

# Navigating the ESSER Cliff: How districts are sustaining high-impact tutoring after federal relief

Amanda Lu, [Ayesha K. Hashim](#), Ev Gilbert, Helen Zhou, and Susanna Loeb

2026 NSSA Conference - Research Lightning Rounds Part 2  
May 6, 2026



NATIONAL STUDENT  
SUPPORT ACCELERATOR

*equalizing access to quality tutoring*

**nwea**

# Motivation

## Pandemic Learning Recovery



**Elementary and Secondary School Education Relief (ESSER) funding spurred rapid expansion of high-impact tutoring (HIT) as an evidence-based learning recovery strategy (Robinson & Loeb, 2021).**



**ESSER funding narrowed resource gaps, expanded access to HIT for underserved students, and aided in the recovery of high-poverty districts (Dewey et al., 2025).**

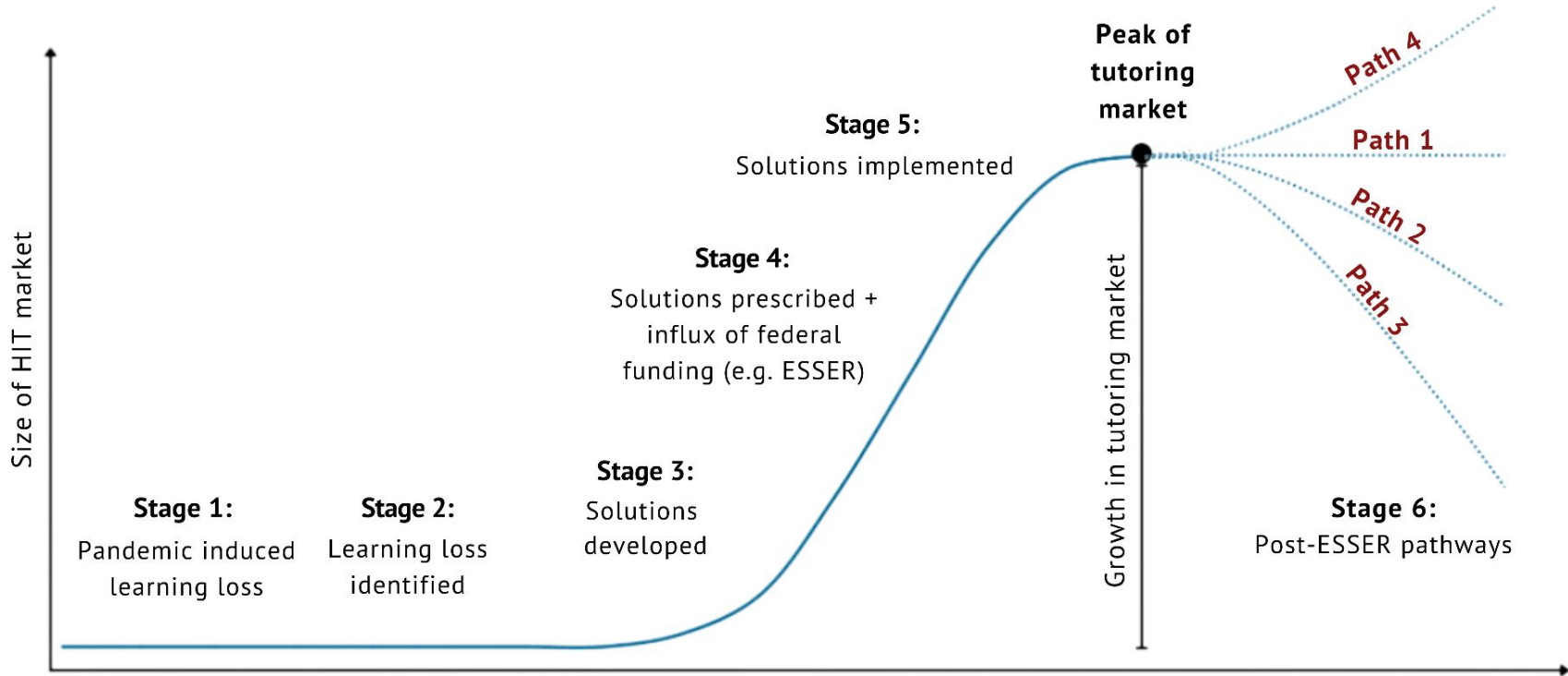
**With ESSER funding expired, districts must decide whether and how to sustain HIT programs long-term.**

# Research Questions

- 1. How did districts utilize ESSER funding to expand HIT programs? Did these programs successfully target underserved populations?**
- 2. How does a district assess and perceive its HIT programs' value post-ESSER?**
- 3. How are districts sustaining their HIT programs post-ESSER?**
- 4. What policy, organizational, and market conditions influence districts' ability to sustain HIT programs post-ESSER?**

# Conceptual Framework

Figure 1. A Model of Potential HIT Program Trajectories



# Methods

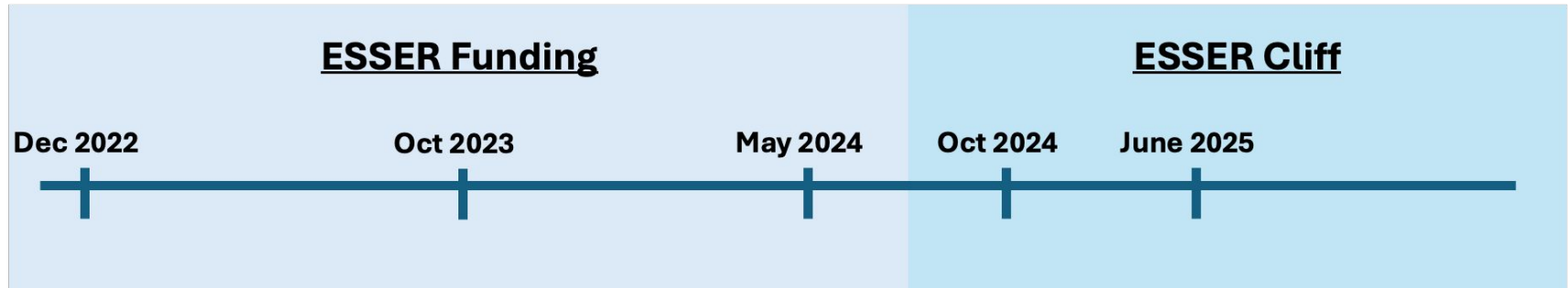
---



# Descriptive analysis of US School Pulse Survey

## Quantitative Methods

- Five waves of survey data to track national trends in tutoring availability, models, funding, and perceived effectiveness overtime (RQs 1-3).
- 4,000 public elementary, middle, and high schools across the nation.
- **Limitation:** Same questions not asked in each wave.



