5 Ways to Improve Tutoring Programs

Evidence on tutoring points to practices that are found in the most successful tutoring programs.

BY EDWARD E. GORDON

Tutoring has become a familiar tool that schools use to reinforce classroom teaching and improve student achievement. That's especially been the case because of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and its provisions for supplemental education.

No matter what the future holds for NCLB, principals and other educators will still need to know what kinds of tutoring are effective and for what purposes.

Principals and other educators will benefit from learning more about promising tutoring practices drawn from the best available studies and field research (Gordon et al. 2007). What follows are practical recommendations that educators can apply immediately to improve school tutoring programs.

#1. USE A DIAGNOSTIC/DEVELOPMENTAL TUTORING PROGRAM.

Evidence indicates that when individual diagnosis is structured into a tutoring program, long-term student achievement increases. One effective way of accomplishing this is by having the tutor observe and record student learning skills on a session-by-session basis. This aids in a more accurate diagnosis of specific learning disabilities (Vellutino et al. 1996).

Accurate observation can guide the tutor in selecting short diagnostic tests and exercises to better detail indi-

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The most promising results in improving long-term student achievement were seen in home-based tutoring programs.

vidual learning obstacles. Using a diagnostic/developmental approach will help the tutor discover underlying, perhaps subtle student cognitive processing issues, such as learning disabilities (i.e., dyslexia, visual/auditory perceptual issues, attention-span limitations, etc.) (Gordon et al. 2004).

#2. STRUCTURE THE TUTORING PROGRAMS.

Design and implement a highly structured tutoring program for your school. This will help tutors implement more precise individualized tutoring, rather than generic "homework helper" or "drill-and-practice" tutoring that provides little, if any, assistance in improving student classroom achievement (Cohen, Kulik, and Kulik 1982; Ellison 1976; Rosenshine and Furst 1969; Wasik and Slavin 1993).

One example of such a structured program used researched, field-based curriculum scripts to build skill competencies at an introductory, maintenance, or mastery learning level. The Individualized Instructional

Program (IIP) systematically designed into its curricula more than 300 learning descriptors to document academic skill achievement, specific learning-how-to-learn skills, and personal motivational outcomes. These curriculum scripts used a test-tutor-test approach by tracking tutor observations session to session and using shorter diagnostic/developmental measurement tools rather than lengthy diagnostic tests. Since many academically challenged students tend to exhibit test-phobic behaviors, the results of this approach appear to be more accurate. (See Figure 1.) Such an approach also has the advantage of increasing tutorial instructional time and reducing the time spent on testing.

In these structured programs, tutors assessed students using learning descriptors in one of 52 subject areas. (See Figure 2.) On a one-to-one basis, the typical tutoring program included 25 one-hour sessions conducted over about 13 weeks. Or on a one-to-five basis, tutors conducted 40 hours of instruction in two-hour sessions over about 10 weeks. The curriculum-script method allows the tutor to follow a more thoughtful, sequentially arranged, systematic tutoring program based on a written record, rather than on informal guesswork. This helps minimize the risk that an individual tutor will overlook significant student learning issues. Also, diagnosis becomes an ongoing process throughout the

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FIG. 1
Example of Short Diagnostic Tool

Using the performance scale below, assess the student's skills after the 10th and 25th hours of tutoring.

Learning Disabilities				Learning Strengths
Very Weak 1	Weak 2	Average 3	Strong 4	Very Strong 5

Visual-Form Discrimination

Definition: The ability to differentiate visually the forms and symbols in one's environment.

Illustration: Can match identical pictures and symbols such as abstract designs, letters, numbers, and words.

Examples:
Prepare a page that has rows and columns of shapes or symbols in which the symbol in the first column recurs somewhere in that row, such as:

■　●　◆　■　☽

♣　◆　♣　♠　♥

π　γ　φ　ψ　π

Observe the following in the student's writing:

letter reversal	word reversal
letter confusion	word confusion
letter omission	word omission
letter substitution	word substitution

Hours Tutored	
10	25

FIG. 2
Sample Learning Descriptors for Reading Comprehension

Skill Rating	Very Weak 1	Weak 2	Average 3	Strong 4	Very Strong 5

Skills	Hours Tutored			Final Grade Level Attained
	5	10	20	
Total Comprehension				
1. Word Meaning				
a. Synonym				
b. Antonym				
c. Homonym				
2. Phrase and Sentence Meaning				
3. Following Directions				
4. Context Clues				
5. Key Words				
6. Topic Sentences				
7. Paragraph Meaning				

tutoring session, rather than only during a pretesting phase (Gordon, Morgan, and Ponticell 1995; Gordon 1983; Morgan, Ponticell, and Gordon 1998).

