VOLUNTEER TUTORS

Some children and youth experience difficulty developing academic competencies required for success in school, work and life. These difficulties may emerge from a number of personal, instructional and societal factors. In an effort to improve academic achievement in youth, there has been an increase in programs that provide additional educational support. Increasingly, these efforts include after-school, (and sometimes during-school) tutoring programs.

Tutoring— instructing a child one-on-one or in small groups— has been shown to have positive effects on academic performance, especially with at-risk children experiencing reading problems. The literacy skills and academic supports that children and young people receive through tutoring solidify their efforts toward high school, college and career success.

Tutoring models fall into three basic categories:

- In *instructional tutoring*, the tutor provides instruction on a specific content area, where students are expected to develop new knowledge and become proficient in topics that were previously unmastered.

- In the *assignment assistance tutoring* model, tutors meet with individuals or small groups who have difficulty completing class assignments and support them in specific tasks.

- In the *strategic tutoring* model, a combination of the other two, tutors support students in completing assigned class work while helping them understand how to learn and apply strategic processes.

Challenges to measuring the impacts of tutoring are significant. Interventions often lack clear programmatic definitions of tutoring and its components. Depending on the type of tutoring program, specific outcomes can also range from acquiring new skills to increasing homework assignment completion - and comparing data across these areas can be difficult.

Heart of West Michigan United Way: Schools of Hope

The Heart of West Michigan United Way is zeroing in on first through third graders in its most disadvantaged neighborhoods.

That’s because children are learning to read through third grade; by fourth grade they are reading to learn. Kids who read well are more likely to graduate, and succeed in college, work and life. The Grand Rapids community, including school districts, have come together around 900 young students who need the most help. Some 1,200 community volunteers – including college students and retirees – work one-on-one with kids in schools for 30 minutes a week. More than 60 companies give employees paid time off to mentor. Congregations host after-school and family literacy programs.

It’s working. Students in the Schools of Hope program are making greater reading gains than their peers. And those in the afterschool program are gaining one and a half years worth of academic growth in just nine months.

In addition to the partnership with the school district, United Way has partnered with five colleges where education professors have built tutoring requirements into the course syllabi. Many students continue to volunteer as tutors even after the semester ends, with the United Way maintaining a majority of the volunteers.
**Reading Recovery**

Reading Recovery is a successful, typically in-school, tutoring program used in approximately 6000 schools. Reading Recovery is a short-term one-on-one tutoring intervention for first grade students who score in the bottom 20% on reading tests. Generally conducted as pull-out sessions during the school day, the tutoring is conducted by trained Reading Recovery teachers for 30 minutes daily over 12–20 weeks. Reading Recovery is a time-tested program that has moderate to large positive effects on students’ general reading achievement and is the highest rated program of its kind, according to What Works Clearinghouse.58

**What the Research Says**

Some Experience Corps and AmeriCorps programs have underscored the power of tutoring to enhance learning outcomes. Elementary school students who participated in Experience Corps have demonstrated significant improvements over the course of the academic year on standardized testing. Program results were often stronger when children received at least 35 Experience Corps tutoring sessions.20

The benefits of one-on-one adult tutoring are exemplified by AmeriCorps tutoring programs, which have produced academic achievements in reading as well as improvements in classroom behavior over the course of tutoring engagements.21 In one AmeriCorps intervention that worked with nearly 900 struggling first to third graders in schools across the country, students achieved at or near grade level reading skills over the course of the school year. Reading gains occurred for students regardless of ethnicity or gender.22

Other investigations have found that an after-school tutoring program in which low-achieving second and third grade children were tutored for one hour twice weekly by university students, retirees and suburban mothers generated strong improvements in the tutees’ reading skills. Half of the tutored children made a one year gain in reading while only 20% of the comparison group children did. Peer tutoring has also shown some positive gains: elementary school students tutored by older peers tended to outperform the randomly assigned control group who was not tutored.23

Tutoring can be an effective intervention for children and youth, but it is critical that tutors be used effectively. Several characteristics can improve the effectiveness of tutoring:

- Programs can develop guidelines for volunteer implementation.
- Programs can also analyze the role tutors can play and develop a robust training program geared towards the needs of the tutors and the students.24
Although individuals without subject expertise can be helpful tutors, teachers and highly trained instructional aides can be extremely effective, particularly when the program is structured with tutor manuals, student materials and training procedures. However, the additional training involved in developing highly structured programs can be cost prohibitive for many school districts and communities.

Characteristics of Effective Tutoring: A Summary

1. When applied in unison, the following practices are most likely to increase reading scores.26
   - Tutoring sessions are frequent, with at least three sessions a week.
   - Program evaluation occurs throughout the program.
   - Tutors receive training prior to and during the tutoring program.

2. The relationship between tutor and student is significantly associated with reading gains. Students who form good relationships with tutors may feel more positively about relationships with teachers and parents.27

3. Program effects are strongest when tutoring occurs more than 25 times in a school year.28

4. Tutor expertise and development of instructional skills are essential to improving the nature of tutoring interactions at elementary, secondary and post secondary levels. Even subject experts benefit from tutor training.29

5. Capitalizing on the professional and/or subject expertise of educators or instructional aides can significantly advance achievement outcomes in tutoring programs.30

6. A diagnostic/developmental template should be used to organize the tutoring program for each student.31

7. Formal and informal assessment needs to occur for each student to guide the tutoring process, and tutors should track the progress of students in order to adjust their content and strategy instruction.32

8. Program success is stronger when teachers and tutors collaborate and when programs are structured around principles of learning.33