



Early Lessons from Implementing High-Impact Tutoring at Scale

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Many education leaders are turning to high-impact tutoring to accelerate student learning and compensate for interrupted instruction due to COVID-19. As federal, state, and local tutoring policies and practices develop, understanding the key barriers and challenges that have the potential to limit program reach and hinder efficacy and then developing targeted approaches to overcoming these barriers can improve the likelihood of success and the ultimate benefits for students. The National Student Support Accelerator, an initiative of the Annenberg Institute at Brown University, has partnered with over a dozen school districts and tutoring providers to implement tutoring programs, to learn from these efforts, and to develop tools and other resources to aid in the provision of high-impact tutoring broadly. This paper draws on interviews with Accelerator partners to provide an up-to-date view of the barriers to implementing quality, school-based tutoring at scale and promising practices to mitigate these challenges.

Across multiple studies and reviews of education interventions, researchers have found tutoring to have large, positive impacts on student achievement in both math and reading ([Dietrichson, et al., 2017](#); [Fryer, 2017](#)). Tutoring programs can remain effective even as they expand to serve large numbers of students. For example, an analysis of fifteen larger-scale tutoring programs found that initiatives increased student learning by an average of 2-10 additional months ([Nickow et al., 2020](#)). However, not all tutoring programs are effective, particularly when implemented at a large scale. The federally-mandated after-school tutoring services under No Child Left Behind's Supplemental Education Services (SES) program were found to have little to no effect on student outcomes, except in a few more regulated contexts ([Hienrich et al., 2014](#)).

Given the historical inconsistency of tutoring effectiveness when implemented at scale, how can we set current efforts up for success? The existing research base on challenges and barriers to effective tutoring implementation and how to combat them is slim. Many studies consider small-scale, localized tutoring initiatives, often driven and designed by researchers themselves, and few of these studies comment on program implementation. Those that do cite logistical challenges districts face in establishing regular time and space within the existing school day to conduct tutoring ([Allor & McCathren, 2004](#); [Al Otaiba et al., 2005](#); [Bryant et al., 2011](#)).

Much of what we know about program implementation comes from research on SES. This program required Title 1 schools to provide parents with the option of enrolling their student in additional learning opportunities to receive "extra academic help, such as tutoring or remedial help" during out-of-school hours ([U.S. Department](#)

[of Education, 2012](#)). Researchers identify the program’s design as a key barrier to success as it depended on parents, who they argue may have limited capacity to discern provider efficacy and to choose from among available tutoring organizations. A qualitative evaluation of SES services found that the majority of students enrolled were not even receiving small-group tutoring but were instead participating in traditional, large-group classroom environments ([Heinrich et al., 2014](#)). The program also experienced low enrollment and attendance rates, a challenge which researchers attribute to a combination of after-school schedule conflicts, reliance on parents to identify, enroll, and in some cases, transport students to the programs, and minimal district financial capacity to support program development and administration ([Heinrich et al., 2014](#)). Additionally, a study of SES implementation across four large cities found that the average hours of tutoring received per student varied from 15 to 40 depending on the year and location, largely influenced by the availability of program funding ([Heinrich et al., 2014](#)).

The current push to expand tutoring diverges from SES in that, while many districts are drawing upon federal funding, few federal prescriptions exist for program design requirements except that programs should be “evidence-based” - for example, parents do not need to opt into tutoring for their children nor select the tutoring provider. Moreover, the challenge of ensuring quality SES providers was further exacerbated by the lack of existing, rigorous program evaluations for most organizations and lack of capacity at the district and state levels to fill these research gaps ([Heinrich et al., 2010](#)). The knowledge base identifying the elements of high-impact tutoring is much more clear today, though the knowledge of implementation challenges and successes is still sparse.

Over the late spring of 2021, we conducted 23 semi-structured interviews with 7 school districts, one charter management organization, and 12 tutoring providers. Three of these organizations participated in two conversations. From these interviews we focused on common challenges and barriers, identifying three overarching themes with 11 subthemes. Knowing these challenges can help focus tutoring implementation, preempting common barriers and maximizing the likelihood of program success.