# Paired with a survey of 35 public school districts with HIT programs...

## Quantitative Methods

- Survey administered from Nov 2025 to Jan 2026
- Explored sustainability strategies, fiscal trade-offs, program design decisions, and contextual factors during ESSER cliff (RQs 3-4)

# Paired with a survey of 35 public school districts with HIT programs...

## Quantitative Methods

Descriptive Variables	Survey Sample (n=35)	Other districts (n=18,555)	Statistical Significance	
	mean	mean	p-value	star
student enrollment	33,784.97	2,599.71	0.00	***
total schools	63.94	5.38	0.00	***
% FRL	39.02%	44.69%	0.63	
% Hispanic	31.09%	20.93%	0.02	*
% White	33.08%	56.38%	0.00	***
% Black	26.33%	11.91%	0.00	***
% Asian	4.78%	2.64%	0.07	+
% elementary schools	57.55%	46.97%	0.06	+
% middle schools	17.10%	12.61%	0.13	
% high schools	18.48%	27.14%	0.08	+
% schools located in city area	57.96%	19.39%	0.00	***
% schools located in suburban area	24.71%	21.98%	0.68	
% schools located in town area	5.36%	12.03%	0.19	
% schools located in rural area	11.97%	46.61%	0.00	***

The districts in our sample are **more racially diverse** than the avg. U.S. school district

Our sample is **majority urban districts**, but also includes **rural** and **suburban** schools

### District Administrator Sample Breakdown by Demographics

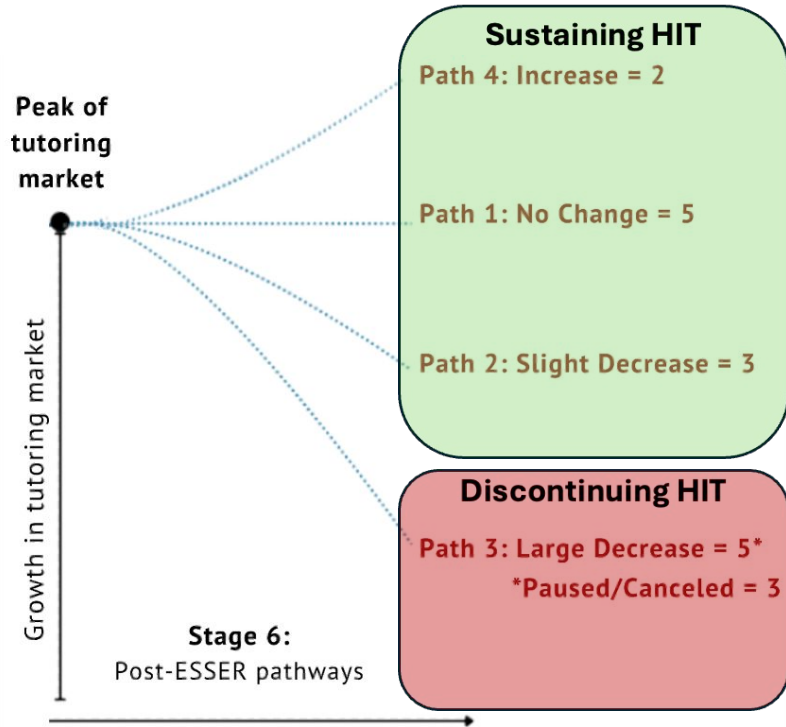
# And interviews with 15 HIT program administrators

## Qualitative Methods

- Interview participants (n=15) were district administrators who completed our survey and reported different pathways for sustaining HIT programs.

# And interviews with 15 HIT program administrators

## Qualitative Methods



Type (NCES Locale)	Size (Enrollment)	Number of Districts ( $n = 15$ )
Urban (City)	Large ( $\geq 25,000$ )	6
	Small/Medium ( $< 25,000$ )	2
Suburban (Suburb)	Large ( $\geq 25,000$ )	2
	Small/Medium ( $< 25,000$ )	3
Rural (Town)	Small/Medium ( $< 25,000$ )	2

**Anonymized Sample Breakdown by District Type and Size**

# RQ1 Findings

---

How did schools utilize ESSER funding to expand HIT programs and target underserved students?

# RQ1: ESSER grew access to HIT programs

Qualitative insights

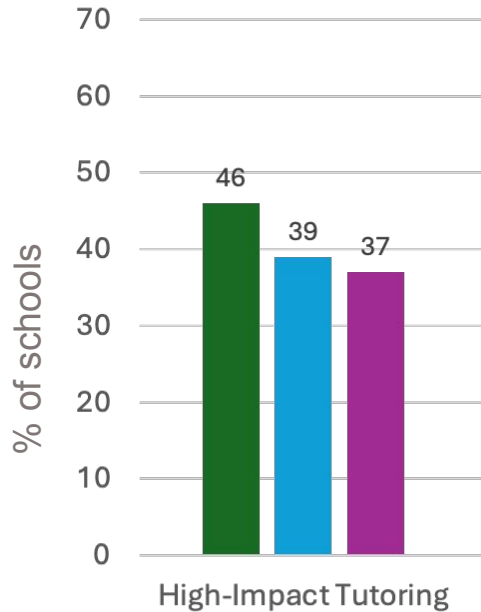
- **Districts found ESSER funds “easy” to use** because they were allocated at the district level, allowing for rapid implementation without the complex school-level allocation requirements of traditional federal funds.

