to fill these learning gaps, especially when implemented using evidence-based practices. But to date, many school districts are not prepared to ramp up their tutoring resources for students. And among those that are, there’s a lot of variation in the approach.

“Some districts are still focused on students’ physical safety,” said Allison Socol, assistant director of P12 Policy at national nonprofit Education Trust. “How these things get implemented really matters. Tutoring in and of itself isn’t some magical solution. It has to be done well.”

Districts that do decide to ramp up tutoring programs can lean on federal funds made available by the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARP). The stimulus bill mandates that a minimum of 5 percent of the total amount received by K-12 districts be used to implement “evidence-based interventions to address unfinished learning.”

**Increasing number of districts eye ‘targeted intensive tutoring’**

Targeted intensive tutoring (TIT) is one such intervention hailed by experts as highly effective. In the ideal version of this method, the same tutor works with one or two students over an extended period of time on building specific academic skills aligned with the school’s curriculum and targeted to each student’s academic needs.

“Just under half of superintendents say they’re planning to implement targeted intensive tutoring with their recovery funds,” said Socol, referring to results of a September 2021 nationwide survey conducted by AASA, the School Superintendents Association.

Making it work won’t be easy. Research shows that this tutoring method is most effective when the tutors are certified teachers who work with the same student in a one-on-one setting every day during the school day for an entire school year on curriculum-aligned skill building for which they receive training before and during their tenure. But the reality of
meeting all those expectations is likely very difficult for most districts.

Consider the Dallas Independent School District. A Texas law requires supplemental instruction (tutoring) for any student in grades 3 through 12 who fails to pass the state’s standardized test, STAAR, or STAAR high school end-of-course assessments. Because of that law, the district’s tutoring requirements have skyrocketed.

Before the pandemic, four local organizations served the tutoring needs of an estimated 1,000 students in the Texas district, said Derek Little, deputy chief of teaching and learning for the school system. “Now we’re facing numbers in the 50,000 to 60,000 range,” he said. “That’s five times more than what we were planning even six months ago.”

Getting the word out about tutoring positions

To oversee the dramatic and sudden increase in demand for tutors, the district launched an Office of Tutoring Services, which has six staff members. In September 2021, Dallas ISD held a virtual job fair resulting in the hiring of an estimated 50 tutors, about one-third of the total number it hopes to hire.

The district is getting the word out about the part-time tutoring positions in various ways. In addition to hosting career fairs, it’s advertising via the district website’s career center, districtwide social media, and a local workforce job board. It’s also relying on word of mouth and partnerships with area universities and high schools to find candidates. But Little says the majority of tutors will be hired by the district’s contracted partners, thereby giving the district less control over who is hired and how they are trained.

Nevertheless, Susan Cordova, deputy superintendent of leading and learning for Dallas ISD, said the district is trying to adhere as tightly as possible to research around high dosage tutoring (another term for TIT). Tutors will be required to commit to the same time slot every week for at least a semester in an effort to build better student-tutor relationships, which Cordova acknowledges are important for success.

But there’s one factor associated with TIT “best practices” that districts are likely to find particularly challenging: hiring certified teachers as tutors. Despite data showing that students have the best outcomes when tutored by certified teachers, many districts will consider hiring non-certified teachers because the supply of certified tutors is way behind the demand.

Stamford Public Schools is among several districts in Connecticut posting ads for tutors on EdWeek Top School Jobs. Of the site’s 318 total advertised tutor positions, Connecticut districts posted 52 of them. And although Stamford’s posting says it prefers college graduates, who will earn $30 an hour up to 20 hours per week, the district is open to hiring college graduates without a teaching certificate at a salary of $20 an hour.

‘Sometimes they just need that cheerleader’

Students in some districts will be working with tutors whose professional qualifications are far lower.

Los Angeles Unified School District, for instance, has partnered with the nonprofit Step Up Tutoring, which connects volunteer tutors as young as 16 to work one-on-one online with children from under-resourced communities, free of charge. Step Up has paired over 800 students from the district with more than 2,500 tutors.