#3. USE YOUR MOST EXPERIENCED TEACHERS AS TUTORS AND TRAIN THEM.

Highly trained tutors have consistently produced better tutoring results. In general, tutors are effective because they give students more personalized attention. However, over time this effect tends to fade, and students resume their earlier learning habits. This is why the tutor's professional education, degrees, spe-

Master tutors see themselves more as "learning detectives," coaches, and mentors rather than "homework helpers" or "test-prep specialists."

cial credentials, prior professional experience, and specialized training as a tutor can make a major difference in ensuring that a student achieves better long-term learning gains (Mathes and Fuchs 1994; Shanahan and Barr 1995).

Finland has developed a highly effective system of tutoring interventions to support all students. There is one specially trained tutor for every seven classroom teachers. In any given school year, 30% of all elementary and high school students are tutored any time they are at risk of falling behind in their classroom programs. Even the best students are on occasion sent for tutoring when they need additional instruction. This makes clear to students and parents that such tutoring is not necessarily a sign of underperformance, but another part of every student's learning experience. Finally, Finnish tutors are given an additional year of specialized tutoring methods and content education at the university level to support them in this specialized education role (Grubb 2007; Barber and Mourshed 2007).

Over several decades of interviews with hundreds of master tutors, the author found that most see themselves more as "learning detectives," coaches, and mentors, rather than "homework helpers" or "test-prep specialists." The most effective tutors are often classroom teachers who long to reach out to the students they see every day who are falling behind in a larger instructional group. These tutors have high levels of personal motivation to pass on their infectious love of learning to every student within reach. They use a diagnostic approach to prepare develop-

mental tutoring classes concentrating on helping a student internalize learning how to learn, rather than simply focusing on immediate assignments or tests (Gordon 2002).

#4. THE SITE OF THE TUTORING CAN MAXIMIZE LONG-TERM RESULTS.

The location of tutoring sessions seems to play an important role in the results. Many school tutoring programs are marginalized by poor student attendance or family mobility problems (Shanahan 1998).

Longitudinal research compared tutoring provided in different locations: schools, public libraries, community learning centers, and students' homes. The most promising results in improving long-term student achievement were seen in home-based tutoring programs. A number of factors seem to have contributed to these results.

When tutoring students in their homes, tutors were more effective in establishing a better learning environment. This occurred because the tutors were trained not just on more effective instructional methods, but also on how to coach parents on ways to support daily learning in the home. These tutors were often the first teachers who had ever visited these homes. The tutors helped parents come to a better understanding of their child's learning abilities and ways to consistently support achievement growth (Gordon et al. 2007).

Research has shown that many parents did not know how to provide a home learning environment that supported their child's classroom achievement (Farkas, Johnson, and Duffett 1999). The tutors met with a parent after every tutoring session and coached them on the fundamentals of providing a quiet, well-lighted, distraction-free, home-study site equipped with basic learning materials. Tutors reviewed class

progress and answered questions in plain terms to better engage the parents in playing an effective supporting role. For the first time, many parents understood that learning occurs day to day in small increments. Finally, parent involvement showed that they valued learning and education for their child. As a result, the parents' role as primary motivators of their child's learning was enhanced even after the tutoring sessions ended (Gordon and Gordon 2003; Stommen and Mates 2004).

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From a practical standpoint, schools should offer home tutoring services on a voluntary basis for both parents and their interested tutors/teachers. A parent needs to be present in the home during the entire tutoring session, but not in the immediate instructional area. Tutors need additional training on effective parental coaching procedures. Offering a mixture of school-based and home-based programs may be the most realistic alternative for any school. Research clearly shows that many families will invite tutors into their home if given this opportunity.