*“I think ESSER funding really gave us that space to try bold things, innovative things, things that we had never done before because we had this funding available. I mean, we hit the ground running and we said we wanted to get as many students working with the tutor as we can.”*

– Tutoring Director,  
Large Urban School District

# RQ1: ESSER grew access to HIT programs

Descriptive analysis of US School Pulse Survey



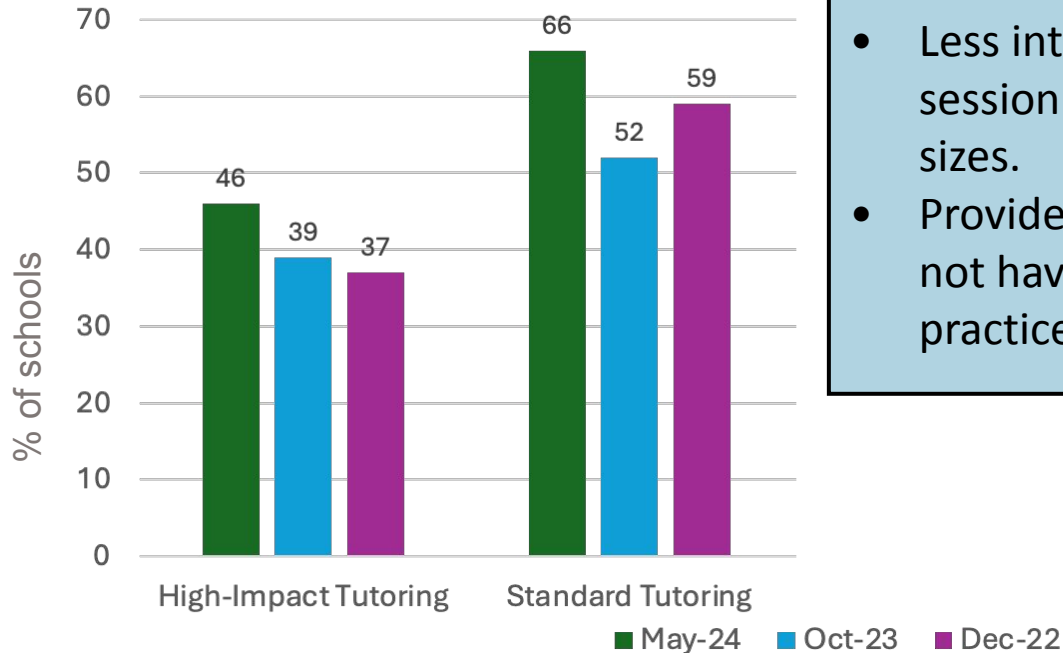
■ May-24 ■ Oct-23 ■ Dec-22

## High-Impact:

- Three or more times a week.
- 30 minutes or more per session.
- One-on-one or small groups.
- Delivered by trained educators using evidence-aligned curricula.

# RQ1: ESSER also grew access to other tutoring programs

Descriptive analysis of US School Pulse Survey

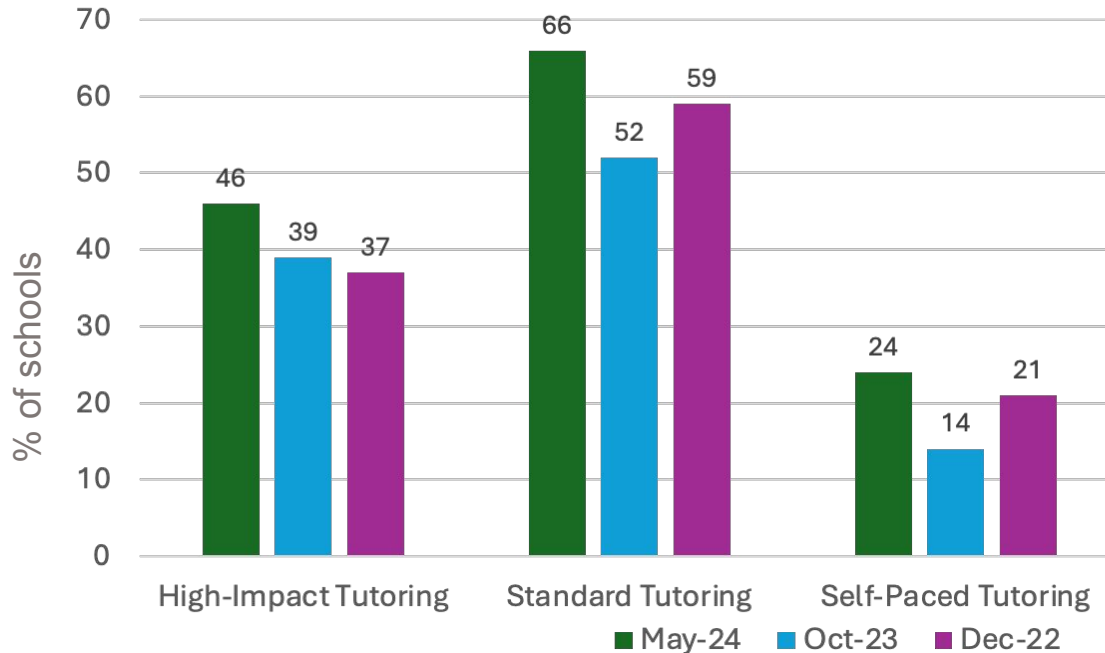


## Standard:

- Less intensive program with flexible session frequency, length, and small-group sizes.
- Provided by educators who may or may not have been trained in tutoring practices.

# RQ1: ESSER also grew access to other tutoring programs

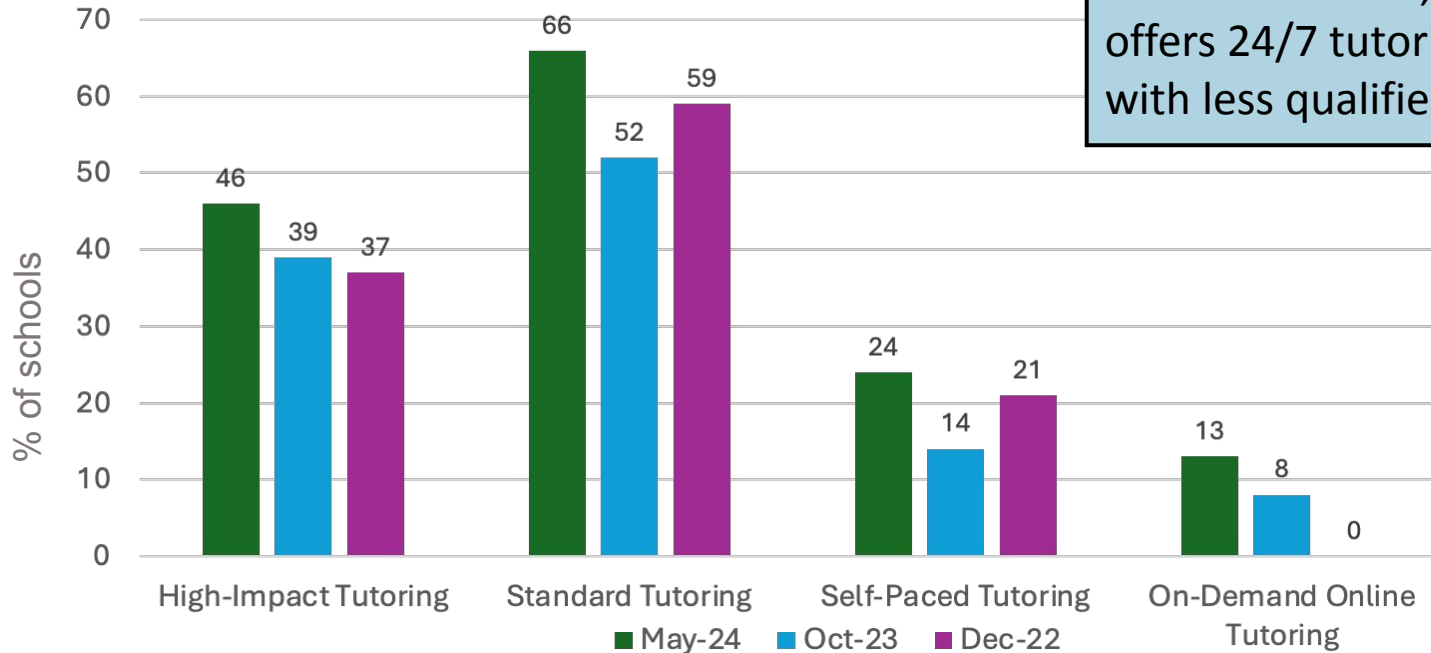
Descriptive analysis of US School Pulse Survey