FINDINGS

School districts across the country are looking to greatly expand tutoring offerings with the support of federal funds and, in some cases, under direct mandate from state legislatures ([TX HB 4545](#)). In contrast to the era of NCLB which placed an emphasis on parents as the tutoring decision-makers, districts are taking the lead in determining how to expand access to tutoring. Yet, in the interviews we conducted, many challenges related to ensuring program quality and district capacity still ring true. In particular, districts and tutoring providers coalesced around the following key challenges and barriers that they have faced so far:

1. Supply of High-Quality Tutors and Tutoring Providers
2. Administrative Capacity
3. School-Level Buy-In and Ownership

(1) Supply of High-Quality Tutors and Tutoring Providers

As school districts and tutoring providers look to expand tutoring programs, those hoping to hire tutors directly are concerned about their ability to find tutor candidates. Nine interviewees highlighted tutor recruitment as a key priority and noted that districts and tutoring providers may have difficulty finding as many tutors as they would like. School districts looking to pass on the hiring process to external tutoring providers lack clarity on the availability of organizations with capacity to meet district tutoring needs. Derek Little, Deputy Chief of Academics with Dallas ISD, was recently quoted as saying that the district will require as many as 1,800 tutors

([Richman, 2021](#)). Administrators from another large school district emphasized the challenge of finding a tutoring provider that could support a district of 180,000 students, stating, “We don’t want just early literacy, we see a need throughout.” Leaders of tutoring organizations noted that it may be especially difficult to find tutors and providers with the capacity to provide support for students who are “severely below” grade level academically. Tutors who can serve multilingual learners and support students in languages such as Spanish and American Sign Language are also in need. As many districts are still in the initial stages of developing their tutoring plans and have only just begun, or in some cases have yet to begin, hiring in earnest for fall 2021, it is unclear how successful they will be in meeting large staffing goals.

Districts and providers are responding to uncertainty around tutoring supply by drawing on existing partnerships and creating multi-pronged recruitment strategies. Guilford County School District (NC), for example, is in the process of deepening its existing relationships with local colleges and universities in order to recruit undergraduate and graduate students to serve as tutors. These existing partnerships are particularly advantageous as local colleges and universities boast a significant population of Black engineering students, equipped with subject-specific skills for math tutoring and mirroring the demographics of the district. However, in order to reach more students, school administrators are also developing a peer-tutoring model and recruiting high-achieving high schoolers for paid tutoring positions during the school day, efforts that they also hope will develop strong local teacher pipelines. Other districts are focusing recruiting efforts on those already engaged in the school space. Two are recruiting high school peer tutors, two are focused on pre-service and retired teachers, two more are working to better align existing school-based volunteer initiatives, and one is exploring engaging the district’s after-school program staff members who may have availability during the day. In recent informal check-ins with pilot partners, Accelerator staff have heard that recruitment is lagging behind original hopes. One partner is exploring the possibility of increasing their AmeriCorps stipends to include housing support, a strategy that has accelerated hiring in the past. Larger districts are also finding that no single tutoring provider is equipped to meet their staffing needs, and instead are taking a portfolio approach, putting out a Request for Proposals (RFP) in order to compile a menu of potential partners with which to pair schools. See for example, [Dallas’ recent](#) request.

In addition to simply finding enough tutors, districts and providers also raised uncertainty around their ability to maintain tutor quality as programs grow. One tutoring provider noted, “...if we think about thousands of tutors...How do we get really highly qualified candidates who are excited, engaged, and show up on time, ready to give their all [...] How do you preserve the quality as you grow the quantity?”

While demand is clearly increasing and supply may not keep up in the short run, the broad range of potential tutors provides opportunities in the longer-run. Research evidence suggests that while tutoring is most effective when classroom teachers fulfill the role of tutor, programs employing paraprofessionals, volunteers and university students, parents, and older peers have also been found to improve student outcomes ([Robinson & Loeb, 2021](#)). Programs are still found to have a significant impact, even when expanded to serve large numbers of students. Not enough evidence exists to understand how the effectiveness of each tutor type might vary as hiring increases ([Nickow et al., 2000](#)).

(2) Administrative Capacity

Beyond vetting and hiring tutors and tutoring providers, schools and school districts face a large number of design decisions and logistical hurdles to implementing large-scale high-impact tutoring programs. Given the scope of coordination required, six leaders directly highlighted administrative capacity as a key prerequisite to a program getting off the ground.

Leaders from district and tutoring providers emphasized that in their experience, simply having district-level staff members invested in the idea of the initiative is not enough. Instead, districts need to designate a specific point person with time and administrative power. Districts have faced setbacks, and in some cases had to push back program start dates or re-evaluate program scope, when they possess a committed program leader but that leader has not had enough influence to shape key decision making, or when program administration is left to high-level district staff with limited bandwidth to push the initiative forward. From the tutoring provider perspective, one interviewee explicitly stated that they are unprepared to partner with school districts “in the bottom 20th percentile” and another cited sustainable district funding as a prerequisite for partnership. In all these interviews, the importance of school district capacity is clear.

