

# Does tutoring work? An education economist examines the evidence on whether it's effective

October 17 2022, by Susanna Loeb

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With reading and math scores [plummeting during the pandemic](#), educators and parents are now turning their attention to how kids can

catch up. In the following Q&A, [Susanna Loeb](#), an education economist at Brown University, shines a light on the best ways to use tutoring to help students get back on track.

## 1. How much money is spent on tutoring in the US each year?

Billions of dollars are spent each year on tutoring in the U.S. This was true [even before the pandemic](#).

The private tutoring market—made up largely of [parents who can afford to hire tutors](#) for their children—was [estimated at US\\$24.9 billion](#) in 2021.

With [many students struggling](#) as a result of [disruptions from the pandemic](#), spending on tutoring is [expected to grow](#). Much of this growth will be driven by wealthy families who [hired tutors during the pandemic and plan to keep them](#). This extra help is [likely to worsen the gaps](#) in [academic achievement](#) between [students](#) from upper-middle-class families and those from families who are poor.

School districts also invest in tutoring for their students. This means special sessions outside of their regular classes. Many districts, such as [Chicago Public Schools](#) and those partnering with [Reading Corps](#), [Experience Corps](#) and others, provided tutoring before the pandemic. With new funding through the [Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund](#), district investment in tutoring is also growing. Of the [nearly \\$200 billion](#) in these emergency relief funds available, \$22 billion must be spent to help kids catch up using interventions that are proved to work. High-impact tutoring qualifies as one of those interventions.

## 2. What kind of difference does it make?

It depends, because not all of the approaches are effective.

During the era of No Child Left Behind—the federal education law that sought to get [all children proficient in reading and math](#) by the year 2014—parents of children in failing schools could sign them up for tutoring outside of school [at the school district's expense](#).

But it didn't really work. Research shows that [only 23% of eligible students](#) participated. And for those students, the average effect was [close to zero](#). When the Elementary and Secondary Education Act replaced No Child Left Behind in 2015, it [did not require tutoring to be offered](#) to students in failing schools, although schools can still spend on tutoring if they choose.

Not all tutoring is effective. Research shows that for tutoring to be effective—or what I refer to as [high-impact tutoring](#)—there are several critical elements. [They include small groups](#), meaning no more than three students. Tutoring also works best when it is [embedded in the school day](#), such as during homeroom or as an elective, occurs with a consistent tutor and takes place for at least 30 minutes at least three days a week. And it involves using student assessment data so that the tutor knows where to focus instructional time.

In fact, this type of small-group, relationship-based, data-informed, intensive tutoring embedded in the school day has been shown to have a [larger positive effect](#) on student learning than any other academic intervention, such as reducing class sizes or sending teachers to professional development. [A large body of rigorous research](#) shows that tutoring can help students who are behind catch up by as much as half a school year to a full school year.

### 3. Does tutoring work online?

New studies from [Spain](#) and [Italy](#) find that virtual tutoring can be effective. Like in-person tutoring, virtual tutoring connects students to a consistent tutor. They just meet online instead of in person.

Potential for online tutoring broadens opportunities for students in rural districts. It does the same for those who need tutoring in subjects for which it is harder to find teachers, such as math.

### 4. How can parents get free tutoring for their kids?

The most effective way for parents to get free tutoring for their children is through their school. Tutoring programs offered through their child's school offer a number of benefits for students, schools and parents. Students who attend tutoring as part of their regular school education either during or immediately before or after school are shown to have [higher attendance rates](#), which leads to better outcomes, such as [stronger math and reading achievement](#).

When tutoring is offered through the [school](#), it enables the child's teacher and tutor to collaborate on ways to help the child progress.

However, not all schools offer high-impact tutoring. Some states such as [Idaho](#), [Indiana](#) and [New Hampshire](#) offer grants to parents that can be spent on tutoring. But in those cases, the parent must register and transport their child to take advantage of this opportunity.

Other states and districts offer opt-in tutoring or tutoring that is available at a convenient time, or homework help options. While there is value in this type of tutoring, [recent research](#) shows that this type of tutoring—which is reliant on the student to ask for help—often does not

reach those students most in need, and therefore likely will not show the same learning growth that high-impact tutoring does.

If educators want to reap the benefits of tutoring, research shows it should be high-impact tutoring that is built into the schools over the long run. Anything else will be less effective.

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