**Self-Paced:** Students work on their own, typically online, with guided instruction that advances to new material upon demonstrating mastery.

# RQ1: ESSER also grew access to other tutoring programs

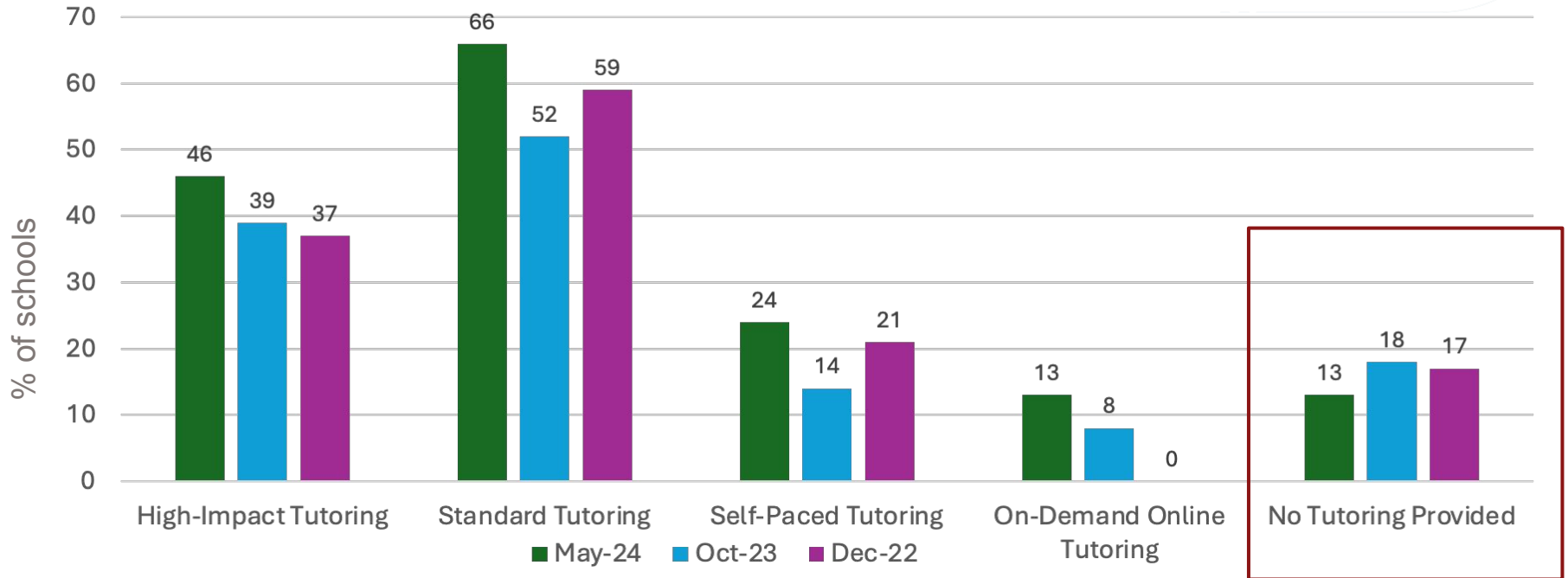
Descriptive analysis of US School Pulse Survey