Interviewees noted that capacity is needed to navigate specific hurdles, which span school and district-level administration, including:

- Designing effective program evaluation protocols
- Training and supervising tutors
- Navigating school schedules
- Identifying effective curricula
- Coordinating relationships with external tutoring providers
- Ensuring high levels of program enrollment and attendance
- Securing sustainable funding

See Appendix A for full descriptions of each administrative challenge.

Tutoring implementation is unusually complex because many decisions need to be made that span the typical academic and operational divides of large district organizations and that potentially require information from and coordination with a range of external actors including families and other care-givers, for-profit and non-profit tutoring providers, private funders and public grant initiatives, curriculum and assessment vendors, and external evaluators. Some district leaders expressed interest in delegating some decision-making authority to schools, suggesting that administrative capacity may also be essential both at the school-level and at the district-level. For example, in the districts profiled where individual schools will be tasked with choosing a particular tutoring provider, the districts we still plan to vet the initial provider pool, establish district-wide financial contracts, and align expectations for program evaluation. Three leaders mentioned that the level of coordination required to work across stakeholders often requires planning to start well in advance of program launch, often late-winter or spring before a fall program launch. Districts noted that it has often been difficult to actually commit to this timeline.

As an example, consider a frequently cited barrier of navigating school schedules, a challenge which can impact core program goals and is necessary to consider early in the design process. Many of the districts profiled hoped to conduct their tutoring programs during the school day, with the hopes of maximizing equitable student access and program success. Across research studies, during-school tutoring programs have an effect size that is nearly twice as large as that of after-school programs ([Robinson & Loeb, 2021](#)). However, the timing of tutoring may impact the types of tutors and tutoring providers available for a district to consider. For example, one tutoring provider noted that while retirees may be available to serve as tutors during the day, current college students may have additional schedule restrictions that limit their availability during school hours. One interviewee noted the challenge of providing tutoring for large numbers of students at the same time, for example during a common intervention block, as this requires more tutors than does offering tutoring throughout the day. Thus, while such a decision may require on-the-ground school-level planning regarding the

use of school time and space, it also has district-level implications for tutoring hiring goals and overall program budget. Additionally, if tutoring is occurring during school, the session will necessarily displace something else, although little research describes the trade-offs for students ([Robinson & Loeb, 2021](#)). District leaders emphasized the importance of communicating with teachers early regarding any potential impact to their classroom experience to foster trust and program buy-in.

(3) School-Level Buy-In and Ownership

Six districts and tutoring providers pointed to buy-in from principals and other school-level staff as foundational for tutoring success given that high-impact tutoring is an in-school initiative. One school district mentioned that principal buy-in and trust is essential for gaining access to the school and navigating logistics related to in-school time and use of space. In the past, when this district partnered with tutoring providers whose tutors do not match a school's racial or economic demographics, distrust among school staff limited the connections that tutors were able to develop with students. School trust is another theme that emerged in research on the NCLB era SES tutoring, where strained relationships between some schools and providers made data-sharing difficult, potentially limiting program effectiveness especially for students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) who require particular learning supports ([Heinrich et al., 2014](#)). One district leader worried that they might encounter more pushback as they seek to expand across all schools, even though school buy-in had not been an issue with smaller, voluntary programs.

The importance of teacher support for tutoring programs and willing collaboration also emerged as a common theme, mentioned by five districts and tutoring providers. Anticipating teacher pushback, two school districts assigned a teacher of record to all tutoring periods, ensuring no teaching positions were cut due to tutoring programs and providing increased oversight and alignment to the program. Two tutoring providers mentioned the importance of clearly defining the role of the tutor and emphasizing how it differed from that of teachers or paraeducators. Another district noted that they marketed tutoring as an initiative to ease the burden on teachers by freeing up more time for them to work with students in small groups as others in the class were meeting with tutors. Given these pre-emptive pushes to build teacher buy-in, interviewees generally noted that they have not experienced significant levels of teacher pushback. In fact, two tutoring providers noted that, in their experience, teachers have been quite supportive of tutoring, as they see positive effects on their students' academic performance and attitudes towards school.

Two tutoring providers mentioned that they recommend that districts start with a smaller pilot program in a small number of schools to serve as proof-points for program buy-in. The benefits of this approach are clear; however, districts are currently looking to tutoring to support the many students in need as a result of the pandemic. Alternatively, districts are working to build school buy-in and "shared ownership" across administrative levels through a portfolio approach in which the district provides choices for schools from a menu of approved tutoring providers.

