



# A Closer Look at Today's Tutoring:

What Works, What Doesn't, and the Road Ahead



# Introduction

In recent years, tutoring has emerged as a cornerstone of K-12 educational reform. Once viewed primarily as a supplemental support option, tutoring is now recognized as a vital intervention for closing learning gaps. The COVID-19 pandemic's significant impact on student learning has elevated tutoring to the forefront of strategies for accelerating academic recovery. This heightened focus has prompted unprecedented investment from federal and state governments. For example, the American Rescue Plan allocated over \$7.5 billion to fund tutoring initiatives across the U.S., reaching approximately 80% of school districts as part of a national effort to address educational disparities (FutureEd, 2024).

The rapid expansion of tutoring has also led to an explosion of new research, data-driven insights, and emerging technologies, fundamentally reshaping what effective tutoring looks like. Studies and forums frequently examine high-dosage tutoring (HIT), which is defined as small-group instruction delivered over a set period with recurring sessions totaling at least 90 minutes weekly. Moreover, integrating artificial intelligence (AI) into tutoring models opens new possibilities for enhancing tutor training, providing real-time session insights, and boosting student engagement.

Navigating this evolving landscape requires a clear understanding of the strategies that work, the challenges programs face, and the innovations that most promise to drive student outcomes. This white paper is intended to support educators, policymakers, and administrators by offering a comprehensive analysis of the tutoring space. Through evaluations of high-dosage tutoring models, scalable implementation strategies, and resource management, it aims to equip stakeholders with actionable insights for fostering student growth.

For example, Cognition's statewide program implementation as part of Ohio's Statewide Tutoring Initiative demonstrates the potential of large-scale, high-dosage tutoring to effectively address learning loss in math and literacy. These programs show that scalable tutoring can succeed when supported by the right resources, consistent data monitoring, and a structured approach to instruction. However, challenges remain, particularly in maintaining tutor quality and ensuring equitable access across diverse school settings (Annenberg Institute, 2023).

Tutoring programs are not one-size-fits-all, and the approaches taken vary widely depending on their design, delivery format, and the needs of the students they serve. This paper invites readers to explore these differences while emphasizing that adaptability and informed decision-making are critical to maximizing tutoring's potential as a transformative academic support strategy.

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# Current Tutoring Landscape

Prompted by pandemic-related learning gaps, schools and districts nationwide have accelerated efforts to integrate tutoring into their master schedules. Studies indicate that using models like high-impact or high-dosage tutoring designed to generate measurable academic gains, such approaches—often delivered in small groups multiple times per week—can yield substantial results. For example, some implementations have shown up to 10 months of additional growth in math for students who participate regularly (FutureEd, 2024). This powerful potential has positioned tutoring as one of the most widely embraced strategies for addressing educational inequities and accelerating student learning.

Beyond federal funding, state-level grants and initiatives have also played a significant role in sustaining tutoring programs. Across the U.S., states have launched initiatives that underscore the effectiveness of tutoring in improving student outcomes. In Louisiana, for instance, 90% of voters recently supported high-dose tutoring for students performing below grade level—a sentiment mirrored in many other regions prioritizing educational recovery (Protect Louisiana Values, 2024). This influx of funding has given schools and districts the flexibility to adapt tutoring programs to their specific needs, balancing considerations such as delivery format and teacher comfort.



## Key questions often guide these decisions:

- 1 Should tutoring be in-person or virtual?
- 2 Is a hybrid model the best fit for supporting students, with an in-house teacher or staff member overseeing virtual sessions?