**Online:** External, online company offers 24/7 tutoring on demand with less qualified tutors.

# RQ1: A minority of schools did not offer any tutoring

Descriptive analysis of US School Pulse Survey



# RQ1: HIT programs targeted student participation based on test score data

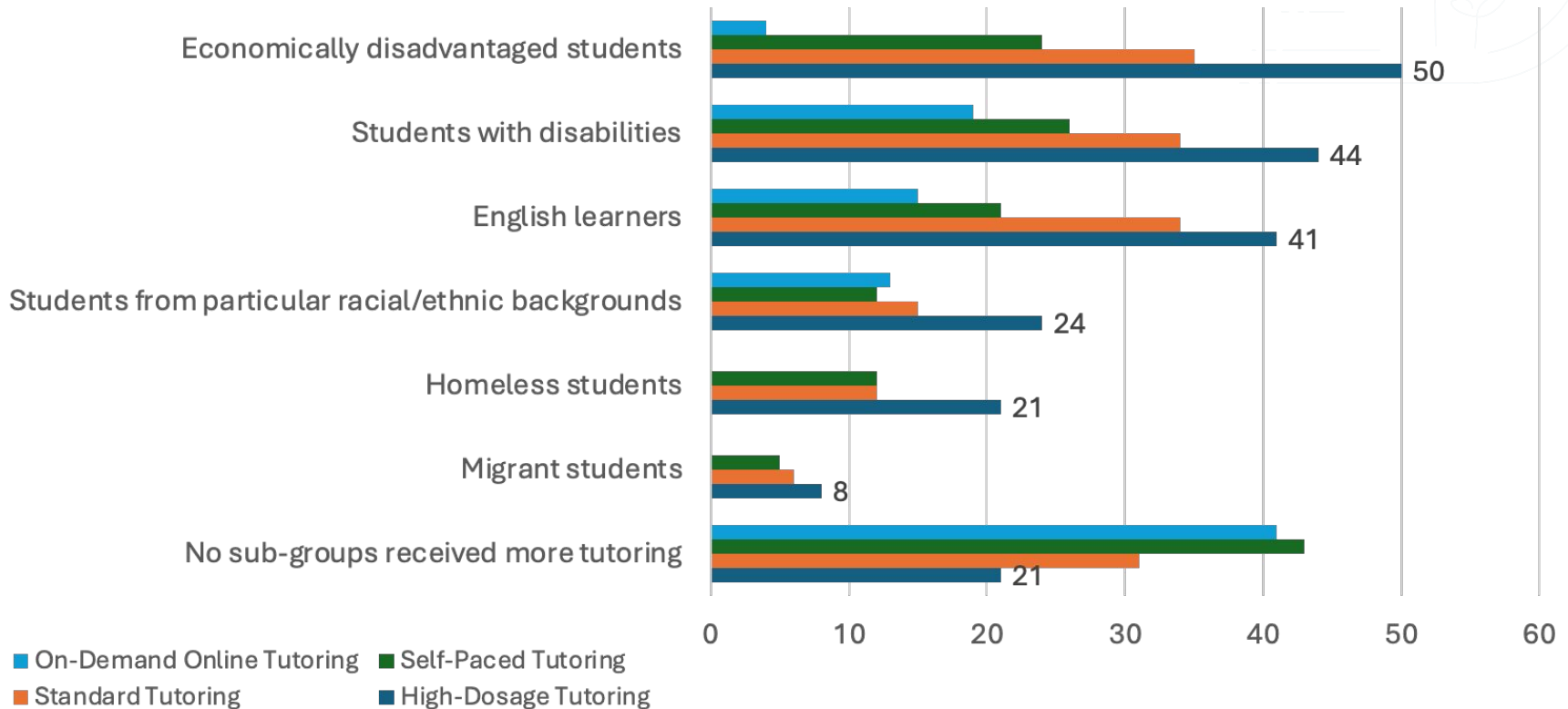
- Almost all HIT schools required student participation (vs. opt-in) and targeted English or math as core subjects.
- 92% of schools used diagnostic or other assessments to identify eligible students.
- Student participation at schools ranged from 25-29% of students.

***“The factors that are driving the decision are our student data from our formative and summative assessments that are showing that, while kids are making growth, in too many spaces they’re not making enough growth, which indicates that they need more academic support in literacy and math.”***

– Managing Director of Extended Learning and Enrichment,  
Small Urban Independent Charter District

# RQ1: HIT programs targeted underserved students

October 2023 US Pulse Survey



# RQ1: HIT programs targeted underserved students

## Qualitative insights

- **After the first year of ESSER, districts refined HIT programs by narrowing their target population** to underserved and below-grade-level students, while increasing progress monitoring to ensure data-driven funding decisions.

*“So what we did was we started taking a look at all of the resources that we have and all of the different programs that we have to offer our schools. **We got very strategic about which schools we offered high-dosage tutoring, and we got very strategic on where do we see the largest gaps of resources and supports, and the most need, and that’s where we honed in on.”***

– District Manager of MTSS,  
Large Urban School District

# RQ2 Findings

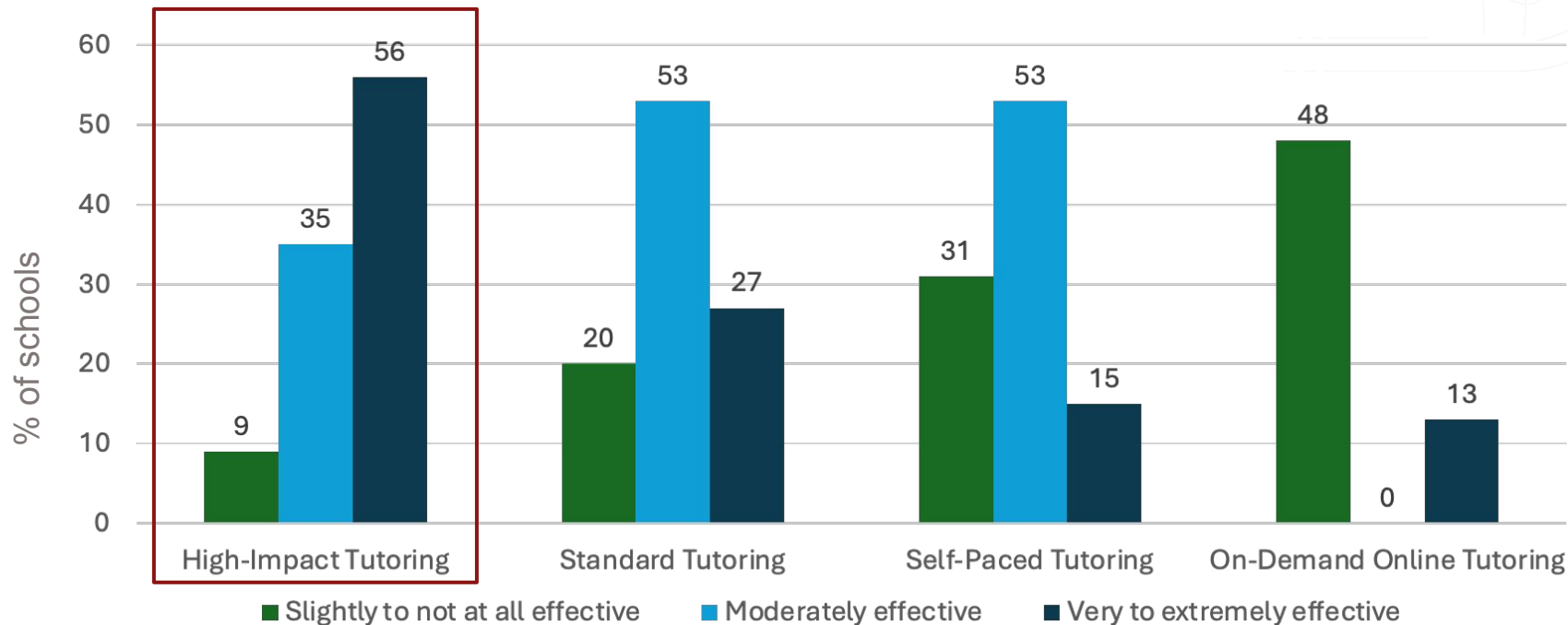
---

How do schools assess the value of these HIT programs?



# RQ2: Schools perceive HIT as highly effective relative to other programs

June 2025 US Pulse Survey



# RQ2: Schools perceive HIT as highly effective relative to other programs

## Qualitative insights

- **Districts positioned HIT as a targeted intervention model aligned with existing frameworks**, distinct from generic “homework help” or skills remediation.