“The students’ need is exponential,” said Marcela Madden, spokesperson for Step Up, whose main focus on tutoring students is homework help. The nonprofit’s tutors may not be certified, or meeting with students in-person, or reinforcing curriculum-aligned skills—all factors that research shows to result in the best outcomes. But, Madden emphasizes, they nonetheless are filling a void.

“These kids have been more adversely affected by COVID,” she said. “Their parents continued to work, or were on the front lines. Sometimes they just need that cheerleader.”

To Combat Learning Loss, New Project Hopes to Test And Scale ‘High Impact’ Tutoring

By Stephen Sawchuk

There is widespread agreement that of all the ways to help students struggling academically due to the COVID-19 pandemic, “high-impact” tutoring is the most promising: It’s personalized. It’s an approach that’s been used for centuries by the well-heeled. And it has a lot of research behind it.

All this has led to a consensus—at least among think-tank types—that the United States needs a significant investment to expand high-quality tutoring programs.

(High-impact tutoring, also called high-dosage tutoring, is sustained and regular contact between a tutor and a student over several months, rather than incidentally called up by a student only on occasion.) The problem of doing this at scale is one of cost, of course, but also of logistics. Research is less clear what elements matter most to a high-quality program: Is it training the tutors? Curriculum alignment with districts’ needs? How is the tutoring integrated into the regular school day?

Into this breach has stepped the Annen-
ber Institute at Brown University, which announced the launch of its National School Support Accelerator. Partly a hands-on tutoring initiative and partly a research project, the accelerator is funding a variety of demonstration tutoring sites throughout the United States to study and refine what we know about tutoring. Eventually, Annenberg staff want to spin off the project into its own organization.

“The trick, I think, is that when you scale something it’s not as good as it is initially,” said Susanna Loeb, the director of the Annenberg Institute. “How can we be careful so it scales at quality? What kind of resources are available so we know that it’s quality, and they’re doing it in a way that the research shows is most effective? That’s really what this organization is aiming to do.”

The project is still in its design phase, but it has a deep bench of researchers and providers who are advising it. It’s also created a definition for what it means by high-impact tutoring, which would cover very small tutor-pupil ratios, but does not include pullout programs or “pod” learning. And it’s developing a set of tools to help new organizations set up programs: How to select the materials needed for training and overseeing tutors, options for curriculum and platforms, and so on. For districts, it will create a checklist of things they consult as they work to establish or partner with tutoring organizations.

Annenberg will be testing these tools in pilot tutoring sites; there are six so far, which are located in districts in California, Texas, Rhode Island, and Colorado.

“We hope when this gets going it will be a place where tutoring organizations can see what other tutoring organizations are doing, where school systems see what is working, and where we can encourage continuous learning,” Loeb said. “We want to know how it can be really supportive of teachers and supplement what they’re doing, and not conflict with what teachers are doing. And we really want to make sure that when it scales up, it scales up with quality.”

A Chance for Funding?
The Annenberg project is being funded mainly by education philanthropies, including the Walton Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, online-meeting organization Zoom, and private donors. (The Walton and Gates foundations also support Education Week’s journalism but do not exercise any editorial control over the content.) Each of the six pilot sites is supported by a $100,000 grant that the district has matched, and supports about 150 to 1,000 students.

To have nationwide impact, of course, a project like this will ultimately need some self-sustaining funding. There’s a palpable sense that another stimulus package could include more K-12 funding, potentially including a tutoring program.

Already, some researchers have outlined how they’d like to see it look. Robert Slavin of Johns Hopkins University, who has also studied tutoring, recently laid out what he called a Tutoring Marshall Plan. His proposal would, among other things, providing funding, support research into tutoring programs that haven’t been evaluated, and help Title I schools hire and train some 300,000 recent graduates as tutors.

There are also a few existing programs out there that could provide helpful guidelines. England has created a National Tutoring Programme, which will put some 335 million pounds into tutoring (around $450 million). While that will cover only a fraction of students, it is much more extensive than anything that’s been tried here in the United States.

Loeb said her organization is planning for two possibilities: the status quo, with the current fractured tutoring landscape, in which case, it would aim to smooth the road for districts that want to begin tutoring programs, and a second possibility, in which tutoring could be part of a federal works program.

