



Types of Tutoring: Effectiveness and Equity

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The evidence is clear that tutoring can help students learn. Researchers have studied many tutoring programs and, over and over, have found strong benefits for students. In fact, we know of few other options for helping individual students catch up to grade level. Tutoring is the best known approach for acceleration and it can simultaneously improve student well-being and engagement in school. However “tutoring” can bring to mind many different types of educational support, and tutoring programs can vary both in their characteristics and in their effectiveness.

The best evidence for effectiveness comes from programs that develop positive, trusting tutor-student relationships; focus on students’ specific strengths and needs; use high-quality instruction; have a frequency and duration that is developmentally appropriate and sufficient to meet students’ learning goals; and are utilized by students most in need of learning acceleration. These are High-Impact Tutoring Programs.

The decisions districts make when designing tutoring programs have consequences for instructional quality, student engagement, and student learning. Districts who successfully implement High-Impact Tutoring programs:

- facilitate strong tutor-student relationships by choosing a tutoring model with consistent, well-supported tutors (e.g. with coaches)
- target students’ assets and needs using assessment data and an instructional strategy that supports differentiated tutoring instructions in small groups of one, two or three students per tutor
- provide sufficient quantity, by establishing a budget and scheduling for tutoring three to five times per week.
- ensure students most in need have access, by integrating tutoring into the school day as part of their regular academic support without requiring parental opt-in.

Many forms of tutoring can be high-impact. Differences across schools may lead to different optimal choices for programs. For example, if a school or district consistently uses a set of high quality instruction materials, the tutoring program may be most effective if it aligns with these materials and the work in the classroom. However, if a school has not committed to a particular set of high quality materials, programs may be more effective if they use their own high-quality materials. Similarly, a program that works with kindergarten students may have their tutors spend only a few minutes each day with each student, since young children’s attention spans are shorter, while a program for high school students may be most effective when it lasts a full class period.

Both online and in-person programs can be high-impact. While tutoring programs offered during the school day are more effective because students are much more likely to attend, the tutors can be in-person or virtual. Both types of programs have shown positive effects as long as the student sees the same tutor each time, the tutor is well supported, and the tutoring occurs with sufficient frequency. In-person tutoring may have some advantages, because it is easier to develop a relationship in-person and it is easier for the tutor to develop an understanding of the school. However, online tutoring during the school day may have some advantages as well. Online programs may be able to attract more tutors, since they can draw on a broader geographic area, which could be particularly important for difficult-to-find skills such as advanced math and language abilities. Moreover, online platforms may facilitate some beneficial instructional strategies and progress tracking.

However, not all programs are effective. Federally-mandated after-school tutoring services under No Child Left Behind’s Supplemental Education Services (SES) program had little to no effect on student outcomes, except in a

few more regulated contexts. Tutoring programs can be ineffective because students don't show up. They can be ineffective because the tutors don't know how to work productively and positively with students. They can be ineffective because they do not target students' strengths and needs.

Opt-in (on-demand) programs, even if they use strong well-supported tutors, are unlikely to meet the needs of struggling students. On-demand tutoring programs have become a [popular option among districts](#) and [states](#). Many of these programs have tutors available for one-on-one educational support at any time of day for any subject area or grade level. Although the quality of on-demand tutoring programs varies, high-quality programs provide students with well-trained tutors whenever they need academic support. However, no matter the quality, educational programs can only benefit students if students access those resources. [Few students](#) take advantage of opt-in programs, and those that do tend to be the students who are already more engaged in school and higher achieving. These are the students who reach out for help and know what to ask their tutors. While access to opt-in tutoring may be a positive addition to educational offerings for some students, it will not help to address persistent or pandemic-induced learning needs or reduce inequalities in educational outcomes across students; in fact, it might increase them.

Overall, tutoring is the most effective approach that research has identified for helping students accelerate their learning. It should come as no surprise that policymakers and educational leaders across the country are investing [money, time, and political capital](#) into tutoring initiatives in response to the pandemic. However, for this investment to pay off these programs need to be high-quality and to provide support to the students who need them. Students must have enough tutoring to reach educational goals. Both in-person and online tutoring programs integrated into students' academic programs have demonstrated their ability to deliver this educational experience and dramatically improve student outcomes. Opt-in programs may be effective for students who use them, but few students will use them and even fewer will use enough to meaningfully benefit.

The research to date provides clearer direction than usual for how districts and schools can set up high-impact tutoring programs to reach their academic and well-being goals for students, especially for those students struggling with grade-level work. These programs need to develop a close relationship between the tutor and student to build student trust and motivation. The clearest way to build this productive relationship is by creating a program that provides a consistent tutor for students who received training in how to engage with students and who meets regularly with each student (three or more times per week). In addition, the program needs to leverage the benefits of individualized instruction by targeting each student's areas of strength and need. While some experienced teachers can personalize instruction without support, most tutors need clear data that identifies what they should be working on with students and high-quality instructional materials that guide them in how best to help students learn. This high-impact tutoring can be delivered in-person or online, but is very unlikely to reach most students unless districts integrate it in their instructional program, setting it into the schedules of students who need it and tracking student participation and outcomes.