***“The tutoring looks very different in that it is high-dosage, it is intentional, it is targeted. It is truly an intervention—it’s not homework help. To me, there’s a definite distinction between, ‘I just need an extra scoop of an adult helping me get through my homework’ ... and, ‘This is something that is actually filling some skill deficits that will help me access my grade-level curriculum.’ And that’s the main difference between what I used to think of tutoring and how I think about tutoring now.”***

– District Manager of MTSS,  
Large Urban School District

# RQ3 Findings

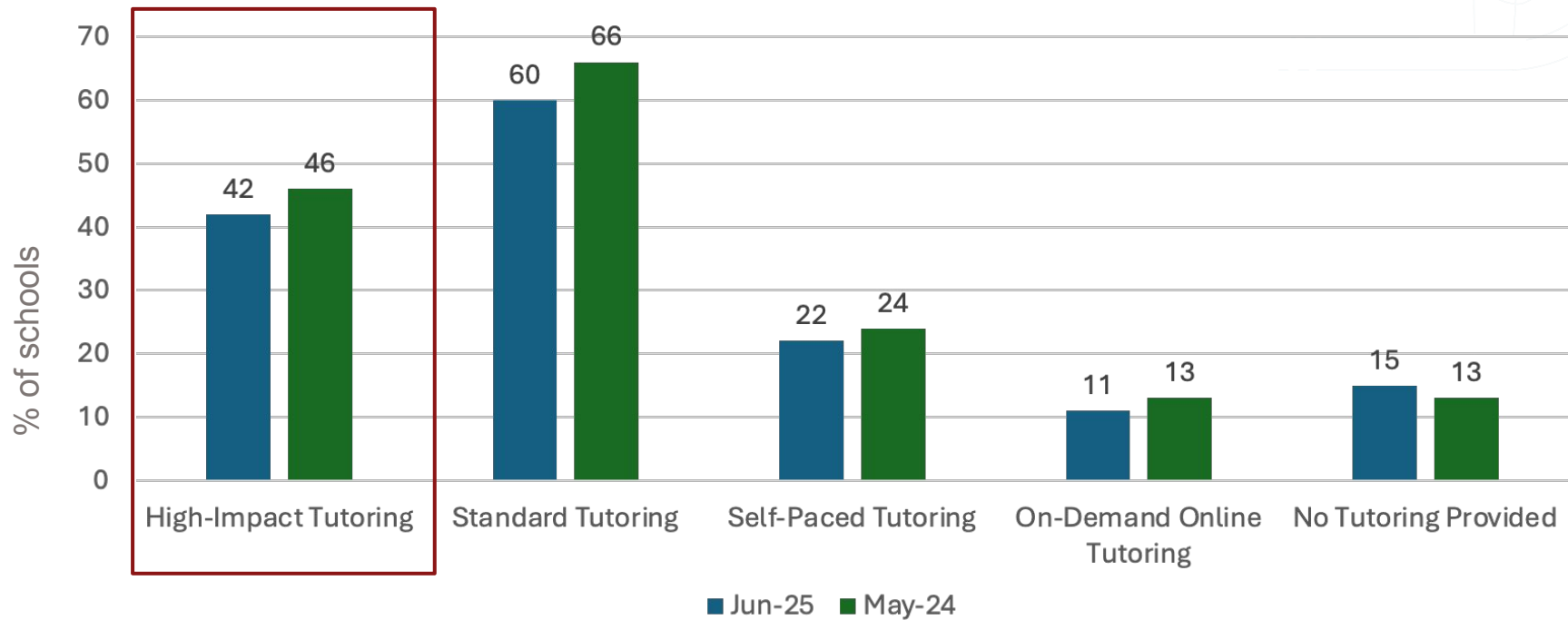
---

How are districts sustaining their HIT programs post-ESSER?



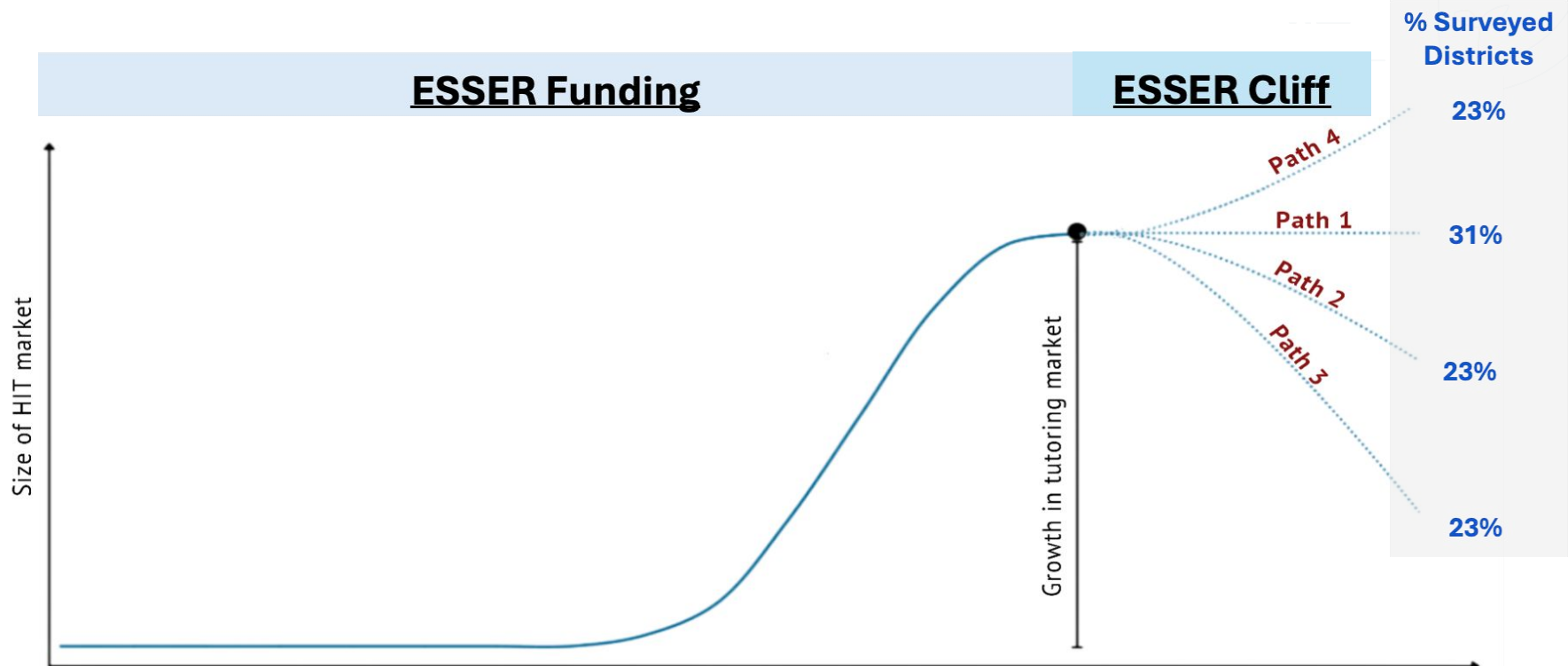
# RQ3: Slight decline in HIT and other tutoring offerings post-ESSER