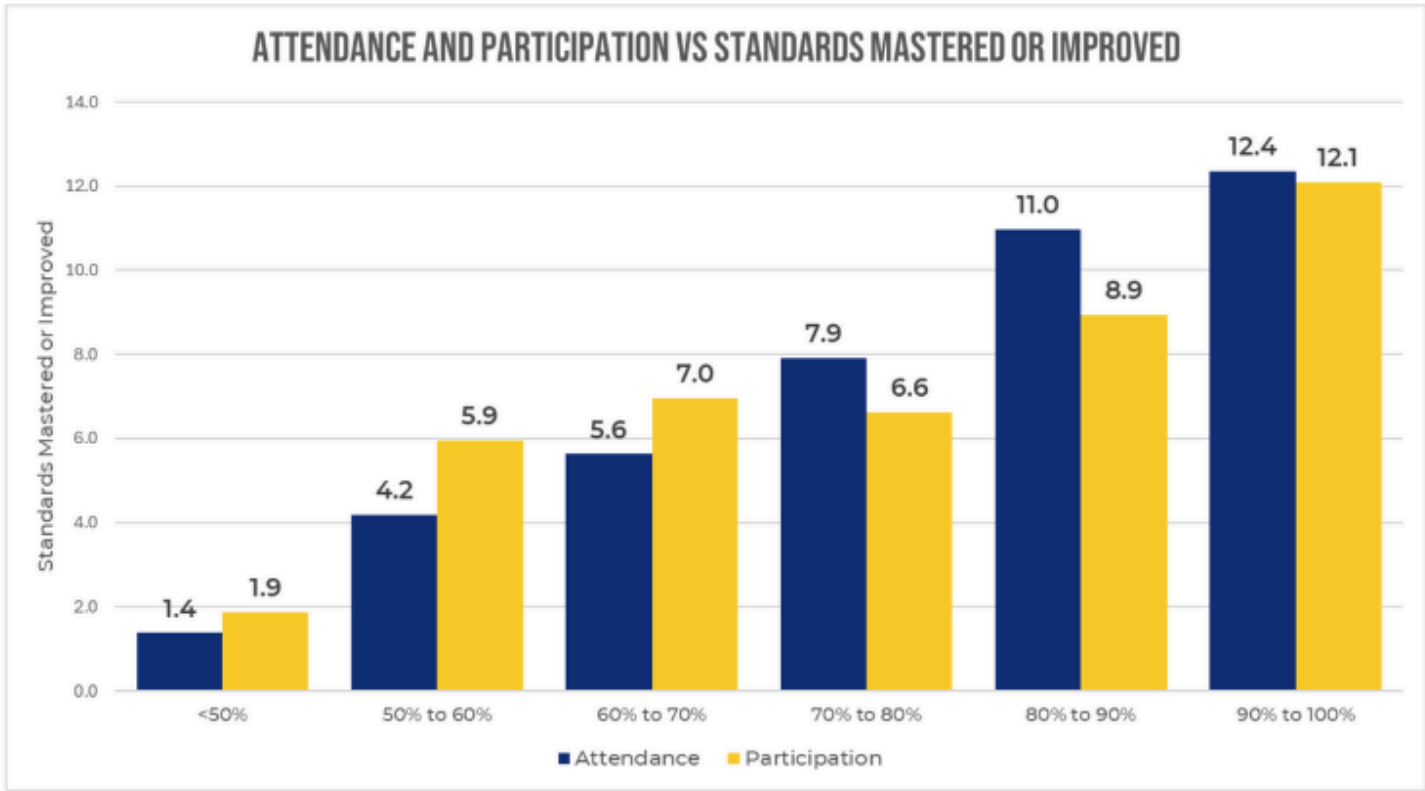
Ultimately, research-backed structures and the ability to tailor programs to local needs have been essential for maximizing outcomes.

The evolution of tutoring design has highlighted notable differences between in-person and virtual delivery. Virtual tutoring has proven to be a flexible and scalable option for districts grappling with staffing shortages or geographic challenges.



Programs like [Cignition's implementation in Ohio as part of the Future Forward initiative](#) exemplify the potential of virtual tutoring to achieve both reach and impact. Serving over 2,000 students across multiple districts, Ohio's program achieved an 80.3% attendance rate and a 94.4% positive student feedback rate. These results demonstrate how structured, high-quality tutoring can drive significant outcomes at scale (Cignition x Ohio Statewide Case Study, 2024)

Figure 4



In addition to delivery methods, technology is reshaping the tutoring landscape. AI-powered systems, such as those being developed by Cignition and others, enable tutors to access real-time insights into student engagement and performance. These tools allow tutors to dynamically adjust instruction, monitor progress against academic standards, and identify areas where students need targeted support. A recent survey found that 91% of parents reported high satisfaction with tutoring services—significantly higher than general school satisfaction rates—highlighting strong parental support for data-driven tutoring interventions (50CAN, 2024).

