

# LEARNING CURVE

LESSONS FROM THE TUTORING REVOLUTION IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

BY LIZ COHEN

JANUARY 2024

**FutureEd**  
Independent Analysis, Innovative Ideas

 NATIONAL STUDENT  
SUPPORT ACCELERATOR  
*equalizing access to quality tutoring*

### ***About the Author***

Liz Cohen is FutureEd's policy director.

### ***Usage***

The non-commercial use, reproduction, and distribution of this report is permitted.

© 2024 FutureEd

### ***About FutureEd***

FutureEd is an independent, solution-oriented think tank at Georgetown University's McCourt School of Public Policy, committed to bringing fresh energy to the causes of excellence, equity, and efficiency in K-12 and higher education. Follow us on Twitter at @FutureEdGU

### ***About the National Student Support Accelerator***

The National Student Support Accelerator (NSSA) is a program of the Systems Change for Advancing Learning and Equity (SCALE) at Stanford University. NSSA's mission is to accelerate access to high-impact tutoring for students in need. NSSA does this by supporting practitioners and policy-makers to adopt and grow high-impact tutoring with quality through research, tools, and engagement.

# LEARNING CURVE

## LESSONS FROM THE TUTORING REVOLUTION IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

### TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Foreword
2	Partnerships with Higher Education: Teach for America's Ignite in Greater Baton Rouge, Louisiana
6	Funding Tutors Through the Federal Work-study Program
6	Tutoring as a Catalyst for Instructional Innovation: Ector County Independent School District, Odessa, Texas
12	Outcomes-based Contracting in Education
13	A School Designed for Tutors: Great Oaks Charter School, New York City
15	The Role of Artificial Intelligence in Tutoring
17	Key Findings
18	Endnotes

## Foreword

How often does it happen that a national policy priority, robust research, and the aspirations of classroom teachers converge? On a bipartisan issue no less? In the case of high-dosage tutoring as an effective remedy for learning loss, we have exactly such a case.

This report, researched and written by FutureEd Policy Director Liz Cohen under a FutureEd partnership with the National Student Support Accelerator (NSSA) at Stanford University, profiles three very different ways to scale high-quality tutoring and sustain it beyond the expiration of schools' federal Covid-relief funding later in 2024, in different communities serving different types of students in different parts of the country: Odessa, Texas; Baton Rouge, Louisiana; and New York City. In addition to site visits to the three locations, we conducted dozens of interviews with school and school district leaders, teachers, students in other parts of the country, together with tutoring providers and researchers working in the evolving tutoring landscape.

We're grateful to Susanna Loeb and Kathy Bendheim of NSSA for their invaluable thought partnership on the project. We are pleased to co-publish this report with NSSA.

Maureen Kelleher, Bella DiMarco, Molly Breen, and Merry Alderman made many contributions to the project. Our thanks to the Overdeck Family Foundation for funding the effort.

**Thomas Toch**  
**Director, FutureEd**

**Tutoring has long been an effective tool to educate children, but one used more frequently to support students of means. While some public schools have sponsored tutoring for lower-income students, the number of private tutoring centers, out of the financial reach of many families, more than tripled between 1997 and 2016, from roughly 3,000 to almost 10,000.<sup>1</sup>**

Then came Covid-19.

During the turbulent 2020-21 school year, when school closures, hybrid instruction, and quarantines disrupted student learning, public schools quickly placed tutoring high on the list of potential responses. Since the beginning of the pandemic, as many as 80 percent of U.S. school districts have implemented new tutoring programs, according to the federal School Pulse Panel, a trend encouraged by recent research showing substantial learning gains from high-quality tutoring, as well as by the billions of dollars in federal pandemic-response funding pouring into state and local education agencies.<sup>2</sup>

Personalized by design, tutoring was remarkably well-suited to address the myriad forms of learning loss affecting students during the pandemic. Tutoring also allowed schools to meet the demands of federal officials, who stipulated that a substantial portion of pandemic education aid be used for tutoring and other ways of directly helping students rebound from the pandemic, rather than on indirect investments such as new HVAC systems or teacher training. Tutoring represented a rare point of convergence between a national policy priority, solid evidence from research, and what educators on the ground needed and wanted. Unlike the approaches embedded in other recent federal education directives, many local educators

have embraced tutoring as an effective strategy to combat learning loss.

Not all tutoring is created equal, however. Research finds that high-dosage tutoring—four or fewer students working with the same tutor for at least 30 minutes during the school day, three times a week for at least several months—produces the best results. The challenge now is to scale that high-dosage tutoring and find ways to sustain it beyond the expiration of schools' federal Covid-relief funding later in 2024.

This report profiles three very different ways to achieve those goals, in different communities serving different types of students in different parts of the country: a rural elementary school and an urban public charter school in the greater Baton Rouge, Louisiana, region that are participating in Teach for America's new Ignite literacy tutoring program; a school district in Odessa, Texas, that launched a comprehensive tutoring program in 23 elementary and middle schools in response to the pandemic; and a charter school network with schools in New York City, Newark, New Jersey, and Bridgeport, Connecticut, that has made tutoring a core part of its teaching model since well before the pandemic, using AmeriCorps volunteers as tutors.

The research conducted at these sites, together with the dozens of interviews taken with representatives

from other school districts and individual schools, as well as with tutoring providers, students, educators, and researchers working in the evolving tutoring landscape, suggest that schools can achieve strong results at scale using different types of tutors in different school settings and provide high-quality tutoring into the future with funding from sources other than the federal government's pandemic-recovery support.

Our research reveals that successfully implementing and sustaining high-dosage tutoring at scale requires several key ingredients: a district-level leader tasked with managing tutoring work across schools; clear goals for tutoring; a willingness to rethink the school day schedule to accommodate large-scale tutoring; a willingness to pursue multiple federal and state funding sources and to make tough spending trade-offs; and buy-in from school leaders and teachers. Buy-in can only be earned, not demanded. Helpful strategies include giving school staff a role in shaping tutoring programs and linking tutoring closely to classroom instruction, so educators feel supported rather than burdened by tutors.

This report also explores the potential of generative artificial intelligence to make tutoring more efficient and cost-effective, as well as the potential of the federal work-study program to propel thousands of college students into public school classrooms as low-cost tutors.

Unsurprisingly, the quality of tutoring in the nation's schools since the pandemic has varied. But if education policymakers and practitioners can expand and sustain the high-dosage tutoring backed by research, today's tutoring movement could prove to be a silver lining to the disruptions wrought by Covid-19. Done right, in-school tutoring raises academic results and builds student-adult relationships that help diminish the sense of isolation that has afflicted many students in the wake of the pandemic. It has the potential to become a valuable and lasting component of how schools teach students.

## Partnerships with Higher Education

# Teach for America's Ignite in Greater Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Jackson Elementary School in Louisiana's East Feliciana Parish District sits on a quiet street just outside the town of Jackson, population 4,130. Driving to the school on an overcast Tuesday morning in November 2023, I passed open fields, small homes, the Dixon Correctional Institution, and a Dollar General. "This is one of the poorest districts in maybe the poorest state in the country," Principal Megan Phillips told me. "Can you imagine that we are providing 2:1 tutoring?"

