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Memorandum

To: Executive Directors
From: Liz Cohen, 50CAN
Date: January 21, 2021
Re: Tutoring as both an emergency response and a recovery strategy

As we close out the first month of 2021, one of the biggest questions we face is what more can be done to help students during this emergency school year and the period of recovery that will follow. The purpose of this memo is to outline several recommendations for preventing and addressing learning loss through tutoring.

Tutoring is an intervention increasingly under discussion—and with good reason. It is one of the few educational strategies that we know works for almost all kids in a wide array of implementation approaches. We also have research on ways to maximize the effectiveness of this option. For example, teachers and paraprofessionals get stronger results than parents or untrained tutors. Tutoring also appears to work best for reading in lower grades and math in upper grades. It's an approach that can both help us address the current state of emergency in education and lay the groundwork for a more vibrant educational system beyond the pandemic.

On the national level, we've seen several tutoring-related proposals in recent months. The Center for American Progress called for an "Opportunity and Counseling Corps" that would provide tutoring in an AmeriCorps-type effort. Robert Slavin, a leading research expert on tutoring, recently advocated for a "Tutoring Marshall Plan." The Annenberg Institute at Brown University will launch the National Student Support Accelerator early this year with a goal of all K-12 students having access to high-impact tutoring.

At the same time, states don't have to wait to see if these national ideas get traction. As additional federal relief funding begins to flow, they have an opportunity to lead the way forward by ensuring those dollars support programs that immediately help students and families. Already we are seeing promising ideas emerge at the state and local level.

For example, in Tennessee, former Governor Bill Haslam's foundation paid stipends to college students to engage in tutoring hosted by Boys & Girls Clubs in the summer of 2020. Official data from this program are forthcoming, but as they plan to replicate and grow the program in 2021, this approach of both providing jobs for postsecondary students while promoting student learning was well-received. The Cleveland Foundation, United Way of Greater Cleveland and the Cleveland Metropolitan School District are supporting Academic Learning Pods, which provide safe, in-person educational support and enrichment at 24 community-based organizations for over 800 Cleveland students. Similarly, in Charleston, South Carolina, the school district is supporting a community-based pod program by paying for educators to work in pods, as well as using some CARES funding to boost internet service in some of the host organizations.

Supporting locally driven tutoring initiatives is one of the most promising routes to getting students the support they need. This memo outlines principles for the development of these programs and concrete recommendations that can be adapted to your local environments.

Principles for effective tutoring initiatives

1. **Urgency and transformation are not mutually exclusive.** We don't have to wait until fall 2021 to rethink the support systems available to American schoolchildren. We can use our emergency response to bring new programs online now that will continue into the next school year. We have an opportunity to reshape how and where learning happens in this country in ways that will benefit children for decades to come.
2. **Local leadership is critical.** While Washington has an important role to play in providing educational aid to states in this emergency, the most effective programs are likely to be developed locally to take advantage of local opportunities and focus on local needs. These are also the programs most likely to be sustained when federal support programs end.
3. **Parents as partners.** Parents have always been crucial to their children's education, but they haven't always been treated as such by the system. Now, they are more central than ever before as learning is increasingly happening at home. Tutoring programs should be designed to maximize parental choice, input and partnership on behalf of their children.
4. **More is better than perfect.** In this unprecedented moment, we should have a bias towards action in recruiting tutors for kids and have a number of different approaches to doing so. Whether that's college students, retirees, local non-profit employees or other willing individuals, our kids need everyone in their corner. In August, we called for an "all hands on deck" approach and this remains a rallying cry as we move into the recovery phase of this crisis. Some approaches are better than others, but any step forward has value at this time.
5. **Measure flexibly.** While research suggests that almost all types of tutoring can yield some positive results, that doesn't mean that we don't need to measure the impact of every new effort. Yet, as we wrote in "Measure Everything" last August, we should work towards measurement systems focused on the needs of parents and students, not institutions.

Option 1. Create post-secondary partnerships

College students are, in many respects, ideal candidates for any new tutoring push. There's a lot of them (around 15 million), they often need or want paying jobs and they are young enough to remember what school was like, which may help with the mentoring aspects of any tutoring program. Already, 29,000 undergraduate work-study students were employed as literacy tutors in the 2016-2017 school year.¹ Current estimates of undergraduate students studying education suggest approximately 300,000 students are in education programs. If half of those students tutored two small groups of three students for a few hours a week, we could reach up to one million K-12 students. Add on students studying math, biology and other subjects and the potential tutor pool only increases.

Engaging postsecondary students as tutors not only allows them to earn wages to help cover various expenses while they pursue their degree, but it also exposes more individuals to the world of teaching and education. Time as a tutor might help a biology major realize he would enjoy working with high school students; any sort of real-world experience helps college students make more informed decisions about their future. Expanding the tutor pool beyond education students can also go far to address long-standing challenges to increasing the diversity of educators.

