Scaling High-impact tutoring: School Level Perspectives on Implementation Challenges and Strategies

Alvin Makori
University of Southern California

Patricia Burch
University of Southern California

Susanna Loeb
Stanford University

High-impact tutoring has emerged as a primary school district investment for addressing learning loss that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. While existing research shows that high-impact tutoring is effective for accelerating student learning, this study examined the school-level facilitators and barriers to scaling high-impact tutoring. Situated in an urban traditional school district and an urban charter management organization, we collected survey and interview data from teachers and administrators to identify scaling challenges. Major barriers to scaling included time and space constraints, tutor supply and quality, updated data systems, and school level costs, while a key facilitator was teacher buy-in. We end the paper with recommendations for how districts can strategically grow their high-impact tutoring efforts.

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and Strategies

Alvin Makori[1], Patricia Burch[2], and Susanna Loeb[3]

[1] Research Assistant, USC EdPolicy Hub, University of Southern California

[2] USC EdPolicy Hub, University of Southern California

[3] National Student Support Accelerator, Stanford University

Background

High-impact tutoring is defined as personalized instruction led by a qualified tutor multiple times a week, with each session lasting 45 minutes to an hour. Ideally, high-impact tutoring is integrated into the school day so that students who do not attend after-school programs can benefit from it, and it is designed to supplement students' regular curriculum, as opposed to remediation, separate from coursework. With districts and states receiving federal relief funds from Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER), high-impact tutoring has become a primary investment for addressing learning loss that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly two-thirds of large urban districts have used ESSER funding to increase tutoring programming, while greater than one in five named tutoring as an ESSER expenditure (Dusseault & Pillow, 2021).

Research shows that high-impact tutoring is unusually effective for accelerating student learning compared to other interventions that have been tested, and it is effective across grade and content areas. A recent meta-analysis found that this approach yields consistent and positive learning impacts for students (Nickow et al., 2020). While policymakers at the federal, state, and district levels are making significant investments in expanding high-impact tutoring, we have much to learn about the school-level facilitators and barriers to scaling high-impact tutoring (White et al., 2023; Groom-Thomas et al., 2023).

This study identifies key successes, challenges, and lessons learned from high-impact tutoring programs implemented in two learning education agencies (LEAs), one a traditional school district (TSD) and one a charter management organization (CMO), located in different regions of the United States, during the 2021-2022 school year. We selected these two sites as settings with centralized support and policies to implement high-impact tutoring. We drew on

administrative data compiled by the LEAs, as well as school staff interviews and survey data, to address the following research questions:

1. What barriers and facilitators to high-impact tutoring program's implementation at the school level do school-level staff identify?

2. What major challenges to scaling up high-impact tutoring practices and what promising strategies to address these challenges do school-level staff identify?

3. How do these barriers, facilitators, challenges and strategies vary by local context and between a CMO and a TSD?

Study Design

The one-year study was part of a larger multi-year study on the implementation and effects of high impact tutoring across nine districts conducted by the National Student Support Accelerator Project (White et al., 2023). That study collected a relatively small amount of interview data and no survey data with the participating districts, while this study does a deep dive in two districts. Our goal was to provide key stakeholders with real-time, actionable data on how to scale high impact tutoring in ways that attended to school context and capacity.

Using a sequential mixed methods research design (qualitative and quantitative), we collected survey data on the beliefs and attitudes of school level staff related to the implementation and impacts of tutoring. We gave survey participants the option of participating in a one-hour follow-up interview to better understand the role of school context in findings and to confirm and add nuance to broad patterns identified through descriptive analysis of survey data. We asked questions related to tutoring eligibility, schedule and time constraints, tutor relationships with the teachers and students, curriculum alignment between the classroom and intervention, and considerations toward scaling up. We surveyed 349 teachers and 263

administrators and interviewed four classroom teachers and 13 administrators across the winter and spring of 2022-23 (see Table 1).

Table 1: Survey and Interview Participation by Role Group and Site

SURVEY DATA		
Setting	Classroom Teachers	Administrators
Traditional School District	248	244
Charter Management Organization	101	19

INTERVIEW DATA		
Setting	Classroom Teachers	Administrators
Traditional School District	2	10
Charter	2	3

Program Design

The study was situated in a TSD and CMO, which, as described in the following sections, yielded differences in school type, student demographics, and state policy factors. To preserve anonymity, we sketch the demographics of each program setting in broad strokes.