Since 2021, 250-student Jackson Elementary has been part of the Teach for America's (TFA) Ignite tutoring program. Launched by TFA during the pandemic, the Ignite Fellowship hires college students to provide high-dosage virtual tutoring in reading or math at no cost to participating schools.

Well before the pandemic, Phillips knew the promise tutoring held for her low-income students, and she knew TFA. In fact, she had moved to Jackson decades earlier as a TFA corps member and never left. But in a school where half the teachers are unlicensed, in a region experiencing an acute teacher shortage, where could she find tutors? So when Laura Vinsant, TFA's executive director for Greater Baton Rouge, asked Phillips in 2021 whether her school wanted to participate in the new program, Phillips jumped at the chance. Louisiana education officials had given Jackson F grades in 2017, 2018, and 2019.<sup>3</sup>

Today, students in grades 1 through 3 have daily sessions on reading fundamentals with their undergraduate tutors, who log in from around the country to work with the same two students, day after day, for ten weeks. So far, the work

has paid substantial dividends. In spring 2023, Jackson Elementary saw a 56 percent increase in the number of students scoring proficient on their early literacy assessment.

### Quick Facts

## TFA's Ignite Tutoring, Greater Baton Rouge Region

- Number of students served: 152
- Number of schools with TFA's Ignite: 5
- Grades and content areas: Grade K-3 reading
- Source of tutors: College students delivering virtual tutoring
- When tutoring occurs: During the school day
- Frequency of tutoring: 4 days/week, 20-30 minutes each
- Cost: \$1,389/student per year for two 10-week sessions with a 1:3 student-tutor ratio

## Creating Conditions for High-quality Tutoring

When the pandemic struck, Katie Hooten was running TFA's program in the greater Phoenix area. As it became clear schools would need additional support to weather Covid's disruptions, she started asking Phoenix schools what they wanted. The idea of a tutoring program emerged from those conversations in 2020.

Hooten is now the national director of TFA's Ignite. As of the 2023-24 school year, over 1,500 undergraduates from more than 300 colleges and universities are tutoring 3,500 elementary and middle school students across 100 schools in 21 states.

With the program still in its infancy, the leadership team is pondering some key questions: How many fellows can they recruit, train, and support? How many schools can they reasonably work with? What makes a school a good fit for the Ignite program?

"I get asked all the time why Ignite doesn't have its own curriculum, and our response is always that school embeddedness matters so much," says Hooten. "We believe that to be effective, we need to be rooted in a school building and culture, so we use the school's curriculum and assessments to understand our progress."

Principal Phillips agrees with this explanation for Ignite's effectiveness. Jackson recently adopted a high-quality curriculum that Ignite has used to inform its tutoring material. "If we had to design something from scratch or rely on the tutors for lesson-planning input, it wouldn't work," she told me as we sat in the second-floor teacher's lounge. "We're using mCLASS [a literacy assessment and instructional system sold by education company Amplify] which is great and helps us determine student groupings. We also progress monitor using DIBELS [an assessment of early literacy skills] every ten days."

Ignite's respect for school curriculum choices doesn't mean the program eschews training. Each national cohort of tutoring fellows goes through 10 hours of virtual learning prior to every 10-week tutoring block. The content of the national training changes each semester, so returning tutors can participate without it being repetitive. According to Principal Phillips, two Ignite trainers, Lauren May and Shauna Walters, have been critical to the program's success at Jackson. Both came to Louisiana as Teach for America corps members. May has now spent a decade in East Feliciana and Walters is in her sixth year. Both provide training, support, and oversight to the 24 Ignite fellows working with Jackson students in addition to playing their regular roles as master teacher and literacy specialist. TFA's Ignite pays trainers a stipend, just as it does tutors.

Supportive school leadership is just as essential to success. "I've talked to trainers in other schools where it can be really stressful if you don't have a principal like Ms. Phillips who asks how she can help you," said Walters. Teachers at Jackson are also closely involved in how the student tutoring groups are set up.

“This way, teachers feel like this is something that’s assisting them versus something that’s happening to them,” Walters explained.

Long before the pandemic, technology and internet access were serious issues for the East Feliciana district. ESSER funds allowed Jackson leadership to purchase a Chromebook for each student and to set up individual Wi-Fi access points in each classroom. These resources, combined with tutoring through the Ignite program, finally began to change students’ learning trajectories at Jackson.

Hooten and her team also point to the importance of a coherent state instructional climate to successful tutoring. “There is something powerful about the alignment around third-grade reading, the alignment of funds and resources in Louisiana that feels different than some other states,” Hooten told me. About 150 Ignite fellows will tutor in the Greater Baton Rouge region across six schools during the 2023-24 school year, with another 50 fellows tutoring in two New Orleans schools.

### Embedding Tutoring in the School Day

Principal Phillips and trainer Lauren May shifted the school schedule to maximize Ignite’s impact at Jackson. After deciding it would be efficient to have all the tutoring happen at the same time of day for all grade levels and classes, they created an “Ignite block,” a dedicated period during which all classrooms participate in interventions. For the first eight weeks of school, before Ignite launches in October, teachers use the block for a variety of interventions and small group work. The intervention block is dedicated to tutoring for the next ten weeks.

When I visited the school in November 2023, two third-grade boys were seated in the library taking turns reading a short text titled, “The Runaway Hamster.” At the next table, a third-grade girl named Cadence with neatly French-braided hair was cutting out sentences with a pair of scissors from a text about going on a picnic. Her tutor, Hanna,

smiled through a Zoom-like window on a school Chromebook, seated in what looked like a dorm room. Hanna asked Cadence to read through the sentences and find the one that read, “off we went to the park.” Slowly sounding out each sentence to herself, Cadence eventually held up the right one with a smile. Many students, especially in the first and second grades, use small whiteboards or transparent sheets to write words with dry-erase markers. “Just because the tutoring is virtual doesn’t mean there’s not a tactile experience for students,” said May.

Importantly for Jackson Elementary, where 85 percent of students are Black or Latino, Ignite tutors come from diverse backgrounds. Fifty-seven percent of all Ignite tutors identify as people of color, and almost half identify as coming from a low-income background and/or were the first in their family to attend college. Notably, 43 percent of Ignite tutors who were college seniors applied to the 2023 Teach for America teacher corps and were both more likely to be accepted and more likely to accept the position than the average applicant.<sup>4</sup>

TFA’s ultimate plan is for tutors to be paid via federal work-study, the program that provides part-time jobs to about 600,000 college students with demonstrated financial need at over 3,000 institutions of higher education.<sup>5</sup> Accessing work-study funds has been more challenging than TFA’s Ignite anticipated, with the organization currently hoping to have one university paying tutors this way by spring 2024. If other ongoing efforts with individual institutions manage to unlock work-study funding nationwide, it would throw open the doors for tens of thousands of college students to tutor in our nation’s schools. (See sidebar on federal work-study funding on page 6)

Tutoring at Jackson is not only designed for struggling students. One of the stronger readers in his third-grade class, Matthen Johnson works daily with another high-performing student, Dakota, and their tutor, Dylan Wilson, a junior at Harvard University. Lauren May explains that she purposefully placed the two boys with a male tutor. There are few



male teachers in East Feliciana Parish, and May hoped that in addition to providing the boys with “challenge work,” they would benefit from a male role model. Matthen told me with pride that on a recent assessment he was able to read 156 words in the time allotted, beating Dakota’s 138.

