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## Memorandum

From: Liz Cohen  
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Re: Tutoring is for the haves in America, but it could be so much more

The state of educational opportunity in America is changing. Even before the pandemic, the number of private tutoring centers in the United States had **almost tripled** since 2000. Now, in 2024, hundreds of thousands of parents across the United States pay for private tutoring. Some parents want their child to get ahead, others want extra help for a child struggling in one or more subjects, and many more are looking for an edge on college applications. Families pay a lot for these extra opportunities to learn. Kumon, the largest tutoring company in the United States, **charges \$195** for one month of tutoring in just one subject.

In this context, 50CAN's newly released "The State of Educational Opportunity in America: A Survey of 20,000 Parents" provides a helpful window into the depth of unequal access to tutoring programs. Wealthy parents are three times as likely to say their child participates in tutoring outside of school compared to lower-income parents. More than 40 percent of families in the survey's highest income bracket, families making over \$500,000 a year, report their child receives tutoring outside of school hours. These are not students who are failing courses—it's students already earning A's, B's, and C's. What these new data show is that students who are already doing alright in school, and who are more likely to do just fine in life, continue to have the most access to the single most impactful academic support we have. In short, tutoring in America is mostly for students looking to get ahead, not those who have already fallen behind.

These survey results help to make the case for improving access to tutoring programs that occur during the school day in public schools, as well as out-of-school tutoring opportunities. The percentage of students in traditional public schools receiving outside tutoring (16%) is half that of students in private schools (36%) and students in public charter schools (32%). All students should have equal access to the most impactful evidence-based approaches to help them learn—and tutoring is at the top of that list, both for demand and effectiveness.

When low-income families do report participation in tutoring, more than 70 percent of them say that their kids receive tutoring through their school or district. Many of these tutoring programs, including after-school, summer school, and those embedded within the school day, are in danger because of the end of federal ESSER funding that was essential in many states to launching these programs in the aftermath of the pandemic. That means this unequal landscape may become even more so in the years ahead.

Almost half of all public schools offered some amount of high-impact tutoring during the 2023-24 school year, according to the U.S. Department of Education's **School Pulse** panel data. More than half of those schools say their tutoring efforts are highly effective. Importantly, there's no one way to run a high-quality, high-impact tutoring program. In some districts, including Ector County Independent School District in Texas, Guilford County Public Schools in North Carolina, and Baltimore City Public Schools in Maryland, that means most, or all, schools have the chance to opt-in to tutoring for at least some of their students. For the 300+ individual schools partnering with Teach for America's **Ignite tutoring fellowship** across the US, it means identifying anywhere from one class to multiple grades

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within a building to participate in four-day-a-week tutoring with college students. Incredibly, those college students find tutoring such a meaningful experience that they are increasingly applying to become teachers after graduation in Teach for America's full-time teacher corps. It's not only the tutors who are happy with the experience: 91 percent of families in this survey whose child receives tutoring are satisfied with that tutoring, even higher than the 85 percent of families satisfied with their child's school.

With those kinds of satisfaction rates, it's a wonder more parents aren't demanding tutoring at school. Indeed, the demand for tutoring would likely be higher if parents had better information about their child's progress in school. Parent-teacher conferences are the only measure in this survey where more than half of parents say they are very useful for determining if your child is at, above, or below grade-level. But those conferences happen just twice a year, if parents are lucky. Parents seem unsure whether grades on report cards or ongoing assignments are useful tools and based on studies of **grade inflation** in recent years, it seems reasonable to find grades rather useless. In this survey, in fact, almost 90 percent of parents say their child is at or above grade level in math and reading. But if that was true, schools and parents would see higher scores on state tests and national tests like NAEP and more kids would be thriving in postsecondary education. Many parents would want their child to work with a tutor if they understood either how behind their child is, or how much more their child could achieve. In fact, when the survey asked parents of students getting D's and F's what kind of opportunities they would want for their kids outside of school, tutoring was their first choice.

One exciting part of the post-pandemic, high-impact tutoring movement is just how much we continue to learn about when and how to do tutoring well. One thing that is now clear is that virtual tutoring can be equally as effective as in-person tutoring, a finding that unleashes tremendous potential. Only 10 percent of families in the 50CAN survey say their tutoring is online. Families understandably distrust virtual learning after their experiences in 2020 and 2021, but today's virtual tutoring is a far cry from that emergency remote instruction.

The **CUNY Reading Corps**, a literacy tutoring program that started in New York City during the pandemic, recently tested whether in-person or virtual tutoring made a difference in student outcomes. What researchers found is that the modality of tutoring didn't matter. The quality of tutor—that they know what they're doing, are using high-quality materials, and other tutor characteristics—matters, but the impact was the same whether in classrooms or online. The 50CAN survey shows that urban families are more likely to report tutoring than suburban or rural families. This could be, in part, an access issue, one that can be addressed by educating families and schools on effective virtual tutoring options. Ten percent of families say tutoring is not available in their community—with the world of virtual tutoring, this is simply not the case.

Despite the hard work in recent years to build a foundation of research and implementation on high-impact tutoring, funding remains the most significant hurdle to long-term sustainability. Tennessee is a leading state in ensuring a future for tutoring because they have now embedded funding for high-impact tutoring in their state funding formula; Louisiana put **\$30 million** into tutoring for the 2024-25 school year and the District of Columbia included **\$4.8 million** in the budget to support tutoring in the coming year. To support families who want to procure tutoring outside of school, Denver's **MySpark program** put \$1,000 in the hands of 4,000 low-income middle-school families last year to pay for tutoring, music lessons, athletics, or other after-school opportunities. Not all families in the program choose to spend their funds on tutoring, but those who do can finally participate in the same kind of extracurricular academic support that is routine for wealthy families.

The long-term future of tutoring rests on schools and districts prioritizing tutoring, and beginning to allocate ongoing federal, state, and local dollars as a regular expense. For Principal Katreena Shelby at Kramer Middle School in the District of Columbia, that means choosing not to hire two paraprofessionals in order to keep her high-impact tutoring manager to ensure that strong implementation of tutoring

continues in her building. It means managing relationships with four different tutoring providers to get enough adults into her building to work with every one of her students—100 percent of Kramer students now get high-impact tutoring during the school day. Thousands of school leaders like Shelby are doing the hard work to schedule and budget tutoring, and then oversee tutor recruitment, teacher feedback, student attendance, and other implementation factors.

The future of tutoring contains uncertainty: whether long-term funding for tutoring will be prioritized, whether schools will continue to focus on and refine implementation, whether sufficient students participate in tutoring to yield systemically-transformative results. What is certain is that families want tutoring, and that a family's income is a significant predictor of whether their child receives tutoring. The best education reform efforts in the world will never help under-performing low-income students catch up to affluent peers if that affluence provides additional, ongoing acceleration of learning.

That said, there's no more optimistic place to be in K-12 education right now than the high-impact tutoring movement, as educators, principals, district leaders, state officials, and others continue to rally behind the growing evidence base of tutoring, and as more than 40,000 public schools continue to provide deeply-needed tutoring support to their students. Parents want tutoring; millions of students need it.