As more data emerges, research affirms the importance of structured, consistent tutoring models prioritizing academic and social support. High-impact tutoring programs, in particular, emphasize the value of maintaining small student-to-tutor ratios, ensuring regular attendance, and leveraging reliable assessment tools to measure progress (Annenberg Institute, 2023).

Despite these successes, challenges persist. Scalability and resource allocation remain significant hurdles, especially as districts seek to implement programs that demand consistent funding and access to high-quality tutors. The current tutoring landscape reflects a complex interplay of funding, technology, program structure, and localized needs. Moving forward, schools and districts must navigate these factors to create programs that are not only effective but also sustainable and equitable.

The following sections will explore these elements in greater depth, examining practices and innovations that define successful tutoring programs and offering insights into critical components that ensure long-term success.

## What's Working in Tutoring Today?

Certain structured practices in tutoring have consistently demonstrated strong academic outcomes. High-impact tutoring (HIT) has emerged as one of the most effective models. Research shows that students participating in HIT programs can achieve 4 to 12 months of additional learning in math and literacy, depending on the frequency and quality of the sessions (FutureEd, 2024). This intensive approach continues to gain traction as schools recognize the value of regular, focused intervention in helping students recover lost learning and build foundational skills.

HIT goes beyond simply offering students extra time for assignments or answering questions. It provides a focused environment where students can build confidence, collaborate with peers at similar levels, and develop problem-solving skills. In many HIT programs, small-group interaction allows students to benefit from hearing their peers' reasoning, which sparks new ideas and deeper understanding. However, the extent of collaboration and opportunities for skill development can vary based on the program's design and implementation. Tutors, in turn, can narrow their focus to specific areas of the curriculum, ensuring conceptual understanding before advancing.

This structured environment functions much like a batting cage in sports, giving students repeated, targeted practice that improves their performance in the classroom and on standardized tests. Additionally, a direct correlation exists between consistent attendance and engagement in tutoring sessions and overall school attendance. Structured tutoring fosters a sense of belonging, motivation, and academic progress, which can help address broader challenges such as declining attendance and student disengagement.

## *Personalization Through AI-Enhanced Support*

Integrating artificial intelligence (AI) into tutoring has introduced new opportunities for personalization, allowing programs to tailor instruction to individual student needs. Many schools and districts already use AI-powered systems in supplemental instruction or game-based learning, but tutoring platforms that integrate AI take this to the next level.

### **AI enhances tutoring by:**

1

**Familiarizing Itself with the Tutoring Environment:** AI adapts to the methodologies and dynamics of sessions, providing tutors with real-time insights into areas needing more focus or where students are struggling. For example, AI can analyze a student's responses during a session and recommend adjustments to the difficulty level of subsequent questions, ensuring the material remains challenging but achievable.

2

**Deep Diving into Curriculum Standards:** AI ensures alignment with academic standards by flagging overlooked areas and guiding tutors to prioritize specific topics critical for student progress. In one scenario, AI could alert a tutor that a student has yet to demonstrate proficiency in a prerequisite concept, allowing the tutor to address the gap before moving forward.

3

**Analyzing Student Engagement:** AI tracks metrics such as participation frequency, contributions during discussions, and engagement quality, providing tutors with actionable feedback. For instance, if a student becomes less engaged over time, AI might suggest specific strategies, such as using interactive activities or adjusting the pacing of instruction, to re-engage the learner.

Studies have shown that AI-augmented tutoring enhances existing instruction by helping tutors identify and address learning gaps in real-time. Additionally, AI supports scalability, enabling providers to serve more students while maintaining the quality of personalized instruction. By integrating AI thoughtfully, tutoring programs can deliver high-quality, tailored support that meets the diverse needs of students and districts alike.

## Outcomes-Based Contracting

Outcomes-based contracting (OBC) is gaining momentum as a model that ties funding to measurable improvements in student performance. This approach incentivizes providers to meet milestones and quality standards, fosters accountability, and focuses resources on results rather than session counts. Districts implementing OBCs report that these contracts enable them to allocate resources more effectively and align tutoring investments with broader educational goals.