The learning gaps and academic challenges facing Jackson’s 250 students didn’t start with Covid, but federal funding made available for tutoring and other steps in response to the pandemic created the conditions for a shift in student outcomes. While the 2023 school performance score assigned to Jackson by the Louisiana Department of Education was only a D, their progress grade was a B.<sup>6</sup>

Crucially for a district as poor as East Feliciana, Ignite is currently offered to schools at a highly reduced cost. How much an individual school pays varies on local context; in Louisiana, schools use funding available through the Louisiana Department of Education’s Real-time Early Access to Literacy (REAL) program. In schools outside Louisiana, some use federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds supplemented by philanthropic funds raised by TFA. Until Ignite fellows can be paid with work-study dollars, Teach for America must continue fundraising.

Hooten knows that unlocking work-study funds is necessary for sustainability: “Accessing federal work-study will be critical to increase access to high-dosage tutoring, especially as ESSER funds wind down.” While TFA continues to work on getting costs down, the model currently runs about \$1,400 per student for a full year, which falls within the typical range of \$1,000 to \$2,000 per student that FutureEd has found in its research on tutoring programs nationally.<sup>7</sup>

## Relationships and Rigor

Like Lauren May and Shauna Walters at Jackson Elementary, Laura Vance is key to the literacy tutoring underway at the K-8 Kenilworth Science and Technology Academy. Ten miles southeast

of downtown Baton Rouge, Kenilworth has been a public school since 1973. After struggling with academic outcomes, Kenilworth was made a public charter school in 2009 and has been on an upward trajectory ever since. Says Principal Hazel Regis on first hearing about the Ignite program: “I knew we wanted it, but I didn’t know who or how we would do it. And then Ms. Vance immediately said she would run it.”

The first big decision facing Regis and Vance was which students should participate in Ignite. “Do we go for third-graders, who have to take a statewide standardized test, and who pretty soon will have to face the [Louisiana] retention law [requiring third-grade students to pass a reading test in order to continue to fourth grade]?<sup>8</sup> Or do we go for younger students, and try to set the stage for better outcomes by third grade?” Regis wondered. Ultimately, they decided to focus tutoring on first grade.

What sets the Kenilworth approach apart from many others is the decision to offer tutoring to students with reading scores in the middle of the pack, as opposed to those with the lowest test scores. “We rearranged our schedule so that the kids who are struggling stay in the classroom to work with the teacher while our highest-achieving kids do center-based work in the same room,” Vance explained as we watched 14 first-graders practice early reading skills in their tutoring sessions. Two classrooms down the hall, a smaller group of students was working on literacy with the first-grade classroom teacher.

Just six weeks into implementation of Ignite, Kenilworth’s second- and third-grade teachers were already clamoring for their students to receive tutoring. They had seen the enthusiasm with which first-grade students embraced the program and how it freed up time for teachers to provide small-group interventions with struggling students. And, crucially, they had heard how often participating students told Principal Regis or Ms. Vance that the chance to see their tutor was the only reason they came to school that day. In the words of Jamal, a Kenilworth first-

grader who looks forward to his tutoring through Ignite: “I love school, and I love to read. And with my tutor I get to read more.”

At both Jackson and Kenilworth, staff believe that part of Ignite’s success is simply due to the fact that students get more time dedicated to reading, and each student gets significantly more time reading with an adult than would be possible in a classroom of 25 students.

“But we also think about where our students are coming from and what they’re exposed to,” explained Regis. “This isn’t just a tutoring program—it’s more than that. They are engaging with young adults from different places and thinking, ‘Oh, there is a state named California. Oh, I could go there one day.’”

Says Morgan Chambers, a sophomore at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, and a tutor at Kenilworth: “It has gone a lot better than I thought it would, and a lot more quickly than I thought. My kids are so excited to learn, though sometimes they come in with heavy things. One of my students lost her father recently. I didn’t think these kinds of things would come up in tutoring sessions or come up so often. Sometimes it’s hard to navigate those heavy situations, but tutoring really is the best 30 minutes of my day.”

## Tutoring as a Catalyst for Instructional Innovation

# Ector County Independent School District, Odessa, Texas

In spring 2021, Ector County Independent School District in the West Texas oil fields earmarked \$10 million of its \$93 million federal pandemic-response funds for tutoring, spread out over three years. Superintendent Scott Muri and Chief Academic Officer Lilia Náñez had run a virtual tutoring pilot in the fall of 2019 that resulted in significant learning

## FUNDING TUTORS THROUGH THE FEDERAL WORK-STUDY PROGRAM

In a May 2023 Dear Colleague letter to college, university, and school district leaders, U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona urged the use of federal work-study funds to hire college students as tutors and mentors for K-12 students.<sup>9</sup> In January 2024, the White House called on colleges and universities to devote at least 15 percent of their federal work-study funds to pay eligible college students working as tutors.<sup>10</sup>

A few organizations, including California’s Step Up Tutoring, have had success with this strategy, but many other tutoring organizations have found it difficult to navigate.

Created in 1964, federal work-study (FWS) provides part-time employment as part of a college student’s financial-aid award.<sup>11</sup> The federal government typically budgets \$1.2 billion annually for the program, a much smaller amount than for Pell Grants or student loans. Currently, funds are allocated to higher education institutions, not to students directly, and the allocation formula prioritizes selective private colleges.<sup>12</sup>

Colleges and universities can use work-study funds to subsidize up to 75 percent of the wages they pay work-study students. A student’s financial aid award dictates the maximum amount they can earn through federal work-study, but they must find and apply for a work-study-eligible job on their own.

This structure makes it difficult for tutoring organizations working with multiple colleges and universities to build a regional or national program. Tutoring programs like TFA and Step Up must be approved as a work-study program by each participating higher-education institution. Institutions also determine individually how much they will contribute toward tutoring stipends.

Step Up Tutoring recruits from 12 California college campuses. After launching during the pandemic, one of the organization’s first steps was to become a federal work-study approved provider on those campuses. “Navigating the bureaucracy of financial aid systems, which work differently at different colleges, was a lot of work,” said Sam Olivieri, Step Up’s CEO. “After you get the agreement to become a work-study

provider, then you have to work with career services to post a job, and only people who have a financial-aid award that includes work-study can apply for the job. We spend a lot of time helping students understand their work-study award. We have to manage payroll for each campus separately since we get billed by each institution individually. And the amount we pay also depends on the individual student's award."

TFA's Ignite has experienced similar challenges as the organization has expanded its network to include paid tutors from over 300 colleges or universities working across 100 schools in 21 states. Approaches to work-study can vary even within state university systems, Katie Hooten says. "Take California's UC system. If the University of California were to have a standardized approach to FWS partnership across all campuses, it would enable the rapid growth of roles dedicated to tutoring or other community service initiatives. But right now, even between UCLA and UC San Diego, we have to pursue completely independent partnerships, figure out their individual rules, and manage it all separately."

Hooten has identified two big policy shifts at the federal level that would help address these pain points for tutoring providers: 1) a standardized system for vetting and approving tutoring partners, and 2) incentivizing universities to commit to a minimum contribution for the community service roles they fund through work-study.