IMPLICATIONS

(1) A better understanding of the potential tutor landscape and policy levers for hiring and supporting effective tutor candidates is needed in order to promote effective tutoring program design.

Given the wide-spread uncertainty expressed by district and tutoring providers about their ability to hire a sufficient number of high-quality tutors, tutor supply remains a key question for the future of wide-spread high-impact tutoring. Leaders specifically expressed interest in hiring racially diverse tutors with context-specific personal experience and skills. Efforts by researchers are underway to better understand the relationship between tutor demographics (gender, race, ethnicity, language fluency, educational background, etc.), student demographics, and tutoring effectiveness as measured by academic and social-emotional outcomes. The research on teaching provides strong indications that students benefit from having tutors who reflect the student population. In the longer run, efforts to recruit a diverse tutoring pool could also increase the supply of a diverse pool of teachers, as tutoring can give college students and recent college graduates insights into teaching and draw them into teaching as a profession.

It would be fruitful to explore: What types of individuals who already interact with education systems (peers, family members, after-school staff, pre-service teachers, recent alumni, etc.) may be able to serve as effective tutors and how many students could they serve? What types of individuals who do not already interact with the education system (retirees, recent college graduates, college students, pre-service teachers, career-changers, etc.) may be able to serve as effective tutors and how many students could they serve? What compensation is necessary to recruit qualified and diverse candidates across contexts? And, how can state-level tutoring corps - such as those being developed in North Carolina, Illinois, Arkansas, and Washington DC - improve the supply of tutors for districts.

For guidance on sourcing tutors, please refer to the [Toolkit for Tutoring Programs: Tutor Recruitment Strategy](#).

For guidance in supporting tutors, please refer to the [Toolkit for Tutoring Programs: Tutor Training and Support](#).

(2) Commitment to tutoring at the federal, state, and district level must be accompanied by the allocation of significant administrative capacity.

Leaders consistently highlighted administrative capacity as a key prerequisite for program success. In order to establish effective tutoring programs, education leaders need to address how tutoring implementation will be prioritized within district and school staffing structures. Tutoring plans should also acknowledge the complexity of effective program implementations, seeking to define initiative scopes and timelines which realistically align with the administrative capacity allocated. Philanthropists, state and federal policymakers may also consider district administrative needs as a key component of implementing a tutoring program in the design of relevant grant funding.

For guidance on administrative capacity requirements, please refer to the [District Playbook: Understanding Central Capacity and Staffing Needs](#).

(3) Systems are needed to facilitate collaboration and shared learning among school districts, tutoring providers, and researchers.

Even as district and tutoring providers coalesce around the barriers of tutor supply, administrative capacity, and school-level buy-in, they are facing these challenges with creativity, sharing a wide range of strategies that they have employed or hope to pilot over the next year. Much can be gained by broader sharing of these practices through the creation of publicly-available tools and the formation of communities of practice. In particular, tools that explicitly lay out a menu of promising approaches to key logistical challenges may increase the feasibility of implementing large-scale tutoring programs for districts with limited administrative capacity. To this end, the National Student Support Accelerator provides a guide for districts, [High-Impact Tutoring: District Playbook](#), to accompany their [Toolkit for Tutoring Programs](#). Similarly, school districts are beginning to come together to form local tutoring collaboratives, which can begin to grow context-specific knowledge and resources.

Overall, the use of high-impact tutoring across the country is growing at unprecedented rates, spurred by pandemic-related needs, an influx of federal funding, and a uniquely strong research base identifying this approach as the most promising intervention for accelerating learning and building students' well-being. As this large-scale implementation gets underway barriers to success will arise. An understanding of likely challenges and of potential solutions may substantially ease the costs of implementation and increase the benefits for students.