June 2025 US Pulse Survey



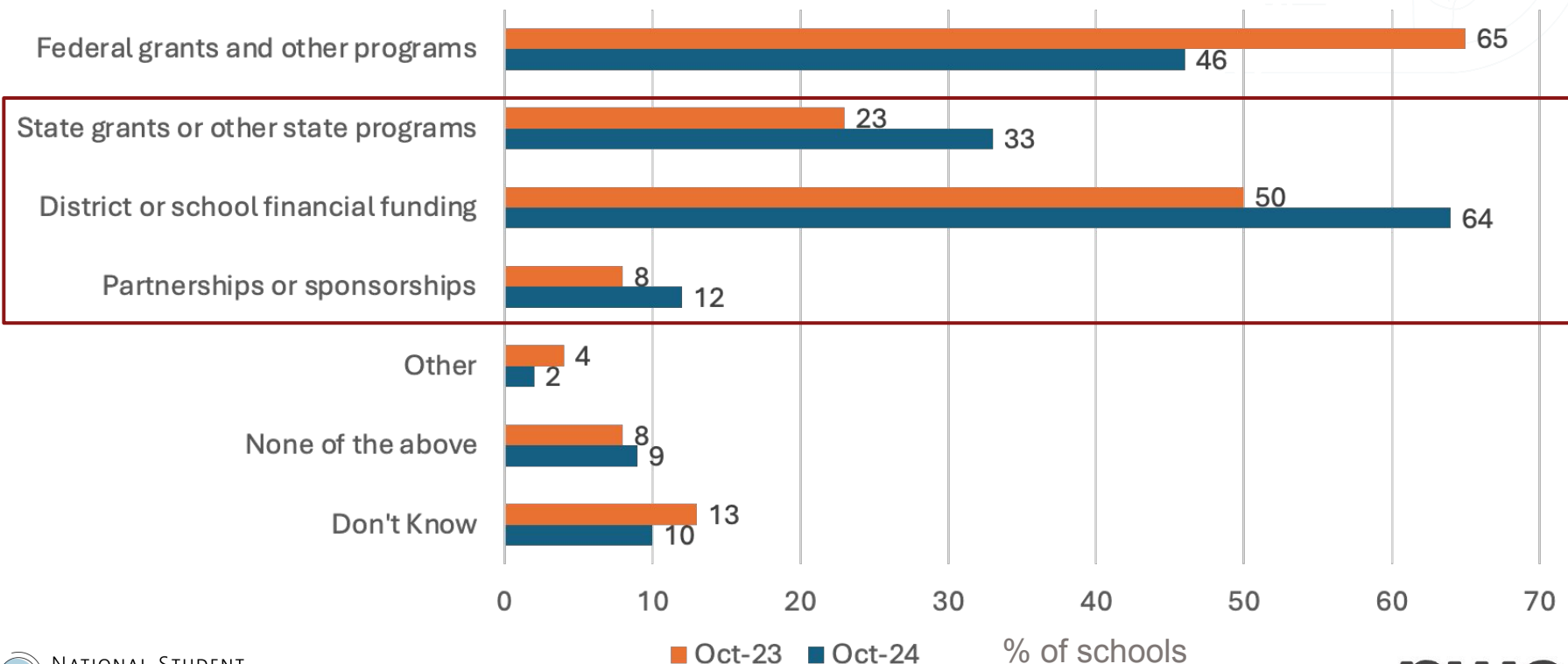
# RQ3: Districts are on different HIT program trajectories post-ESSER

Conceptual framework mapping of District Administrator Survey results



# RQ3: Districts are leveraging diverse funding streams for HIT post-ESSER

October 2024 US Pulse Survey



# RQ3: Districts are refining HIT programs for sustainability by prioritizing implementation

Qualitative insights

- **Right-sizing program scale** to ensure stronger implementation fidelity and equitable access to high-quality tutors.
- **Focusing on highest-need areas** to increase impact and align tutoring with strategic priorities.
- **Increasing coherence** with core instruction and other intervention frameworks.
- **Building durable systems, infrastructure, and routines** (e.g., scheduling, staffing, data dashboards) to improve implementation.
- **Building in-house tutor pipelines** to ensure tutor quality and reduce costs.