Whether to hold out hope for these changes is unclear. As recently as November 2023, House Republicans announced plans to zero out the program and use some of the funds to increase Pell Grants. Should that happen, programs like Ignite and Step Up would either drastically scale back their offerings or fold altogether.

The federal government could consider an alternative. In making the case for Pell Grants over work-study, House Republicans have noted that grant funding goes directly to students without involving college or university administrators. Congress could

consider a small national pilot program of work-study funds to be used specifically for tutoring programs like Step Up and Ignite. Once college students complete their tutoring obligations, they could receive federal work-study funds directly. In the case of Ignite tutors, they would receive their full \$1,200 stipend in a one-time payment after completing a 10-week Ignite session.

The strong data behind tutoring has generated an uncommon level of bipartisan support and a program like this would signal the federal government's ongoing commitment to high-quality tutoring. Democrats on Capitol Hill who unsuccessfully sought to pass the College Affordability Act in 2019 would likely support a more direct connection between work-study and tutoring.<sup>13</sup> Republicans who have concerns about funding flowing through universities would be appeased. And a majority of Americans support making college tuition-free.<sup>14</sup> As a result, policies that make college more affordable while simultaneously improving academic outcomes and reducing teacher burden would seemingly be politically popular.

Sam Olivieri believes the addition of tutoring to work-study opportunities would mean the release of immense untapped potential. "Five percent of college students could support 25 percent of elementary school students in this country," she says. "That would be game-changing."

gains for their students, so they were willing to place a big bet on expanding virtual tutoring in the wake of the pandemic.

This school year, just over 2,000 students across 23 of Ector County's 45 schools are receiving high-dosage tutoring, about six percent of the district's student population. But the program has done more than help struggling students. It has also led participating schools to redesign their school days, creating schoolwide or grade-wide "intervention" blocks that deliver extra instruction to all students regardless of reading level. Advanced students get faster-paced or enriched instruction, while others work in small groups with a classroom educator or paraprofessional. Still others are tutored.

### Quick Facts

## Tutoring in Ector County ISD, Texas

- Number of students served: 2,000
- Schools participating: 21 elementary schools, 2 middle schools
- Grades and content areas: Elementary and middle school math and reading
- Source of tutors: External vendors delivering virtual tutoring
- When tutoring occurs: During the school day
- Frequency of tutoring: 4-5 days/week, 30-minute sessions

## Balancing District Expectations, School Autonomy

Muri and Nájñez's first step was to appoint an administrator to manage the tutoring initiative across the district, so it wouldn't fragment into a host of different school-based programs. They selected Carina Escajeda, an Ector County native who worked as a counselor at Permian High School for seven

years before taking the new position of high impact tutoring manager.

Together, the three administrators set expectations for participating schools. At every school, tutoring had to happen at least four days each week, for at least 30 minutes at a time, with the same tutor consistently working with the same student—the gold standard established by research for high-dosage tutoring implementation. The daily tutoring schedule had to be clearly defined at each school, detailing which days tutors would cover reading, which days they'd cover math, and which students would receive tutoring on any given day.

But Superintendent Muri and his team didn't force the program on school leaders. Principals could opt in or opt out of the initiative, and those who opted in could choose between two vetted remote tutoring providers: Air Tutors, which has human tutors work one-on-one with students via video, or FEV Tutor, a chat-based model also using human tutors working with students one-on-one.

Principals were also free to decide how many students would participate and how to fit tutoring into their school schedules. Most schools wound up adopting similar approaches, given there are only so many ways to add a block of time for the majority of students in a classroom to participate in virtual tutoring, but allowing school leaders and grade-level leads to make the decisions themselves helped foster buy-in.

In another strategic move, Muri cut a deal with Air Tutors and FEV Tutor to pay them more if Ector students improved with tutoring and less if students did not improve or lost ground—an approach called outcomes-based contracting that is rarely used in education. With Muri's support, Nájñez had attended a conference on the concept at Harvard University back in 2020 and the tutoring initiative seemed a good place to try it out. (See sidebar on outcomes-based contracting on page 13)

Ector County's results have been impressive: 50 percent of students who scored below grade-level on the previous year's Texas state assessment and received at least 20 hours of tutoring scored at grade-level or higher after one year.<sup>15</sup> And approximately 30 percent of students tutored in math scored in the 66th percentile or higher on the standardized Northwest Education Association's MAP exam after one year, reflecting more growth than would be expected in a school year.

Escajeda's jam-packed workday points to the importance of centralized leadership to a district-wide tutoring program. When she's not in schools checking on how tutoring is going she reviews data, ensures students are rostered correctly for tutoring sessions, meets weekly with vendors, and reports to district leadership on the progress of the initiative. She troubleshoots technology issues, supports teachers embracing new roles as campus leads for tutoring, and validates student outcomes data that determine how much the vendors are paid. Escajeda is a major reason why tutoring looks and feels the same from school to school in Ector County ISD.

Escajeda's work demands painstaking attention to detail, especially with the district's high school tutoring program, which follows a completely different model from that of K-8. At Permian High School, 40 students have tutors to help them pass Texas high school exit exams. Due to the complexity of high school schedules, Escajeda works with each student individually to determine when the student can meet with a virtual tutor, what elective class the student can miss, and how the student will make up the work from the missed class. As in school districts nationwide, the vast majority of tutoring in Ector County occurs in elementary and middle schools. Because elementary and middle school students are usually assigned to just one or no more than a handful of classrooms, scheduling is significantly simpler in schools serving these grades.

## Live-video Tutoring at Johnson Elementary

When tutoring launched in Ector County, Zenovia Crier, principal of Lyndon B. Johnson Elementary, jumped at the opportunity to make it part of her school-improvement strategy. She had moved to Odessa, the county seat of Ector County, from Houston in 2021 to lead what was then a failing school. Tutoring became central to her turn-around work and today 125 out of 514 Johnson students, about half of the students in grades three through five, are tutored by Air Tutors. Air Tutors employs more than 800 tutors, all of whom have a bachelor's degree, 60 percent of whom have an advanced degree, and 70 percent of whom have over 10 years' teaching experience. Most are between the ages of 30 and 55.<sup>16</sup>

When I visited Johnson last fall, I found 20 third-graders spread out across the school's cafeteria, each with a laptop, some with headphones. It was 2:30 p.m., an hour I expected elementary school students to be antsy, ready to be done with the school day. Yet these students were quiet and focused. They received tutoring in groups of three, but because the tutor was virtual, students didn't have to sit near their groupmates.

Bailee, whose Halloween hair bow was nearly the size of her head, considered a prompt to write a sentence with the word "rip" in it. She slowly typed, "I rip my paper."

At the other end of the room, Aiden, wearing jeans and a blue zip-up jacket, yawned while raising his hand. His tutor showed the group a picture of a bar chart and asked what it was. "I don't know the name, but it's how you might count different things, like he has four apples and she has five bananas," Aiden said. "Maybe it's a maph?" The tutor, a young woman, congratulated him on the great description and asked if the word he was looking for was "graph."

In Kayla Shirley's fourth-grade classroom, students were engaged in one of three activities during the school's daily "Knights of the Round Table" intervention block—named for the school's mascot, the Knights. Seven students worked independently on math enrichment while Shirley sat at a table with five students, leading small-group instruction. The remaining students were logged into their tutoring sessions.