OBCs are particularly effective in high-dosage tutoring, where frequent assessments and goal-setting are embedded in program structures. They also require ongoing collaboration between districts and tutoring providers, creating a system where both parties have shared accountability. Providers must continuously analyze session data and adjust to ensure goals are met while districts benefit from a more transparent evaluation of their tutoring programs.

When well-executed, OBCs offer a roadmap for sustainable and effective program implementation. Providers can share insights from past successes to help districts refine their approach, ensuring alignment with their unique priorities and challenges. This collaborative framework builds trust, ensures quality, and reassures districts that providers are committed to delivering results.

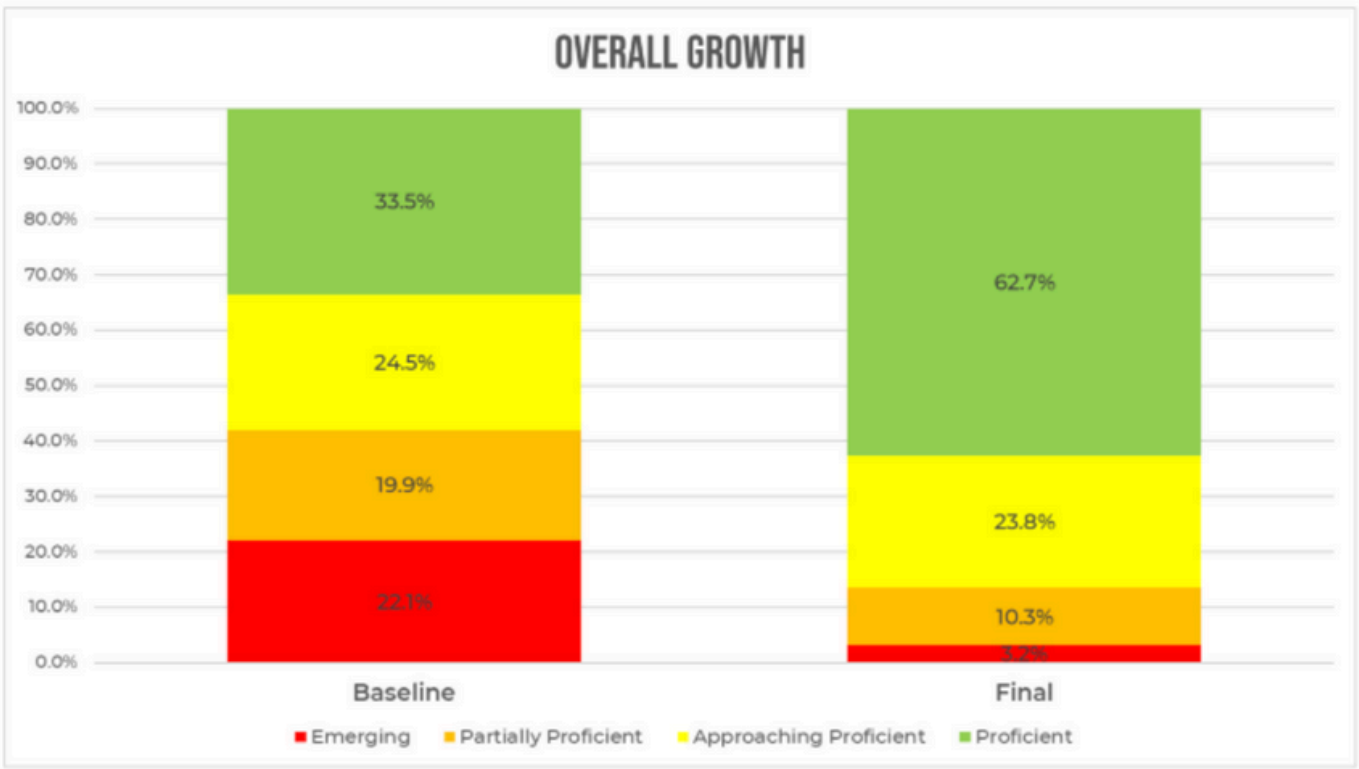


- A substantial part of payment to a service provider is contingent on meeting agreed upon student outcomes.
- OBC ties academic impact to public dollars, giving districts a framework to understand cost effectiveness.
- Districts and providers identify and commit to clearly defined outcomes and associated responsibilities.
- Districts set the price, building in provider incentive for quality and innovation in service of outcomes.



