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Everyone Wants Tutoring for Students - Why Can't We Agree What Tutoring Is?

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It is difficult to overstate the negative effects the COVID-19 pandemic had on child development, both academically and socio-emotionally. Study after study has illustrated the expanded gaps that have emerged for students in core subjects like reading and math, as well as an emerging new mental health crisis.

It's not often that the education sector forms near-universal consensus on any topic–and rarer still for such alignment to happen in months rather than years. Since catching its breath after the chaotic first weeks of school closures, the collective voice of educators has spoken clearly: tutoring! Tutoring is what students need to address the educational effects of the pandemic.

Over a dozen states have launched tutoring initiatives, some like Texas even going so far as to mandate that schools provide tutoring to certain students. Scores of school districts, whether large ones like Los Angeles Unified or small ones like East Ramapo, New York, have initiated their own efforts to bring large-scale tutoring to students.

There's only one problem. Nobody agrees on what tutoring is.

Wherefore consensus

It's not hard to understand why tutoring is having such a moment. First and foremost, tutoring is easy to understand for both educators and caregivers, free of the 'edspeak' jargon that sometimes gets attached to other types of intervention. Pretty much everyone quickly imagines a student getting regular help from someone with training and expertise in an intimate one-on-one or small group setting.

What's not to like about that? Tutoring is also popular because, unlike an unfortunately growing list of things in education, it's not controversial. There is no

anti-tutoring lobby sending out newsletters to elected officials decrying the dangers of students receiving regular one-on-one or small group instruction. Across the political and ideological spectrum, pretty much everyone agrees that it's a good thing when students who are struggling in school receive tutoring.

That is at least partially because when done right, tutoring is also supported by a mountain of evidence. Dozens of peer-reviewed studies show that tutoring is one of the most effective ways to accelerate learning. While less well researched, there is also a consensus among educational experts that tutoring can provide significant socio-emotional benefits for students as they form a caring and supportive relationship with their tutor.

But here's where the problem begins. Those dozens of studies looked at different permutations of tutoring. While there are definitely overlapping features, every school-based tutoring program looks a little different than the others. The result is that lots of different instructional programs rely on the credibility of the term 'tutoring' while the particulars of their program may actually be inconsistent with what research has shown to be best practices.

Let's Get Technical

So, what are the variables at play when we talk about different types of tutoring programs? There are seven main categories to think about:

-Instructional ratio (1-to-1 vs. 1-to-many)
-Frequency (how often tutoring happens each week)
-Dosage (how many total hours of tutoring students receive)
-Setting (during school, after-school, summer, etc.)
-Communications mode (in person vs. videoconference vs. text-based)
-Tutor profile (teacher, trained professional, near peer, community volunteer, etc.)
-Content & curriculum (teacher-assigned, school-assigned, provided by tutor, etc.)

Given that some of these variables like dosage have many permutations, there are almost an infinite number of ways these features could be combined into a tutoring program.

Picture a program where teachers come in on weekends to work with groups of students in-person for six months using a special curriculum the school has adopted. Now picture an after-school program at a community center where students drop in

for occasional help with their homework from volunteer tutors via videoconferencing. Two very different programs, both of which could legitimately be called 'tutoring'.

It may seem like this is splitting hairs. After all, tutoring is universally acknowledged as good, right? While both of the two example programs could potentially benefit students, the first would be much more likely to significantly move the academic needle than the second.

The term high-dosage tutoring (sometimes also called high-impact tutoring) have been coined by researchers and practitioners as a way of distinguishing between those programs that have a basis in evidence and are likely to provide significant academic benefits for students, and those that do not.

The Three Laws of High-Dosage Tutoring

There are three through lines in all the research on high-dosage tutoring that are always featured in programs showing significant academic benefits for students.

The first law of high-dosage tutoring is fairly obvious: there needs to be a tutor! That tutor can fit many different profiles as we'll talk about later, but tutoring should be provided face-to-face by a human being.

Programs where students anonymously submit questions using their phone or computer are not tutoring, regardless of whether a human or a computer program is on the other end. Even a very sophisticated artificial intelligence can't take the place of a real, caring person. AI instructional programs should be thought of as extensions of asynchronous interventions, many of which have been shown to provide academic benefits–though usually with a much smaller impact than live human tutoring.