David typed  $5 + 5 = 12$  and then asked the tutor to check his submission. He remained completely focused on his tutoring session, even while students on either side of him were working independently on other material at different levels of difficulty. One of them was Antonella, who tackled a word problem that involved drawing an array of a garden with four rows of flowers, seven flowers in each row.

Shirley's classroom is far from atypical. On the contrary, it offers a good snapshot of almost every Ector County ISD classroom where tutoring takes place. "Whole-group instruction is still the core of what we do, but tutoring supports that core in a truly individual way," said Robert Whatley, Johnson's assistant principal.

### Chat-based Tutoring at Bowie Middle School

On the other side of Odessa, Bowie Middle School Principal Amy Russell has selected Ector County's other tutoring vendor, chat-based FEV.

In Monica Olivas' sixth-grade classroom, large poster sheets display colorful lists of which students participate in tutoring on which day of the week. On this day, 11 students were logged into tutoring sessions, while 14 other students worked on assignments or used online enrichment programs. Texas House Bill 1416 requires that students who test below grade level on the state assessment must receive 30 hours of supplemental instruction over the course of the

school year, though schools may include other students in these supplemental offerings. The state provides no resources for the instruction it mandates; local school districts must organize and pay for it. The students below grade level, sometimes referred to as "1416 students," are at the front of the line for tutoring, but Ector County ISD also encourages schools to use the NWEA MAP test, given in the first month of school, to determine which other students should receive tutoring if funds are available.

Teachers play a central role in determining the content of tutoring sessions in Ector County, a clear break from much of the tutoring done by commercial tutoring companies that has typically been disconnected from classroom instruction.

In some Ector County schools, grade-level lead teachers decide whether to focus on NWEA MAP scores or STAAR (the Texas state assessment) scores. Each teacher can choose whether to share specific content and standards with the vendor for tutors to cover, and about a quarter of them, including Olivas, do so. All tutors are given information about Texas state standards to help them work with students towards grade-level proficiency. One result of Olivas' providing tutors with specific course content is that while her students get personalized help from their own tutor, they're all working on the same topics.

Teachers and principals attribute some of Ector County's tutoring success to participation points and incentives that at least one vendor, FEV Tutor, gives students. Tutors can award points to students for effort, persistence, or achievement, and those points can result in small prizes, such as pencils or a pair of FEV-branded headphones, or simply public pride when a teacher displays the list of students by points acquired. At Bowie Middle School, a sixth-grader named Jade's tutor types, "Go ahead and give it a try," to which Jade quickly types back, "done its 43." The tutor immediately responds, "Plus 1 point for effort. Now let me explain."

In Erick Salgado’s fifth-grade class at Blackshear Elementary, the student ranked first that day for working hardest had scored lowest on state standardized tests, not an uncommon occurrence in Ector. By contrast, students needing the most help are often the least engaged in traditional classrooms, where they’re reluctant to speak up in larger settings. Beyond awarding points, the tutors also give students an “exit ticket,” two or three questions that allow them to demonstrate whether they’ve mastered the material covered in the tutoring session that day. Teachers and tutors review the results to plan for future sessions or additional in-class support.

### Tough Fiscal Tradeoffs

While tutoring has been successfully incorporated into teachers’ and students’ daily school routines and many students are seeing significant growth as a result, the Ector County tutoring program’s future is dependent on new funding sources.

Like thousands of other school districts, Ector County invested a significant portion of its one-time ESSER funding in tutoring, just as the federal government encouraged local educators to do. By the end of the 2023-24 school year, Ector County is projected to have only \$700.00 remaining of its initial \$10 million tutoring investment.

Yet the district is committed to sustaining the program. Says Superintendent Muri, “ESSER funds enabled us to explore areas of student support and acceleration that we have never been able to do before due to funding.” Or as Principal Crier of Johnson Elementary so forcefully puts it, “We can’t go backwards now that we know this is a solution to catch all kids up.” Hers is a widely shared sentiment in Ector County.

Finding the money to continue tutoring in Ector and elsewhere once the federal pandemic-recovery funds expire isn’t going to be easy, however.

The district is waiting anxiously to see if the Texas state legislature will increase school funding to schools this year (what would be the first expansion of state aid since 2019) or at least attach some funding to existing state legislation (H.B. 1416) mandating interventions for struggling students. In the meantime, Muri plans to use a “strategic abandonment tool” to transfer funds to tutoring from other programs that, “while good, may not be producing great results.”

At the federal level, funding in Titles I,II,III, and IV of the Every Student Succeeds Act can be used for tutoring.<sup>17</sup> Alternatively, if school districts can connect tutoring with Response to Intervention (RTI), a program designed for early identification of struggling students or students with disabilities, districts could support tutoring through Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.<sup>18</sup>

Ultimately, saving the new tutoring systems in Ector County and beyond—and the achievement gains these programs have delivered—will require schools and districts to make tough choices around how they spend Title I funding from the Every Student Succeeds Act, the primary source of ongoing federal school aid. “Campuses are going to have to use some of their Title I funding for high-impact virtual tutoring,” Lilia Náñez, the Ector County chief academic officer, told me. “It’s a dilemma. When I was a campus principal at a Title I school, I always funded people with Title I funds—a reading coach, a reading specialist, or an instructional coach. So, schools will have to choose: ‘Do I not fund a person so I can fund high-impact virtual tutoring?’”

That tension between hiring a community member as school staff and contracting with high-dosage tutoring providers able to give more students more support may go a long ways toward defining the trajectory of tutoring in Ector County and nationally in the years ahead.

## OUTCOMES-BASED CONTRACTING IN EDUCATION

Across the United States, public schools spend between \$80 billion and \$200 billion a year on external contracts, for everything from HVAC maintenance to technology subscriptions to tutoring providers.<sup>20</sup> Almost all of these contracts are drawn up to pay vendors for goods or services rendered, not for the outcomes they produce. By contrast, outcomes-based contracting, a business-model more commonly found in social services, health care, and both early and higher education, is just beginning to take hold in K-12 education. The premise is simple: vendors are paid, in part, based on student outcomes that are linked to the services they provide.

Currently, a handful of school districts nationally are piloting outcomes-based contracts with math tutoring providers. Harvard University's Center for Education Policy Research worked with the districts to help them develop the contracts, then handed off its mentoring role to the Southern Education Foundation in 2022. Two participating districts—Florida's Duval County Public Schools and Ector County Independent School District in Texas—offer informative examples of different approaches to outcomes-based contracting with tutoring providers.

Officials in Duval County, near Jacksonville, realized that poor outcomes in middle-school math were leading to the placement of 5,000 students a year in a low-level, pre-algebra course during freshman year of high school. The district joined the Harvard-hosted pilot to address the problem, investing about \$2 million of its federal Covid-recovery funds into an outcomes-based contract with a tutoring provider that delivered three, 30-minute sessions per week of math support to 1,250 struggling middle-school students.

Duval County's vendor, FEV Tutor in partnership with Edmentum, earns a base fee of \$800 per tutored student. If a student hits an established midyear growth target, the vendor receives an additional \$530. If that student then hits an established end-of-year growth target, the district pays another \$700. Finally, if the student also scores proficient or above on the state assessment, the provider earns a \$420 bonus.