Case Study: Structured Success in HIT Programs

Figure 1



The Ohio Statewide Tutoring Initiative serves as a model of how structured, high-impact tutoring can achieve substantial outcomes. With a dedicated 4-to-1 student-to-tutor ratio and frequent in-school sessions, the program design prioritizes engagement and personalized support. Data from the initiative revealed that students participating in the program showed an average improvement of 18% in math proficiency and 15% in literacy proficiency over the course of the academic year.

This program’s success has also been reflected in broader outcomes, such as increased student confidence and higher participation in classroom activities. One participating district reported that students who regularly attended the tutoring sessions were 25% more likely to meet grade-level benchmarks compared to their peers who did not receive additional support. These outcomes highlight the importance of consistent monitoring, well-structured sessions, and dedicated resources in achieving measurable progress.

The initiative’s success has inspired other states to explore similar tutoring models, underscoring the potential of HIT to transform student outcomes when supported by appropriate resources and accountability structures. By demonstrating that large-scale programs can drive meaningful improvements in academic achievement, the Ohio program reinforces the value of high-dosage tutoring as a long-term solution for learning recovery.

## What's Not Working? Challenges in Scaling Tutoring

Despite the successes of high-dosage tutoring (HIT) and other structured models, scaling these programs to serve larger student populations introduces significant challenges. Research highlights that the effectiveness of tutoring programs can diminish as they expand, particularly when consistent quality and engagement become difficult to maintain. While smaller, targeted programs have demonstrated high impact, logistical and quality control issues often arise when tutoring initiatives scale to serve thousands of students. For example, studies suggest that programs serving more than 1,000 students may see a reduction in standardized test score improvements of up to 50%.

This reduction stems from several factors, including challenges in maintaining tutor quality, increased administrative oversight, and the complexity of managing diverse student groups with varying needs. Effective scaling requires balancing resources and customizing implementations to address the unique priorities of each school or district. Even when backed by substantial evidence or case studies, cookie-cutter approaches rarely work across different contexts. Success depends on developing thoughtful, collaborative implementation plans tailored to local needs, such as whether tutoring occurs during the school day, before or after school, or in hybrid formats.

Scaling challenges are magnified for large districts with tens of thousands of students. For instance, if 5-10% of a district's population is significantly below grade level, enrolling all of those students in a high-dosage tutoring program may not be feasible without straining resources or jeopardizing outcomes. Additionally, programs designed as part of an MTSS framework must consider the long-term role of tutoring. High-dosage tutoring supports student progress within MTSS but is not a quick-fix solution; removing students from tutoring prematurely can lead to regression, underscoring the importance of maintaining sustained support over time.

To mitigate these challenges, providers like Cognition have developed strategies designed to support scalability without compromising quality. For example, robust tutor training and continuous professional development ensure tutors are equipped to address the diverse needs of students in large-scale programs. Data-driven systems provide real-time insights into student progress and tutor performance, enabling timely adjustments that keep programs on track. Additionally, flexible delivery models—such as a mix of virtual and in-person tutoring—allow districts to tailor programs to their specific logistical and resource constraints. By implementing these approaches, districts can create scalable solutions that maintain the high standards necessary for student success.

## Equity Gaps and Access to Tutoring

Addressing persistent equity gaps is one of the most pressing issues in scaling tutoring. Students most in need of academic support—including those from lower-income families and those performing significantly below grade level—often face the highest unmet demand. A survey by 50CAN found that students with mostly Ds and Fs reported five times the unmet need for tutoring compared to higher-performing peers. These disparities are exacerbated by socioeconomic barriers that prevent many lower-income families from accessing consistent tutoring services.

Virtual tutoring has helped reduce some geographic barriers, but significant challenges remain. For example, ongoing legal disputes over equitable internet access highlight how critical resources like broadband are essential for supporting virtual models. Districts that previously relied on ESSER funding to address these gaps are now facing funding shortfalls, raising concerns about how underserved students will continue to access these essential resources. Without sustainable funding models, equity gaps will likely persist, leaving many students behind.