Traditional School District

Located in the southeast region of the United States, the TSD is a large urban district with Black students making up the largest race demographic, forming a majority-minority student population when combined with the district's strong Latino representation. As of the 2022-23 school year, nearly half of the students in the TSD were classified as coming from an economically disadvantaged background.

After piloting the program in early 2021, the TSD launched its high-impact tutoring program during the 2021-22 school year, aiming to include 2,000 students in the intervention across grades 3-12. According to district documents, the TSD began its program by providing one to two tutors per school, with plans to scale up frequency and dosage over the course of the school year. The district, which created a tutoring department to oversee the program's growth,

reported that over 2,300 students participated in at least one session during the 2021-22 school year, with 93% of these students meeting with a tutor more than once during the year. According to the district, the average time over the course of the school year was 12 hours of tutoring and 17 sessions per participating student. Participating students in the intervention were more likely to be identified as an English learner, female, or Black, while they were less likely to be identified as White, Asian, or eligible for special education services.

Eligibility for the program was determined at the school-level, typically by identifying students who scored below the 20th percentile of a national measurement exam. In order to efficiently and rapidly recruit teachers, the district leveraged a partnership with a local university to train graduate students as tutors while they simultaneously earned college credit and financial compensation for their services. The school also extended its outreach to former district teachers.

The TSD's curriculum facilitator was largely responsible for the implementation of the high-impact tutoring program, assigning tutors to teachers while providing guidance to staff as needed. In contrast to the CMO (described below), the TSD was located in a state with no tutoring mandates, though the launch of the program was around the same time that the state governor called for schools across the state to return to in-person learning.

Charter Management Organization

The CMO in the study had a population of over 20,000 students at the time of data collection, with a majority Latino population alongside a significant Black population. As of the 2022-23 school year, over half of the students attending the CMO were classified as coming from an economically disadvantaged background. The CMO is nested in a major urban district in the southwest region of the United States that is home to over 140,000 students.

The CMO's home district initiated its tutoring program in fall of 2021, following the passage of a state law that requires schools to administer accelerated learning— at least 30 hours over the course of the school year— for each student who did not pass the state's standardized assessment. Contracting and other program start-up functions were led by the district, while decisions surrounding tutoring providers were decided at the individual school level. Using TutorTrack to collect data on when students attended tutoring sessions, the district reported that, while over 75,000 students in the district qualified for the intervention, less than 9,000 participated in high-impact tutoring over the course of the 2021-22 school year. The district attributed this participation rate to a short turnaround between the passage of the state bill and the onset of the 2021-22 school year. Within the CMO, almost half (46.58%) of the nearly 8,000 student population was eligible for high-impact tutoring, with three out of four (74.31%) eligible students receiving tutoring during the 2022-23 school year (Personal communication, December 19, 2023). The district recorded an average of 13 hours of tutoring per participating student, with English-language learners, students who identify as Hispanic or Latino, students who were eligible for special education services, and economically disadvantaged students being the most likely demographics to be eligible for tutoring. Though students who identify as Black appeared more likely to be eligible for the intervention, the district reported that Black students did not attend tutoring at higher rates than other demographics, whereas Hispanic/Latino students and English-language learners were the most likely to attend at least one tutoring session.

Findings

Our summary of main findings is as follows:

1. *Respondents reported widespread buy-in of high-impact tutoring, though they noted that it could be implemented more effectively including with improved tutor quality and updated data systems.*

Approximately one in three survey respondents in both settings reported that they would recommend the program to another school, while approximately half of all teachers surveyed in both sites reported that they would identify the program to other teachers. Survey participants generally did not view teacher buy in for the intervention as a challenge or priority. For example, in the CMO, just one in ten surveyed administrators viewed teacher buy-in for tutoring as a challenge, while only 1% of surveyed TSD administrators identified the same.