The second law of high-dosage tutoring is that instruction needs to be low-ratio, either 1-to-1 or in small groups. There isn't a hard and fast rule on how big the groups should be; studies have found significant academic benefits for students in groups ranging from two to four students. There is reason to believe that even slightly larger groups can be effective, though to a lesser extent.

However, once the group gets larger than a certain size (generally agreed to be 6 students) it's no longer tutoring. It's also not tutoring if a single instructor is working with more than one group of students at the same time, whether multitasking on a

virtual platform or floating from group to group. There is a clear line between classroom instruction and tutoring, both of which can be beneficial to students but only one of which is an evidence-based intervention.

The third law of high-dosage tutoring is again fairly obvious: students should receive a high- dosage of tutoring. This means a large number of tutoring sessions that are delivered consistently.

There is no magic number of tutoring sessions that need to be delivered for students to show growth, but most programs that have demonstrated efficacy deliver at least 10 sessions of tutoring, with those sessions usually ranging from 30-45 minutes. While a student might have a genuine breakthrough in just one instructional session, showing meaningful academic growth usually requires a sustained effort. A student who dropped in to an after-school tutoring program two or three times over several months unfortunately wasn't really tutored at all.

Good, Better, Best

As long as programs clear these three hurdles of high-dosage tutoring and are providing students with at least 10 sessions of consistent tutoring from a live human tutor, there is a good reason to expect them to make a meaningful academic difference for students. However, there are definitely some approaches that studies have shown to be more effective than others.

Often these features can be thought of on a spectrum. For example, having a 1-to-2 instructional ratio is better than having a 1-to-4 ratio, which in turn is better than having a 1-to-6 ratio. Similarly, the greater the number of tutoring sessions students receive, the larger the expected impact would be.

Also, in the 'more is more' categories are frequency of tutoring (three times per week is better than twice per week) and experience of the tutor (volunteers can be effective, but professionals or subject experts are better, and credentialed teachers the best). Nearly all of the research on high-dosage tutoring has looked at in-person programs, making that preferable to programs using videoconferencing–though there have been some promising new studies of the latter.

When it comes to curriculum, there are different schools of thought depending on the background of the tutor and the context of the tutoring. Generally speaking, the less experience/expertise the tutor has, the more important it is that there is a

curriculum being followed that has specifically been designed for tutoring (as opposed to a classroom curriculum). It is also usually necessary to have a structured curriculum for any summer tutoring programs, since students don't typically have any teacher-assigned curriculum to work from.

Perfect should never be the enemy of good when schools think about how to deliver high- dosage tutoring. In-person tutoring is often preferable to videoconferencing, but in today's extremely challenging hiring environment it may not be feasible for schools to recruit enough tutors to meet students' needs. Tutoring that takes place during the school day tends to have larger effects than after-school tutoring, but it may be logistically overwhelming for short-staffed administrators to attempt to roll out such a program at scale, so after-school can be a good alternative.

What's In a Name?

Being precise about what is and is not a 'tutoring' program may seem like a fussy distinction to make during a time when schools and students are dealing with so many challenges, but it actually matters a great deal.

Both globally and in the US, tutoring is overwhelmingly a consumer market, meaning that the buyers are individual caregivers and students rather than government entities like schools. This introduces an element of stark privilege, where those families who have access to tutoring are predominantly those with the affluence to afford it. This actually widens the opportunity gap by giving those students who already have advantages an edge over traditionally disenfranchised students.

Moving tutoring into the public sphere would mean that who gets tutoring is determined not by whose family can afford it, but by who needs it. Enabling students to access rigorous and robust tutoring through their school or another state-funded program would be a huge step towards greater equity in education.

The US tried this once before, under the No Child Left Behind legislation, requiring schools that did not make adequate progress to provide families with access to free tutoring. However, because 'tutoring' was very loosely defined and because there were even looser regulations governing providers, we saw very little of the kind of high-dosage tutoring that is proven to make a difference academically.

The result is that when No Child Left Behind was replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act, the provision for publicly-funded tutoring fell by the wayside. There simply wasn't enough evidence of its success and advocacy groups weren't willing to fight for something that resulted in such low-quality instruction.

We have an opportunity to do something truly extraordinary for students by scaling up publicly funded tutoring, but in order for that to happen we need to learn from the lessons of the past and make sure we all agree on what quality, rigorous, and academically meaningful tutoring looks like.