Published August 19, 2020

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 during the first six months of the pandemic 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 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
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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 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 paid 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 in the summer of 2020.)

**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.”

OPINION

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To Get Tutoring Right, Connect it to the Classroom

Tutors should be using the same high-quality materials that teachers use in the classroom

By David M. Steiner & Ethan Mitnick

Meet Emma, a 4th grader. In 2020, 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 2021-22 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 42 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 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 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. Ethan Mirnick is the president of SchoolKit.

School system leaders who are launching tutoring programs can take deliberate steps to fold core existing instructional resources right into their tutoring plans.

A Guide for Helping Students Catch Up
School districts are increasingly turning to high dosage tutoring to help students catch up in beginning reading. As more students enter kindergarten and first grade behind in pre-reading skills, teachers are unable to provide the individualized instruction necessary to get students on track for reading success.

**High Dosage Tutoring Works To Get Students Caught Up In Reading**

Teachers have struggled to successfully teach a sequenced skill to an entire class. Students exhibit too much variability in their letter sound knowledge to adhere to a sequence, even in small groups. This variability poses a high risk that students will fall behind the curriculum sequence, which puts them at risk for developing bad reading habits and low self image as readers.

“If the classroom teacher progresses to teaching long vowels while some students are still struggling with short vowels, irremediable confusion is the likely results for far too many students,” says Seth Weinberger, Executive Director of Innovations for Learning. “Students confused by vowel sounds will start guessing at words and will quickly lose confidence in themselves as readers. This can launch a downward spiral that will be very difficult to remediate in later grades.”

**Proven Results**

A global nonprofit, Innovations for Learning, has demonstrated that daily one-to-one instruction can be highly effective in classrooms with large numbers of at-risk students.

According to a study on the impact of tutoring with interventionists from Innovations for Learning,** a greater percentage of early learners who received one-to-one tutoring:

- outperformed those who were not tutored on an assessment measuring emergent reading proficiency
- demonstrated a significantly higher rate of progression in their reading
- achieved grade level proficiency

**Focus on Phonics**

Phonics is essential in beginning reading, the distinguished educational researcher Robert Slavin said.* He explored teaching phonics to demonstrate how working with proven tutoring programs instead of general guidelines work better because "the details matter."

Studies of various one-to-one tutoring programs have indicated the efficacy of individualized phonics instruction for at-risk students. Tutors are able to identify stumbling blocks and take the time to address them completely before increasing the challenge to the student.

**Effective, Affordable, Scalable**

As more nonprofits such as Innovations for Learning scale their implementations, the cost of high dosage tutoring is becoming more affordable. Costs can be reduced further by better integrating tutor instruction with teacher instruction, providing each student with only the supplemental assistance needed to close learning gaps.

**Attention to Details**

According to educational researcher Robert Slavin, an effective tutoring program needs crucial features that address details such as:

- tutor training and coaching
- student materials and software
- instructional strategies
- responding to errors
- assessment frequency
- recognition of progress
- handling absences
- teacher/tutor relationships

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With the return to in-person learning in sight, K-12 leaders are urgently setting priorities for the 2021-22 school year. Each spring, educators are eager to find that “just right” approach to their biggest challenges. As a former middle and high school principal, I know that’s especially true after a tough year—and no year has been tougher.

For many leaders, accelerating student learning is top-of-mind, and one method that has garnered a lot of attention is high-impact tutoring. The National Student Support Accelerator, founded at the Annenberg Institute at Brown University to promote and support high-impact tutoring, defines it as one-to-one or small-group support that supplements classroom learning and complements existing curriculum by focusing on specific goals in response to individual students’ needs. This kind of tutoring is also known as “high-intensity tutoring” or “high-dosage tutoring.”

Research has shown that frequent in-school tutoring is one of the best ways to support students’ academic progress. In fact, tutoring has had greater impacts on student learning than various forms of teacher training, curriculum, extending the school day, teacher evaluation, and more.

This kind of tutoring is not meant to solely focus on remediating previous learning, although some reteaching may be involved. It might be helpful to think of high-impact tutoring as “accelerated learning” rather than “remediated learning.”