In Texas, Ector County took a different approach to creating outcomes-based contracts with two tutoring providers, Air Tutors and FEV Tutor. There, the school district pays a base fee of \$25 per completed tutoring session with each student. If a student demonstrates

improvement on the NWEA MAP assessment equivalent to more than one year's growth in one school year, the district increases its pay for tutoring that student to \$27.50 per session. Pay can increase further as student growth increases.

But if a student loses ground, the vendor loses money. If a student who made gains regresses below the 49th percentile on the benchmark test, the per-session pay declines to \$22.50. If the student regresses below the 40th percentile, per-session pay declines to \$21.25.

Tracking each student's progress is a laborious task that consumes much of High-Impact Tutoring Manager Carina Escajeda's time towards the end of the school year, but it ensures that vendors make a real difference in student achievement. (See Ector County ISD case study on page 6)

Ector County's vendors are comfortable with baking in the incentives and the penalties. "We believe in what we do at Air Tutors," says Hasan Ali, the company's founder and CEO. "We don't mind putting our money where our mouth is because we are confident with our results."

"When we think about the public, this shows that we're being responsible with funding, that we're tying it to student outcomes and our district's strategic plan," says Jasmine Walker, who was the director of K-12 math for Duval County before moving to the Southern Education Foundation to help other districts introduce outcomes-based contracting.

It remains an uphill battle to persuade districts to try outcomes-based contracting. Among pilot districts, few have expanded its use beyond hiring tutoring providers, even when the contracting led to higher-quality implementation and better student outcomes, says Sarah Glover, the Southern Education Foundation's program lead for outcomes-based contracting.

One reason for this is that school district contracting officers typically aren't trained in how to develop or support performance-based contracts.<sup>21</sup> Outcomes-based approaches are more commonly used in healthcare, energy, or infrastructure projects. Under the California Solar Initiative, for example, vendors are paid on the basis of how much energy they generate. In tutoring, this model would help reduce the number of providers that don't make a difference for students.<sup>22</sup>



## A School Designed for Tutors

# Great Oaks Charter School, New York City

At Great Oaks Charter School in New York City's Greenwich Village, the presence of a large cadre of AmeriCorps fellows makes it possible to combine in-person tutoring with classroom instruction during the school day. In fact, the school was founded in 2013 with tutoring at the core of its approach to teaching.

Every English language arts and math class is double-blocked: one period for whole-class instruction plus a second workshop period for small-group tutoring, with teachers available as needed during the workshop block.

In a sixth-grade math class I observed in December, tutoring fellows led small groups of students through problems on percentages. The fellows demonstrated deep knowledge of their subject matter, finding different ways to check for understanding and explain concepts when their students struggled. "When I have fellows," English teacher Jennifer Bradley told me, "I have someone who can sit with a certain kid and explain the same thing five different times until the kid gets it right."

Each year, Great Oaks Foundation, the charter school's management organization, recruits over 200 recent college graduates to work as AmeriCorps fellows at their nine campuses serving primarily low-income students of color in New Jersey, Connecticut, and New York. A federal agency, AmeriCorps funds non-profits such as Great Oaks across the nation. These organizations hire more than 200,000 Americans annually, many of them brand new to the workforce, who exchange up to two years of labor for a living stipend and health benefits. Fellows must be at least 18 years of age and work 35 hours per week.

Nearly three dozen fellows are working at GO-NYC in Greenwich Village this year. Between three and six

work full-time in every Great Oaks math and English language arts classroom. Others support science classes. As "regulars" in the schools, the fellows get to know students well, providing mentorship and emotional support in addition to the academic support students need to master a challenging curriculum. Half of the school's current teachers started as fellows.

The fellows' efforts are getting results: students who started the 2022-23 school year at the 25th percentile or below in math and worked with a fellow all year subsequently scored, on average, at the 43rd percentile. The same year, the percentage of Great Oaks NYC students at or above grade level in math increased to 22 percent from 13 percent in 2021-22.<sup>19</sup>

## A New Approach to School Staffing

Fully appreciating the GO model means rethinking how schools are staffed and who performs each role within a school. Fellows have numerous responsibilities in addition to small group instruction and mentoring. They oversee student dismissal, hall monitoring, and lunchtime, and conduct outreach with the families of their mentees every other week.

Fellows manage after-school activities for 90 minutes, five days a week. They lead a Saturday school academic support program for students that runs for eight half-days over the course of the year. In other

### Quick Facts

## Tutoring at Great Oaks Charter School, New York City

- Number of students served: 320
- Grades and content areas: Middle school reading and math
- Source of tutors: AmeriCorps fellows providing in-person tutoring
- When tutoring occurs: During the school day
- Frequency of tutoring: 5 days/week

words, they are teachers, assistant teachers, mentors, counselors, coaches, and more.

Though prospective teachers are told during the hiring process that working with fellows is part of the job, it can be an adjustment to lead a team of assistants as well as manage a classroom of students. “When I came to Great Oaks, it was my fifth or sixth year of teaching,” explained English language arts teacher Bradley. “I had to get used to managing adults. It’s unheard of anywhere else I’ve taught to have four, five, sometimes six adults in a room. But it is awesome. I’ve learned to make things clear not only to the students but to the educators working with me, so I don’t have to handhold.”

One obvious benefit to having other adults in the classroom: teachers can teach, without being distracted by the host of other tasks that make the job overwhelming for so many public-school teachers. Fellows also help teachers by supporting tasks closely related to instruction: grading assignments, proctoring exams, and preparing lesson materials. “It’s all the help you could need or want,” says Bradley. “It’s a load off my back with so many things.”

The presence of other adults—even younger, less-experienced ones—keeps teachers on their toes, too. In an internal survey, 90 percent of Great Oaks teachers said fellows improve student learning. “I’m more aware of what I’m doing and what I’m saying because there are four other adults in the room,” Bradley told me. In some cases, depending on teachers’ preferences, teachers and fellows create lesson plans together.

## Increasing Rigor and Relationships

At the start of the school year, each fellow is assigned a group of about eight students to mentor. Fellows meet daily with their mentee groups and call or text each mentee’s family every week. Some fellows say their work as mentors is more valuable to students than their tutoring. “I had a really easy time in the

classroom because of the mentoring,” explained former fellow Leticia Parkinson, who came to New York from Trinidad in pursuit of a teaching degree. “I didn’t know a lot about classroom management and managing behaviors. But these students want me to be a good teacher because I built really good relationships with my mentees from the start.” Parkinson joined the staff as a science teacher following her fellowship year.

Those relationships can help draw out students when they are disengaged from an academic subject. During a sixth-grade language arts workshop period, the class divides into four groups, each having its own discussion of “The Watsons Go to Birmingham.” In the group led by first-year fellow Matty Sebolai, Ava, a high-performing student, is much more engaged than Riley, who is sitting next to her.<sup>23</sup> But Sebolai has the bandwidth to attend to both students. “Riley?” she asks, “Why are the strings important?” Reluctantly and quietly, Riley responds.

In many whole-group instructional environments, a student like Riley would just be left alone. During workshop periods at Great Oaks, every student is called on by name and asked to participate at least once.