APPENDIX A: LIST OF ADMINISTRATIVE CHALLENGES

Logistical Challenge	# of Times Mentioned	Key Considerations
Program Evaluation/ Metrics	9	<p>Four interviewees mentioned that they have struggled to identify specific metrics for program success or create effective processes for analysing program data. Two interviewees expressed a strong interest in documenting the social-emotional impacts of a tutoring program but are not sure how to go about this. Two interviewees expressed uncertainty about how to set academic goals for their program (accelerating growth vs. absolute achievement, how to identify benchmarks). One district also noted the challenge of coordinating assessment administration across their multiple tutoring providers, while still maximizing instructional time. Interviewees also mentioned the need for systems by which tutors can adjust instruction based on student progress and by which school districts can “get students on-track, get them out of the program, add more.”</p> <p>Related Resources: Toolkit for Tutoring Programs: Measures & Data Collection District Playbook: Setting Goals District Playbook: Designing Data and Continuous Improvement Systems</p>
Training & Supervising Tutors	8	<p>Two interviewees expressed interest in creating a “feedback loop” for program staff and tutors to learn from and apply student data. Two more interviewees noted the need for additional tutor training on the use of technology and navigating online tutoring environments. Interviewees also had unanswered questions regarding the timing (pre-service vs. in-service) and content of tutor training.</p> <p>Related Resources: Toolkit for Tutoring Programs: Training & Support District Playbook: Growing Your Own Program: Training and Supporting Tutors</p>
Navigating School Schedules	7	<p>Key challenges faced in scheduling include trade-offs with student’s ability to participate in other classes/activities, ensuring that tutoring happens when students are most likely to be engaged, and there is available physical space in which tutoring can occur. Aligning tutoring with tutor’s schedules can also be a challenge, particularly if working with part-time or volunteer tutors or full-time tutors that split time between multiple school sites. One interviewee noted that it is generally challenging to provide tutoring for large numbers of students at the same time, for example during a common intervention block, as this requires more tutors than does offering tutoring throughout the day.</p> <p>Related Resources: District Playbook: Scheduling Sessions</p>

Curriculum	6	<p>Two school districts noted that it was a challenge to find an external tutoring provider that was able to align with their existing curricula. However, one tutoring provider noted that the impact of tutoring may be limited if strong curricula is not already in place across the district. Two interviewees also expressed the need for interactive online platforms that are accessible by both tutors and tutees, as in one case current systems do not allow tutees to interact with course content without direct tutor support.</p> <p>Related Resources: Toolkit for Tutoring Programs: Session Content Toolkit for Tutoring Programs: Choosing and Using Virtual Tutoring Platforms District Playbook: How will You Ensure Your Tutors’ Sessions Align with Your Students’ School Curriculum?</p>
Aligning District - Tutoring Providers	5	<p>Interviewees noted that alignment is needed across district and tutoring provider expectations in relationship to overarching goals of the program, target student population, identification of curriculum and level of alignment with district’s core instruction, use of district-wide or provider-specific assessments, distribution of labor/responsibility for hiring tutors, relative responsibility for securing program funding. Tutoring providers noted that formalizing relationships with districts can sometimes face extended school board approval processes. On the district side, one interviewee mentioned the need for new systems to coordinate large portfolios of tutoring providers and the desire to create a collaborative “ecosystem” instead of managing each partnership separately, however, they wondered if this might be a challenge among competitors.</p> <p>One district expressed uncertainty as to the best way to identify quality tutoring providers. Since relatively few tutoring providers have undergone rigorous external program evaluations, one district has decided to vet programs using research-based high-impact tutoring characteristics (Robinson et al., 2021).</p> <p>Related Resources: Tutoring Database District Playbook: Partnering with a Provider: Collaborating with a Provider District Playbook: Partnering with a Provider: Selecting a Provider</p>
Attendance & Enrollment	5	<p>Five interviewees mentioned that once they had a tutoring program set up, it was still challenging to get students enrolled in the program and attending tutoring sessions. However, one interviewee noted that attendance has not been an issue in their program once students form relationships with their tutor.</p> <p>One interviewee noted that attendance was particularly difficult during the summer when students were attending tutoring virtually and not in a school setting and that they hope this will be less of an issue once students are logging into the virtual platform during the regular in-person school day. However,</p>

		<p>another interviewee discussed difficulties with attendance when tutoring took place in person but during a block of time where students were not used to receiving structured academic content.</p> <p>Three interviewees spoke to methods they are using, or hope to use, to increase attendance: setting aside time during the school day for students to attend virtual tutoring, setting expectations regarding during-school tutoring blocks from the beginning of the year, and designating a point person to assist students in the sign-up process.</p> <p>Related Resources: Toolkit for Tutoring Programs: Stakeholder Engagement District Playbook: Boosting Enrollment and Attendance</p>
Funding	5	<p>Four interviewees mentioned that they are concerned about tutoring programs relying primarily on federal monies, should COVID-19-related federal funding decrease in the future. Instead, they hope to cultivate philanthropic funding streams and to draw on more established federal programs such as Title I.</p> <p>While no interviewees mentioned lack of funding as a current concern, one tutoring program mentioned that a school district they work with had chosen to employ a chat-based program instead of implementing high-impact small-group tutoring in order to reduce costs.</p> <p>Related Resources: Funding Tutoring Programs</p>

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