Efforts to address these barriers have shown promise in some areas. For instance:

- **District Initiatives:** Several districts have partnered with local governments to provide subsidized or free internet access for students in need, ensuring virtual tutoring programs remain viable options.
- **Nonprofit Support:** Organizations like EveryoneOn have worked to close the digital divide by providing affordable technology and broadband access to underserved communities, enabling more students to participate in virtual learning.
- **Cognition's Role:** Cognition has tackled equity challenges by offering flexible program models that align with district needs, including virtual tutoring options designed to reach students in rural or underserved areas. Additionally, by leveraging data-driven insights, Cognition helps districts identify students needing support and tailor programs accordingly.

These examples demonstrate that addressing equity gaps requires a multi-pronged approach involving collaboration between districts, nonprofit organizations, and tutoring providers. By implementing sustainable strategies, schools and districts can reduce disparities and ensure all students have access to the academic support they need to succeed.



## ***Resource Limitations and Staffing Challenges***

Staffing remains one of the most significant hurdles to scaling tutoring programs effectively. Nearly 20% of educators leave the profession annually, a trend that makes finding and retaining qualified tutors increasingly difficult (RAND Corporation, 2024). In-person tutoring programs are particularly vulnerable, as they rely on paraprofessionals and other support staff, who may lack the specialized training required for high-dosage tutoring.

Remote tutoring models, like Cognition's, offer a partial solution by enabling districts to connect with qualified tutors regardless of location. However, these models also require districts to address potential learning curves with technology while balancing the demand for in-person support. For districts with limited funding, prioritizing quality over quantity is essential. Working with a provider that emphasizes rigorous tutor vetting and training ensures programs maintain high standards, even as they scale.

## ***The Importance of Data and Continuous Improvement***

Data collection and analysis are critical for scaling tutoring programs effectively, yet many districts struggle to implement streamlined systems for managing and utilizing this information. Privacy concerns, technical limitations, and resource constraints hinder districts' ability to monitor progress and adapt strategies in real-time.

Scalable programs must embed robust data systems that support continuous improvement. This includes setting clear expectations for how data will be collected, shared, and acted upon. For example, regular assessment cycles and feedback mechanisms allow tutoring providers to identify areas for adjustment without adding excessive administrative burdens.

Clear communication with school staff is equally important. Teachers and administrators need access to actionable, digestible data highlighting key metrics without overwhelming them with irrelevant details. Effective collaboration ensures that tutoring programs remain adaptable and responsive, fostering long-term success.





## Key Insights from Data-Driven Tutoring Approaches

The role of data in tutoring has grown significantly, providing programs with the insights needed to tailor instruction, monitor effectiveness, and make informed adjustments. Today's most impactful tutoring models leverage data-driven practices to enhance program quality and student outcomes.

Programs that incorporate regular progress checks—such as bi-weekly reviews or assessments after each session—consistently demonstrate higher success rates in addressing learning gaps. These frequent evaluations help tutors identify areas of misunderstanding early, enabling targeted interventions that prevent students from falling further behind. When combined with AI-enhanced tools that monitor engagement, tutors gain granular insights into student performance, maximizing the effectiveness of each session.

Adequate data disaggregation provides a roadmap for allocating resources where they are most needed. By analyzing trends and performance data, programs can adjust their practices to reach underserved students and enhance the efficacy of large-scale initiatives. Monthly or quarterly data review cycles further empower educators and administrators to track outcomes, assess trends, and make evidence-based decisions. **13**

This collaborative approach to data is vital. Tutoring providers and school staff benefit from continuous analysis—not only to ensure adherence to contractual expectations, such as outcomes-based agreements, but also to inform internal improvements. Providers can use data to determine whether tutors require additional training, are ready to work with more challenging student groups, or can expand into new subject areas. For both schools and tutoring providers, ongoing data review is indispensable for guiding progress and optimizing outcomes.

## ***Building Trust Through Transparency and Accountability***

A key component of effective data-driven tutoring is transparency. Programs that openly share results—such as attendance rates and academic gains—with stakeholders build trust and establish accountability. **Survey data shows that 91% of parents report higher satisfaction with tutoring programs that provide regular updates on student progress compared to traditional interventions that lack transparency (50CAN, 2024).** This openness not only strengthens relationships with parents, educators, and policymakers but also reinforces the program’s commitment to achieving measurable outcomes.