As with any education intervention schools undertake, it is important to first consider a variety of factors and then formulate a program that’s calibrated to address them. In my role helping leaders of the KIPP network of charter schools shape their academic strategies, I advise that any school looking to design a high-impact tutoring program address these eight key components:

1. **Format:** It can be either online or in person.

2. **Frequency and length of time:** It is recommended that tutoring take place at least three times per week for at least 30 minutes at a time for the full school year.

3. **Ratio:** Ideally, a student-to-tutor ratio should be 1-1 or 2-1 and no greater than 4-1. Any ratio greater than 2-1 runs the risk of “teaching to the middle” and thus being less effective. Larger groups also require the tutor to have greater pedagogical skills and/or classroom-management skills.

4. **Scheduling:** It is recommended that tutoring occur during the school day as a formal part of the schedule, such as a dedicated class period.

5. **Staffing:** If possible, students should have the same tutor(s) for the full year. Research indicates that less-experienced tutors can be effective with consistent training, strong supervision, and structured curricula. Schools might consider staffing with paraprofessionals and/or novice teachers.

6. **Students:** Given that all students benefit from individual attention, tutoring is recommended for all students, not just for those who may be struggling. Tutoring exclusively for struggling students tends to create stigma and may be perceived as punishment.

7. **Support:** For tutors, determine who will provide ongoing training and supervision, including observation and feedback. For content, determine differentiated scope and sequence for each student and determine whether teachers or tutors will be providing it. For outcomes, determine the process for individual goal setting, progress monitoring, and data collection and analysis.

8. **Tutoring content:** Content should be curriculum-based, on grade level, with just-in-time scaffolds to help students over rough spots, and it should be focused on the most critical standards for the grade level. It is most important to tailor content to students’ progress, whether that be pre-teaching, reviewing for an exam, or aiding with homework.
These are all important considerations, but the list comes with a caution, too. In stressful times, a recipe feels like a godsend. Yet a recipe can also be dangerous because it does not take local context into consideration. So rather than run with predetermined recommendations, school leaders should first start with defining the student outcomes they are seeking to meet through high-impact tutoring. If schools are looking for one “rule” to follow without exception, it is this: Start small, work with the program until you find success, and then assess whether that success can be maintained at a larger scale.

For example, the KIPP schools in Nashville, Tenn., are building their program with these components in mind but in a way that meets their context and constraints. They will be targeting students in specific grades, with primary students focusing on reading and secondary students focusing on math. Their tutoring will be offered for an hour after school, three days a week, and they have partnered with a local tutoring service to provide instruction and oversight.

While KIPP Nashville is not incorporating every single recommendation, they are considering all components in their design, and—most importantly—they are starting small. “We decided to start small and observe results so we could make the appropriate revisions if we decided to scale up,” said Nancy Livingston, the KIPP Nashville chief of schools.

To be as successful as possible, take these eight components into account and thoughtfully design a program that is realistic, sustainable, and rooted in your specific context. Our students don’t need another education initiative to fizzle out partway through the year. They deserve a well-considered plan that places their learning at the center. High-impact tutoring, if done right, can be instrumental in achieving that goal.

Kevin Newman is the senior director of academic health for the KIPP Foundation. He was formerly the principal of KIPP Austin Academy of Arts & Letters and KIPP Austin Collegiate in Austin, Texas.

**Learning Recovery: The Research on Tutoring, Extended School Year, and Other Strategies**

The evidence points most strongly to the value of high-dosage tutoring, but other approaches also have merit

By Heather C. Hill

Editor’s Note: This is part of a continuing series on the practical takeaways from research.

Districts will receive about $123 billion set aside for schools in the American Rescue Plan. This legislation provides money to help districts bring back students during (what I hope is) the tail end of the COVID-19 pandemic. The funds can also purchase programs that meet the needs of the hardest-hit students, hire additional educators to address learning loss, and underwrite summer, after-school, and extended-day and -year learning programs. With so many choices, how should schools spend this money in ways that most boost student outcomes?