Across the United States, many federally and locally funded education programs are already sending teachers into the homes of children as tutors, coaches, and instructors. Such programs have ranged from Even Start and Early Head Start (Armor 2002; Geissler 2000) to nontraditional high school tutoring (Manzo 2005) and parent/teacher home visitations (Donaldson 2002; U.S. Department of Education 2007*a*, 2007*b*).

#5. ENCOURAGE THE USE OF PEER TUTORING IN THE CLASSROOM.

Peer tutoring can help teachers reduce some of the negative effects of high-stakes testing on classroom instructions. Teachers now report spending more time on test preparation and less time on learning activities (Barksdale-Ladd and Thomas 2000). Evidence shows that peer tutoring may not only help increase student mastery of subject knowledge and general learning skills, but also improve student motivation and sense of empowerment as learners. Peer tutoring can have extremely positive effects on student classroom achievement and has been shown to signifi-

cantly improve reading comprehension.

Peer tutors can reinforce concepts, help tutees practice skills, assist with individual projects, support problem solving, or challenge tutees' thinking or approaches to learning. Peer tutoring also strengthens tutors' un-

THE ESSENTIAL 10

In designing and administering your school's tutoring program, these 10 components seem to show considerable promise for quality improvement:

1. Tutors can be effective regardless of their training and education by just giving students more personal attention. However, teacher education, prior professional experience, and specialized training as a tutor can make a major difference. Professionally prepared tutors consistently produce significantly higher levels of student achievement than tutors with little or no special preparation.

2. Tutors need to use a diagnostic/developmental template to organize and implement each student's tutoring program.

3. Tutors must be able to track the session-to-session progress of each student in order to modify tutoring content and use student academic strengths to overcome weaknesses.

4. Principles of learning drawn from both cognitive and constructivist thinking seem to offer the strongest contemporary tutoring methods.

5. Tutors need to use continuous feedback to help students develop positive self-images as learners.

6. Formal/informal assessment needs to be used throughout the tutoring process.

7. Mentoring/coaching students on learning how to learn by providing guidance on study habits, taking tests, attention to school, and learning in general is a significant, informal part of effective tutoring.

8. Mentoring/coaching each student's parents on sustaining the day-to-day learning process in the home after the tutoring ceases is an important role for effective tutors.

9. To facilitate the coaching of parents, it is desirable to conduct the tutoring in the student's own home outside of school hours. If this is not possible, a community center, school, or library can be used, but tutors should try to provide coaching to the parents.

10. Throughout the tutoring, tutors must collaborate closely with each student's classroom teacher. The final measure of the effectiveness of the tutoring is the short-term and long-term improvement of the student's daily classroom achievement (Gordon et al. 2007).

derstanding of concepts and skills, engages them in creative thinking and problem solving as they test alternative strategies for helping tutees, and enhances the tutors' self-images. This can become a promising component in building students' critical thinking skills.

Peer tutors can be organized in ways that optimize opportunities to learn in many meaningful ways. For example:

- Peer tutors can elicit their tutees' ideas and experiences in relation to key topics and then fashion learning situations that help them elaborate on or restructure their current knowledge.
- Tutors and tutees can be assigned complex, meaningful, problem-based activities.
- Tutors and tutees can be encouraged to work collaboratively and be supported to engage in task-oriented dialogue with one another.
- Tutors can make their thinking processes explicit to tutees in their own language and encourage tutees to do the same through dialogue, writing, drawings, or other representations.
- Tutors can employ a variety of assessment strategies to understand how their tutees' ideas are evolving and to give feedback on the processes, as well as the products, of their thinking.

Peer tutoring requires careful planning that is grounded in the appropriate training of student tutors. Research clearly shows that effective peer tutoring does not result from a haphazard volunteer program. Peer tutoring requires a purposeful program of specific learning objectives, activities, and assessments for developing students' mastery of concepts and skills. To be effective tutors, students need to learn how to interact with peers as learning partners. Peer tutors are more successful if their roles are highly structured, if they are made aware of basic learning principles, if they understand curricular goals, and if they are trained in the appropriate use of tutoring activities and materials.

We must not ignore or dismiss the potential hurdles that teachers will face as they consider using peer tutoring in their classrooms. Peer tutoring will require parent and organizational support. Parents generally know very little about peer tutoring; they need to be educated about the role of peer tutoring as a support and supplement to teacher instruction and the benefits of tutoring for both tutee and tutor.   **K**

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