Muhammed, a high school junior, said that the Great Oaks environment provides the combination of rigor and relationship he needs to succeed. “When I got here, I could really see how much people here actually care about me. In my old school, if you didn’t do the work, they didn’t care. They were like, ‘Ok, you don’t want to do the work? That’s your problem.’ But here, they’re like, ‘You need to do this. Do it. Trust me.’ They push you, and they make sure you get your work done because they know it’s going to help you.”

“The culture here isn’t something you can just get at a different New York City school,” adds another 11th-grader named Alonzo. “You can see the uniqueness in our culture, our students, and how we behave with each other. We’re like a big, happy family.”

## Recruiting and Supporting Tutors

GO Foundation, the charter management organization, leads fellow recruitment for all Great Oaks schools. Just over 60 percent of applicants find the fellowship via the job-seeking site Handshake. Another 15 to 20 percent come through referrals from current or former fellows. Most applicants are finishing their bachelor's degree and looking for a job, typically with an interest either in public service or working with children.

Before the school year begins, fellows from all Great Oaks schools participate in a week-long, overnight training called "GO Forum." This training focuses on the three primary components of the Great Oaks program: develop a community, mentor for leadership, and instruct for mastery. Fellows then receive site-specific pre-service training at the school where they will work, including how they will support instruction, mentor students, and support school operations.

Once the school year begins, fellows typically participate in whatever professional development is provided to teachers at the school. The GO Foundation hosts monthly in-person sessions focused on career and personal development, including opportunities for fellows to think about professional goals after their service year.

Great Oaks Charter School also pays for fellows' housing, since their federally funded annual stipend, which ranges from \$17,000 to \$20,000, comes nowhere near the cost of renting an apartment in New York City. All Great Oaks campuses provide housing for tutors close to the school where they work. In the past, GO-NYC rented safe, reasonably priced apartments so that fellows serving a particular school could live in the same building. The school managed to do that in a daunting Manhattan housing market by adopting a staffing model that effectively shifts a teacher salary to housing for four fellows. To further reduce costs, as of fall 2023, fellows live in dormitory-style housing (two fellows per room) on

## THE ROLE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN TUTORING

"There's a saying about economists," said economist Jens Ludwig of the University of Chicago. "We don't believe you can find a \$50 bill on the sidewalk. In other words, you never get something for nothing. But we were wrong. Computer-assisted learning is the \$50 bill on the sidewalk when paired with tutoring."

Ludwig made these comments at a December 2023 Aspen Institute panel on high-dosage tutoring in Washington, D.C. He was referencing a series of studies that looked at the consequences of shifting from daily in-person tutoring to every-other-day in-person tutoring, if students use a high-quality computer-assisted learning (CAL) platform on the off days.<sup>24</sup> The studies, conducted in Chicago Public Schools and the New York City Department of Education, found it is possible to replace half of a student's tutoring time with high-quality CAL without sacrificing student outcomes.

This finding mirrors a theme that FutureEd identified during a recent deep dive into the role of AI in schools: the most effective way to use artificial intelligence in schools is as a tool that supports rather than supplants educators.<sup>25</sup>

One of the best known and most widely publicized AI chatbots in education is Khanmigo, from the non-profit Khan Academy. Khan describes Khanmigo as an AI-powered student tutor and teaching assistant that can help teachers develop lesson plans, co-create rubrics, and write a class newsletter, among other tasks.

Khanmigo, which costs school districts \$35 annually per student, is designed not simply to give students an answer, but to guide them through the learning process by asking questions and providing personalized feedback. It's exactly the kind of high-quality CAL that allows a steep reduction in the cost of in-person tutors while preserving the impact of tutoring.

Richard Culatta, the chief executive officer of the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), says that an important first step for schools and districts is to give educators the opportunity to investigate AI or other technology tools easily and

the two floors above the five-story school, housed in a former church. Across the street, one-bedroom apartments rent for more than \$3,300 per month.

In addition to the nine Great Oaks campuses, the GO Foundation has begun partnering with several District of Columbia public schools, Achievement First charter schools in Connecticut, and others to bring AmeriCorps fellows into those schools as tutors. This bid to retrofit the Great Oaks tutoring model onto existing schools will be an important test of scaling the approach.

“What we’re doing at Great Oaks isn’t just about tutoring,” said Michael Duffy, the founder of Great Oaks and the president of the GO Foundation. “We’re reimagining how to run a school, how to staff classrooms, and how to recruit and inspire the next generation of educators. But we’re doing it by focusing on giving each student the attention and support they need to realize their full human potential.”

\*

The emergence of successful tutoring initiatives in Baton Rouge, Odessa, and GO-NYC didn’t happen by accident. Leaders like Superintendent Muri in Ector County, Principal Megan Phillips in Jackson, Louisiana, and school founders like Michael Duffy followed researchers in shaping tutoring models that produced the best results. They sourced talented tutors. They aligned tutoring with classroom instruction to a substantial degree. They encouraged buy-in from administrators and teachers by affording them autonomy and supporting their needs in the classroom. They trained tutors to mentor students and help address their substantial social and emotional needs. And in Ector Country, they wrote accountability for vendors into their outcomes-based contracts.

What is particularly exciting about these three initiatives is the door they open to rethinking how schools run and who can educate students, a rethinking that includes an expanded—but

## THE ROLE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN TUTORING (Continued)

without fear of making mistakes. “Give teachers time for some structured exploration,” Culatta explains.

Privacy and protecting student data are areas of concern in using technology, and AI specifically, for personalized tutoring. According to a report from the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Educational Technology, “the data [needed] goes beyond conventional student records (roster and gradebook information) to detailed information about what students do as they learn with technology and what teachers do as they use technology to teach.”

School districts, state education agencies, and federal officials will need to carefully develop policy and practice to preserve student privacy while taking advantage of the efficiencies offered by technological advances. As of January 2024, only three states—California, Oregon, and West Virginia—have issued guidance on AI use, including privacy policies, while another 11 are in the process of developing them.<sup>26</sup>

Meanwhile, Jens Ludwig continues to think about how to stretch that mythical \$50 bill farther. “In principle, it should be possible to offer students a tutoring package that is relatively light on tutor time and heavier on CAL, which would free up scarce, more expensive tutor time to give to the students who might be less willing to engage with the computer program,” he recently wrote. But we don’t yet know “where is the tipping point for [any] given student in how much CAL time, relative to tutor time...before learning gains start to decline.”

*With contributions from Alina Tugend*

supporting—role for emerging technologies. Importantly, the work in Baton Rouge, Ector County, and particularly Greenwich Village suggests ways to sustain funding high-quality tutoring when federal pandemic-recovery money runs out. With headlines routinely trumpeting schools’ many challenges and failures, the rise of the tutoring movement in public education is a reason for optimism.

## KEY FINDINGS

**It's popular and it works.** Tutoring represents a rare point of convergence between national policy goals, research findings, and what teachers and principals actually want. Unlike other federal mandates or darling ideas of policymakers, high-quality, high-dosage tutoring has been warmly embraced by school staff in the programs profiled here and in other districts across the country. Why? Teachers can measure their students' improvement.