To answer this question, I reviewed syntheses of research that look at ways to catch students up academically. Overall, high-dosage tutoring programs had the best track record. Other promising possibilities include extended learning time and highly structured home summer-reading programs for elementary students. Where possible, I compare program outcomes by using the average impact of high-dosage-tutoring programs as a benchmark. While such comparisons are imperfect, they give educators a rough sense for how to prioritize programs with the same aims.

If districts are particularly targeting struggling students and can find the means to do high-dosage tutoring well, the research suggests that is the top choice. To qualify as high dosage, the program must provide each student roughly 75 minutes per week of small-group or individual instruction over a 36-week period. Low-dosage tutoring programs, on the other hand, do not on average show positive impacts.

The success of tutoring makes sense—tu-
tutors can tailor material specifically to student needs and pace material to match student progress. Many tutoring programs operate during the school day, with certified teachers pulling students out of their regular classroom for 1-to-1 or small-group instruction. Reviews of the literature show that after-school programs that feature tutoring can likewise improve outcomes in English/language arts.

Another approach to regaining lost learning is an extended school year. While tutoring may be directed just to some students, an extended school year is intended to move all students closer to where they would have been without the pandemic.

Several sources of evidence point to a longer school year as promising. First, economists have shown a relationship between the number of instructional days and student performance: When schools gain instructional days as a result of fewer snow days or changes in state testing windows, standardized-test scores improve. Second, policies and programs that add days to the school calendar are often (though not always) positively associated with improved student outcomes. In some cases, these programs can also accelerate the learning of students with lower levels of prior knowledge or who come from low-income or other historically marginalized communities.

Still, the extension has to be significant. A back-of-the-envelope estimate based on a study by Benjamin Hansen suggests that adding between two to six weeks of instruction per year per student is needed to achieve the same effects as 36 weeks of high-dosage tutoring per year per student. In line with this estimate, successful programs extending the school year added between two and six weeks of instruction to the calendar.

Districts might also think about an extended school day. However, the evidence as a whole provides only weak support for extended days as a means of academic catch-up. It may be that how the time is used accounts for most of the difference. For instance, researcher Matt Kraft described how the Match Charter Public High School in Boston used a two-hour extension of the school day to incorporate individual tutoring; ELA test scores rose similarly to the effects seen in the average high-dosage-tutoring program, and math scores rose among the lowest-performing students.

The recovery plan specifically sets aside funds for summer school or other summer experiences for children. Several scholars have examined the body of literature on summer school and find that summer school programs that include reading and math work boost those skills, though the effects are roughly just a half to a third the size of those produced by the average high-dosage tutoring program.

Critics point out that academically focused summer schools may have a downside, depriving students of other kinds of summer benefits, like those gained in summer camp, informal care, or neighborhood settings. There, students may develop self-regulation and self-efficacy, enhance their creativity, or explore interests like art or engineering. Summer school may also be a relatively inefficient way of recovering lost learning because the material and pedagogical methods used in summer settings may not align well with students’ school year classroom experiences.

Perhaps surprisingly, highly structured home-based reading programs over the summer appear as effective on average as summer school in improving elementary-grade reading outcomes. One review of the literature also suggests that these home-based programs may be particularly effective for low-income children. Such programs provide students books or other texts to read, and many programs encourage reading the materials with family members. Particularly effective programs, like READING, also match texts with student interests and reading levels as well as involve classroom teachers in the program’s rollout and conclusion.

After-school programs are also popular for improving achievement. Unfortunately, after-school programs without tutoring have shown on average either small or no effects on student academic outcomes. That said, after-school programs with strong youth-staff relationships and an explicit focus on building social-emotional skills may help students build those skills and develop a more positive attitude toward school. Like many summertime activities, they can be valuable, but they don’t seem very good at helping students acquire academic skills they are missing.

With the exception of extended-day and after-school programs without tutoring, all the options above provide a pathway to recovering at least some of the academic learning lost to the pandemic. Districts choosing among them will want to compare costs and prospective benefits in order to spend their federal recovery money wisely.

Districts will also want to pay close attention to the implementation of the program(s) they choose. Effect sizes produced in academic studies are often not reproduced in the real world. I’ll write more about that in a forthcoming essay. ■

Heather C. Hill is a professor of education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.
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