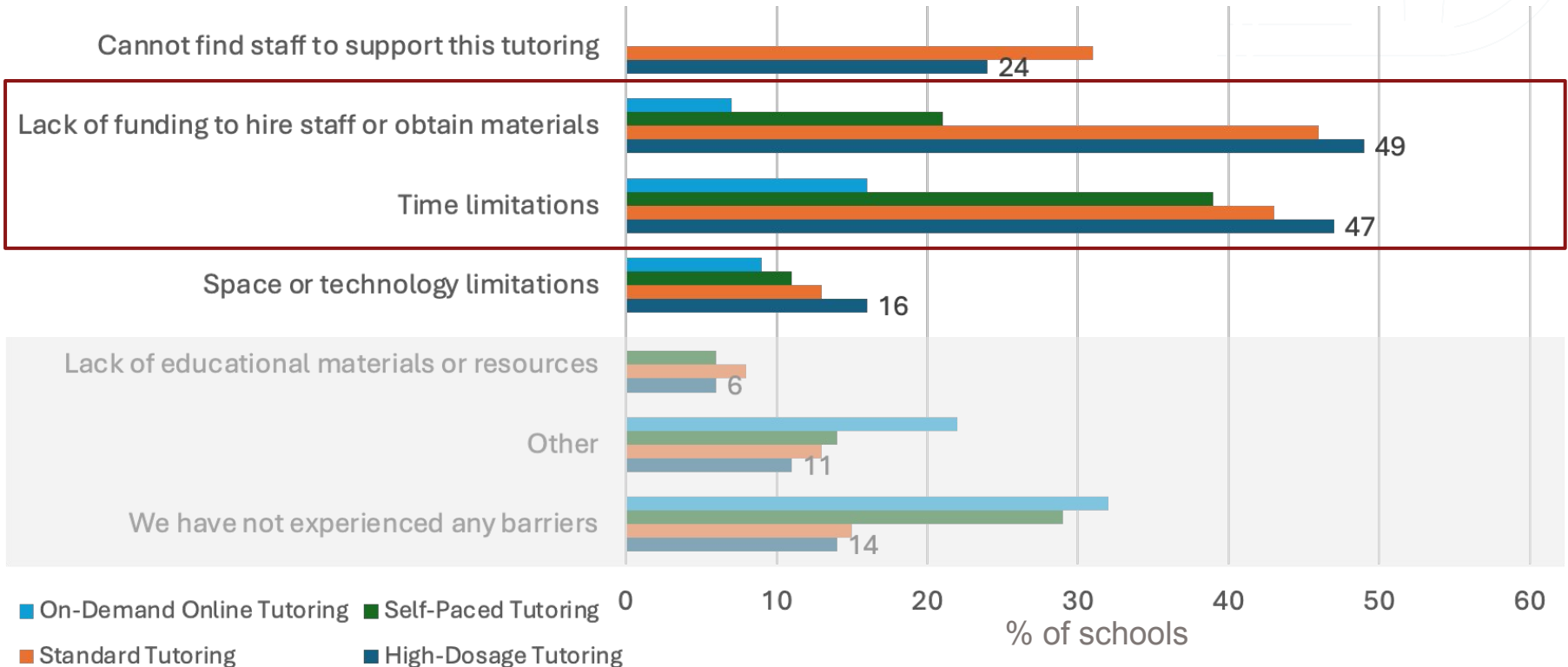
# RQ4 Findings

---

What conditions influence districts' ability to sustain HIT programs post-ESSER?

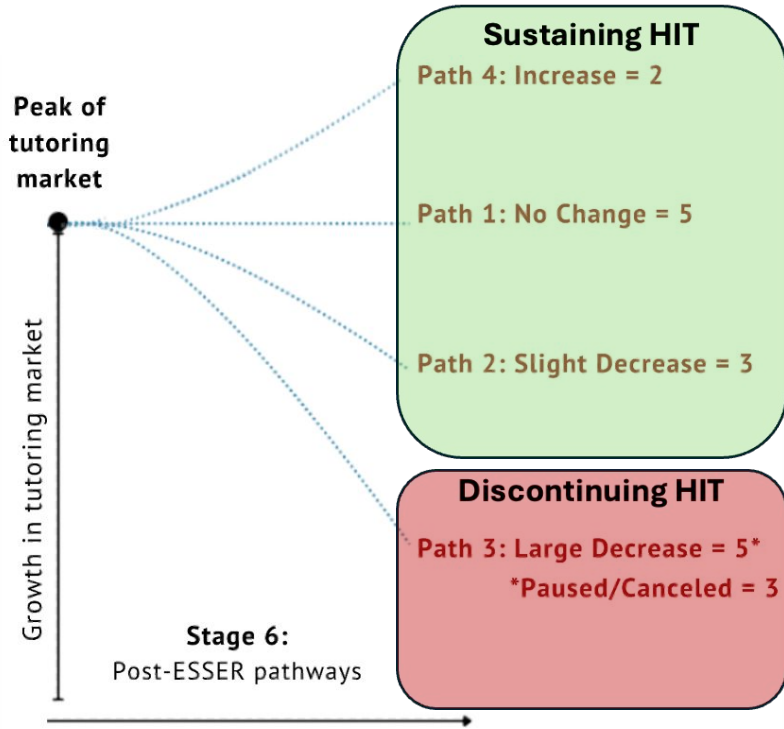
# RQ4: Funding and time constraints as primary barriers to sustaining HIT

October 2024 US Pulse Survey



# Interview sample for post-ESSER pathways

## Qualitative Insights



Type (NCES Locale)	Size (Enrollment)	Number of Districts (n = 15)
Urban (City)	Large (≥ 25,000)	6
	Small/Medium (< 25,000)	2
Suburban (Suburb)	Large (≥ 25,000)	2
	Small/Medium (< 25,000)	3
Rural (Town)	Small/Medium (< 25,000)	2

**Anonymized Sample Breakdown by District Type and Size**

# RQ4: Funding constraints as a driver for HIT program discontinuation

## Qualitative insights

- **High external vendor costs** were not sustainable, and districts lacked capacity to move programs in-house.
- **Limited data systems** for tracking early-stage outcomes to prove the value of HIT.
- **Insufficient or inconclusive impact evidence** to qualify for local, state, or philanthropic funding.
- **Political pressure** on district leaders to justify budget allocations via outcome-based evidence, which remained insufficient.
- **Unstable and competitive grant landscape** made long-term planning difficult and funding unpredictable.

Discontinuing  
HIT

# RQ4: Districts that sustained or scaled up their HIT programs overcame fiscal barriers through...

Qualitative insights

- **Strong local partnerships** with universities, educator prep programs, local funders, and community coalitions.
- **District champions** who proactively advocated for innovative funding opportunities.
- **District strategic initiatives and budgeting processes** that prioritized tutoring.
- **Robust data systems** to demonstrate program impact on student achievement.
- **Embedding HIT within existing programmatic and funding structures** (e.g., federal, state, and general funding or MTSS and RTI frameworks).
- **Adopting low-cost, in-house tutor pipelines** that increase community engagement.

# Practical Takeaways

---



# Takeaways

## Policy implications

- **Long-term viability of HIT** hinges on predictable, flexible funding streams and refinements to program design and implementation.
- **In-house and hybrid HIT models** are more cost-effective and easier to sustain long-term.
- **HIT sustainability** relies on district leadership, strategic partnerships, robust data systems, and diversified funding.
- **Evidence expectations** should support continuous improvement and progress monitoring.

# Thank you!



Amanda Lu, [amanda.lu@georgetown.edu](mailto:amanda.lu@georgetown.edu)

Ayesha K. Hashim, [ayasha.hashim@nwea.org](mailto:ayasha.hashim@nwea.org)

Ev Gilbert, [evanfg@stanford.edu](mailto:evanfg@stanford.edu)

Helen Zhou, [helenzhou@g.harvard.edu](mailto:helenzhou@g.harvard.edu)

Susanna Loeb, [sloeb@stanford.edu](mailto:sloeb@stanford.edu)