## **The Road Ahead: Anticipated Trends and Developments**

Several trends are poised to shape tutoring's future as it solidifies its role in K-12 education. From increased investment in technology and innovation to a heightened focus on equity and accountability, the road ahead promises continued growth and refinement. These anticipated developments highlight the need for adaptable, evidence-based approaches to meeting the diverse needs of students and educational stakeholders.

In recent years, many educational companies that traditionally focused on supplemental learning—such as curriculum resources, professional development, or game-based learning—have introduced tutoring into their offerings. This shift, primarily driven by funding from the American Rescue Plan and other recovery initiatives, underscores the demand for programs that address learning loss. However, as funding sources diminish and competition intensifies, only a select number of tutoring providers will likely sustain their efforts long-term.

Programs that withstand these changes must demonstrate proven results, adapt to shifting educational priorities, and stand out amidst a crowded field. As public school enrollment declines in many areas and districts adjust to changing student populations, accessible, high-quality tutors and curriculum-aligned programs will remain critical. Virtual tutoring models, in particular, offer the flexibility to address geographic and staffing challenges, making them a key component of the future landscape.

## ***Navigating Uncertainty in Funding and Policy***

The next few years will likely bring significant shifts in education policy and funding. Changes in federal leadership, especially during transitions between political parties, can reshape priorities for programs like Title I. For example, discussions around reallocating Title I funding into block grants with less oversight may alter how districts budget for interventions. While such changes offer flexibility, they could also result in reduced funding levels, forcing schools to reevaluate their strategies for serving students most in need.

This uncertainty extends to the potential restructuring or even elimination of federal agencies like the Department of Education, which would have profound implications for education funding and policy oversight. In this evolving environment, districts will need to focus on securing grants, demonstrating the efficacy of existing programs, and identifying scalable solutions that meet both short- and long-term needs.

## ***A Continued Focus on Equity and Outcomes***

Despite these challenges, the focus on equitable access and measurable outcomes will remain central. Research consistently shows that students thrive when supported by educators who are invested in their success. Programs must prioritize hiring qualified tutors skilled in delivering effective lessons and committed to continuous learning and adaptation.

As programs evolve, the expectation for clear and demonstrable outcomes will grow. Administrators will increasingly scrutinize data to identify interventions that yield results and those that do not, reallocating resources accordingly. Tutoring providers must rise to meet this demand, offering evidence of success, maintaining transparency with stakeholders, and ensuring their services remain adaptable to the ever-changing educational landscape.



## Conclusion

The future of tutoring lies in a commitment to continuous improvement through programs that combine innovative technology with high-quality human instruction. Data-driven approaches, such as frequent progress monitoring and outcomes-based contracting, enable programs to effectively track their impact and adapt to meet students' unique needs. Equally critical is an unwavering focus on equity—ensuring that tutoring services remain accessible to students from all backgrounds and addressing the higher unmet demand often seen among underserved communities.

As emphasized throughout, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to tutoring. School and district leaders must carefully evaluate available programs to determine the best fit for their specific needs. Whether implementing in-house tutoring with district staff, partnering with an external in-person provider, or leveraging virtual solutions, it is vital to prioritize approaches that align with long-term student success. Virtual tutoring, in particular, plays a critical role in preparing students for a future where technology and collaboration are integral to personal and professional success. Building students' confidence in using virtual tools, working in group settings, and problem-solving collaboratively are foundational 21st-century skills that extend far beyond the classroom.

Administrators should evaluate potential tutoring providers by seeking partners who share their vision for student achievement. Providers must not only deliver results but also demonstrate a genuine investment in the success of the students, schools, and districts they serve. The most effective providers understand the challenges educators face because many have experienced those challenges firsthand. They are committed to addressing key areas of recovery and ensuring that students receive the support they need to succeed academically and beyond.

School and district leaders can build partnerships that foster trust, empower staff, and create meaningful, measurable student outcomes by researching and selecting programs that meet their unique needs. With the right approach, tutoring will continue to be a transformative force in education, helping students thrive in the classroom and beyond.



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## Who is Cognition?

Cognition delivers high-impact K-12 tutoring, led by experienced educators who produce **proven, repeatable results** in student success. Our research-based approach focuses on data-informed instruction and collaborative learning, encouraging **student-to-student interaction** to **build deep conceptual understanding**.

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