Policy Recommendations:

- State education agencies should work with higher education institutions to create avenues for students to receive course credit for tutoring, make it a graduation requirement or other incentive structures.
- Federal work-study funding could be prioritized to tutoring positions. At current funding levels, these funds could pay for approximately 200,000 tutors if every work-study position was as a tutor.

- An emphasis should be placed on recruiting a diverse tutoring pool of candidates by maximizing the number of college students who can apply for the program.

Option 2: Invest in community-based learning pods

Learning pods provide a structure for supporting and enriching education outside of the school building, housed within trusted community organizations. Pods can and do take place in rec centers, churches and non-profit organizations that know what families need. Arguably, a community-based pod might be more culturally sensitive than a traditional public school and may also provide readily available opportunities for wrap-around services for the whole family. Thus, community-based pods offer a platform for providing tutoring to students. Tutoring can mean many things in this scenario; this is where a flexible measurement and funding approach is key. Whether it's reading help, math support, bringing in specialists, facilitating virtual tutoring requested by parents or running STEM experiments in a parking lot, as long as someone is tracking it in some fashion, parents are engaged and providing feedback on outcomes and it can start now, we should find ways to support it.

An example to build upon is the work of the National Parents Union, which has funded at least 37 parent-led pods this year for students traditionally underserved in public education. Some of their grant recipients are working with foster children, refugees, families impacted by incarceration and other particularly vulnerable groups. With relatively small amounts of funding, these parent-led pods are often already incorporating tutoring. One grantee, for example, used a \$17,000 grant to secure tuition and curriculum from an online program for homeschooling, along with 30 hours a week of tutoring for the six foster children in the pod.

Policy Recommendations:

- In jurisdictions with locally funded pods (such as Cleveland, Charleston and others), the staff at host organizations should provide some tutoring as part of enrichment or other programming throughout the school week. School districts should provide curriculum materials if needed to community-supported pods in order to best facilitate tutoring or other educational support.
- New funds to assist education could include support for pods to provide tutoring this spring that will expand access to learning opportunities. Communities should plan to continue supporting pods throughout the 2021-2022 school year even as students return to buildings. This provides an existing structure outside the school day through which students can continue to access tutoring.
- State legislatures should use 2021 legislative sessions to explore ESAs and other avenues to direct dollars directly to parents who want to procure tutoring.

Option 3: Leverage paraprofessionals, substitutes and other district employees

Research tells us that paraprofessionals can be as effective at tutoring as fully certified teachers. Paraprofessionals could be immediately deployed as either virtual or in-person tutors. This would be an efficient and effective use of current employees.

Substitute teachers are another pool of adults who could be immediately engaged as tutors. There are at least one million paraprofessionals in the United States and at least 400,000 substitute teachers.

Many districts are reporting shortages of substitute teachers because many in the current pool do not wish to participate in in-person learning. They could, however, work as virtual tutors. One approach could be to use substitute teachers both for asynchronous feedback to students and for individual or small-group virtual tutoring sessions.

Policy Recommendations:

- In districts learning virtually, current paraprofessionals should be immediately deployed as small group virtual tutors.
- In districts with hybrid or in-person learning, strong consideration should be given to using paraprofessionals as tutors for the remainder of the school year, as well as into the next school year. Indeed, paraprofessionals developing a deeper relationship with students through small-group tutoring (virtual or in-person) could go a long way to ensuring students are individually supported through academic and psychological challenges in the coming months.
- Districts should immediately inquire about which substitute teachers would be willing to tutor on a virtual or in-person basis and should think creatively about how to allocate remaining funding to maximize small group tutoring opportunities with substitute teachers.

Option 4: Reimagine virtual learning formats for Spring 2021

Many of the most sizeable school districts in the country remain largely, if not entirely, virtual. With learning lagging under these conditions, there is a strong need to try different approaches that might work better for both individual students and teachers rather than whole class instruction online.

Prioritizing individual or small group meetings could go a long way to bolstering student engagement and helping teachers identify when students might be in a variety of vulnerable or risky situations.

One approach that states could pursue is for every student to have a one-on-one check-in with their teacher for at least 15 minutes once a week. In order to make time for these personal connections, students could spend less time in full classes and instead balance small group tutoring sessions with asynchronous work.

Policy Recommendations:

- School districts should ensure that all students receive a weekly one-on-one interaction with their classroom teacher.
- Whole-class virtual instruction time could be reduced to make time for shorter, small group sessions.
- State legislators could provide greater flexibility for seat time or other barriers standing in the way of creative solutions.
- Legislators should engage with teachers willing to share constructive input about how creative approaches are benefiting students and would help educators work more effectively at this time. Whether at traditional public, charter or private school, policy makers should solicit input from all educators about how to build a stronger, student-centered learning experience.