**Focus on what evidence says is high-quality tutoring.** While some less intensive programs such as on-demand tutoring may seem easier to implement, research shows they typically don't yield strong results. For that reason, this report focuses exclusively on high-quality, high-dosage tutoring. While the programs profiled here show there's some flexibility in that definition, the non-negotiables are in-school tutoring sessions, meeting at least three times per week, small group size (no more than four students per tutor), consistency of tutor (the same tutor works with the same student(s)), and programs lasting at least several months.

**Give principals and teachers a measure of autonomy.** Crucially, the school leaders and educators we studied had some degree of autonomy in implementing the tutoring programs in their buildings, whether that meant choosing which vendor to use (Ector County principals), choosing whether to send specific curricular materials to tutors (Ector County teachers), or adjusting the school day schedule (principals and educators in Greater Baton Rouge and Ector County). With greater autonomy tends to come greater buy-in, as well as the advantages of a program designed for local context.

**Leadership is key.** The successful tutoring initiatives studied here all have one thing in common: a strong program lead. Whether that's Carina Escajeda, the high-impact tutoring manager in Ector County, Kate Boyle, the GO-NYC fellowship director, or Lauren May and Shauna Walters, the teacher/trainers for TFA's Ignite, each program has someone who makes sure the tutors know what their job entails and what material to cover. Where the tutoring lead also has another role (e.g., a classroom teacher), it's important that this additional responsibility come with additional pay.

**Relationships with tutors help motivate students.** Tutoring can create a strong relationship between student and tutor. As shown in these profiles, many different kinds of people—college students (Baton Rouge), recent college graduates (Great Oaks), or professional tutors hired through an external vendor (Ector County)—can be successful tutors who foster real relationships with students. Importantly, those relationships can be meaningful even through virtual connections. A positive tutor-student relationship may benefit student well-being in addition to any academic impact, something to keep in mind during a time of heightened rates of depression and anxiety among youth.

**Increasing funding for federal programs like work-study and AmeriCorps is a crucial path to sustainability.** Beyond using Title I or other federal grants to states and school districts for tutoring, federal funding for work-study and AmeriCorps will be crucial levers to support continued growth of high-dosage tutoring. These funding streams are well established, barring any Republican attempts to dam them, and allow schools to tap into populations perfectly suited for tutoring—college students and recent college graduates. The AmeriCorps stipend should be increased, at least for positions as high-dosage tutors, and bureaucratic red tape should be lessened so that national tutoring initiatives can access work-study funds more readily.

## ENDNOTES

1. E. Kim, J. Goodman, and M.R. West, "Kumon In: The Recent, Rapid Rise of Private Tutoring Centers," Annenberg Center at Brown University Working Paper No. 21-367 (March 2021), <https://edworkingpapers.com/index.php/ai21-367>.
2. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, "The School Pulse Panel," <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/spp/default.asp>.
3. The official 2017 grade was a D; under revised scoring launched in 2018, the score would have been an F.
4. Data provided by Teach for America.
5. Community College Research Center, "Participation in Federal Work-study," Teachers College, Columbia University (July 2021), <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/participation-federal-work-study.html>.
6. Louisiana Department of Education, "2023 District Performance Scores," <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/resources/library/performance-scores>.
7. Tutoring cost range comes from conversations with school and districts leaders as well as vendors, representing at least ten different programs.
8. In 2023, Louisiana's state legislature passed a bill requiring third-grade students to pass a reading test in order to continue to fourth grade; the bill goes into effect for third-grade students in the 2024-25 school year; H.B. 12, 2023 Regular Session (Louisiana, 2023).
9. M.A. Cardona, "Key Policy Letter Signed by the Education Secretary," (May 10, 2023), <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/secletter/230510.html>.
10. The White House, "FACT SHEET: Biden-Harris Administration Announces Improving Student Achievement Agenda in 2024" (January 17, 2024), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/01/17/fact-sheet-biden-harris-administration-announces-improving-student-achievement-agenda-in-2024/>.
11. Federal Student Aid, U.S. Department of Education, "Federal Work-study Jobs Help Students Earn Money to Pay for College or Career School," <https://studentaid.gov/understand-aid/types/work-study/>.
12. J. Scott-Clayton, "Federal Work-study: Past Its Prime, or Ripe for Renewal?" The Brookings Institute (June 22, 2017), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/federal-work-study-past-its-prime-or-ripe-for-renewal/>.
13. C. Coudriet, "House Democrats Advance Federal Student Aid Overhaul," *Roll Call* (October 31, 2019), <https://rollcall.com/2019/10/31/house-democrats-advance-federal-student-aid-overhaul/>.
14. H. Hartig, "Democrats Overwhelmingly Favor Free College Tuition, While Republicans are Divided by Age, Education," Pew Research Center (August 11, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/08/11/democrats-overwhelmingly-favor-free-college-tuition-while-republicans-are-divided-by-age-education/>.
15. Data from the 2022-2023 school year.
16. Air Tutors demographic information provided by the company.
17. National Student Support Accelerator, "Funding for High-impact Tutoring" (November 2023), <https://studentsupportaccelerator.org/sites/default/files/Funding%20for%20High-Impact%20Tutoring.pdf>.
18. L. Cohen, "A Long-term Strategy for Funding High-quality Tutoring," FutureEd, Georgetown University (September 7, 2023), <https://www.future-ed.org/a-long-term-strategy-for-funding-high-quality-tutoring/>.
19. Information provided by Great Oaks.
20. Public expenditures total close to \$800 billion. At least one expert estimates that 10 to 20 percent of spending goes to external contracts. Thus a rough calculation would suggest that 10 percent of \$800 billion is \$80 billion; M. Hanson, "U.S. Public Education Spending Statistics," Education Data Initiative (September 8, 2023), <https://educationdata.org/public-education-spending-statistics>; Capital News Service, "Contracted Out: An Unprecedented Look at Maryland Public School Spending," *Maryland Matters* (August 22, 2023), <https://www.marylandmatters.org/2023/08/22/contracted-out-an-unprecedented-look-at-maryland-public-school-spending/>.
21. N. Wakeman, "Outcome-based Contracts Are Smart but Hard to Field," *Washington Technology* (November 30, 2022), <https://washingtontechnology.com/companies/2022/11/outcome-based-contracts-are-smart-hard-field/380293/>.
22. Solar Energy Industries Association, "Performance-Based Incentives," <https://www.seia.org/initiatives/performance-based-incentives>.
23. Student names have been changed at the school's request.
24. J. Guryan and J. Ludwig, "Overcoming Pandemic Induced Learning Loss," Aspen Institute (November 8, 2023), [https://www.economicstrategygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Guryan\\_Ludwig\\_2023\\_Chapter.pdf](https://www.economicstrategygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Guryan_Ludwig_2023_Chapter.pdf).
25. A. Tugend, "Navigating the Artificial Intelligence Revolution in Schools," FutureEd, Georgetown University, (December 20, 2023), <https://www.future-ed.org/navigating-the-artificial-intelligence-revolution-in-schools/>.
26. A. Klein, "Districts Are Hungry for AI Guidance. Here's How One State Crafted It," *Education Week* (January 11, 2024), <https://www.edweek.org/technology/districts-are-hungry-for-ai-guidance-heres-how-one-state-crafted-it/2024/01>.

# LEARNING CURVE

LESSONS FROM THE TUTORING REVOLUTION IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