While identifying the intervention as promising, school level staff also stated clear priorities for improvement., including tutor quality. When asked how often tutoring sessions tended to focus on the most critical skills that students need, almost one in five CMO teachers responded "almost never", while more than one in four CMO administrators responded with "once in a while" or "sometimes". TSD respondents expressed similar concerns. Survey respondents highlighted concerns in the following areas: classroom management, helping to identify specific areas where students needed assistance, and building strong relationships with students and families. These issues were slightly more prominent in the CMO than in the TSD.

In both settings, survey respondents identified the need for better data systems for identifying students most in need of tutoring and for assessing program impact. This need was further reflected in interviews, where multiple respondents cited the need for additional staff to manage the data surrounding tutoring eligibility and program implementation, as well as seeking improved central office and school communication to coordinate program responses. One TSD principal envisioned hiring a lead tutor who could use program feedback to "manage the

flexibility and the data", particularly toward "trying to figure out the master schedule" so that students avoided missing core classes.

2. *Space and time constraints within schools posed significant barriers to scale in both the TDS and the CMO. Schools improvised workarounds— such as pulling students out of classrooms into hallways and small spaces— that diluted the quality of the intervention for students. Respondents reported having a champion for tutoring within the school helped to overcome the barriers and deliver tutoring even when it was difficult.*

At both sites, physical space constraints were seen as a barrier to scaling up high impact tutoring. For example, In the TSD, 30% of administrators indicated "more physical space allotted for tutoring activities" as an important challenge. In the CMO, 54% of surveyed administrators said the same. Teachers in both sites similarly identified lack of adequate space as a barrier to scaling tutoring. Working in an already confined environment, respondents described having to get creative in order to figure out where to hold tutoring sessions. A few schools converted empty school spaces into makeshift tutoring centers, while one school used white board dividers in the hallways. In interviews, respondents indicated that successful scaling would necessitate additional space as opposed to repurposing existing space. One TSD curriculum facilitator lamented that the tutors did not receive a designated tutoring space during the school year, resulting in tutoring sessions taking place "in every nook and cranny in [the school] building."

School level staff also identified scheduling constraints as a challenge toward scaling up high-impact tutoring. In the TSD, approximately 40% of teachers and 23% of administrators indicated "more time during the school day for tutoring activities" as a challenge at their school In the CMO, approximately 50% of surveyed teachers and 21% of surveyed administrators reported the same. In interviews, tutors reported being unable to pull students out of classrooms

during mandatory core instructional periods. This severely limited tutoring time in the context of what numerous respondents noted was a short school day. In the TSD, schools tried to offset these scheduling challenges with tutoring outside of the school day. However, transportation logistics became the driver of failed before-or-after-school tutoring initiatives, primarily due to a nationwide bus driver shortage and budget limitations on transportation. Meanwhile, many teachers at both school settings advocated for a push-in tutoring method, where tutors enter the teacher's classroom and help their designated students during normal instructional periods, creating a mix of push-in and pull-out tutors in the charter network.

While these constraints reduced implementation quality, having a champion in the school to help overcome these barriers we key to providing the tutoring effectively. In both the CMO and TSD, approximately half of all teachers and administrators surveyed identified the program as having a school staff member who was a "champion" for the program at the school level. These champions tended to be formal teacher leaders such as curriculum coordinators and grade level leads.

3. *The districts articulated clear eligibility requirements for which students should participate in high impact tutoring, including students with the lowest test scores and those on the cusp of proficiency benchmarks, but supplying enough tutors to include all students who could benefit remained a challenge.*

Employees in both the CMO and TSD stated that their schools relied on assessment data to determine eligible students for the intervention. This approach mirrored district communications— the TSD selected students on a "highest need" basis determined by performance on a national assessment, while the CMO's state required districts to provide "accelerated instruction" to all students who did not pass the state standardized assessment. CMO interviewees indicated two student populations as the primary targets for the intervention:

students who tested in the bottom 20% of subject proficiency in their grade, and "bubble students" on the cusp of reaching proficiency.

Despite the data showing that tutoring could benefit both groups of students, many teachers had to choose just one group to receive high-impact tutoring due to tutor constraints, leaving the non-tutored group in the classroom for the teacher to work with. Both the CMO and the TSD had varying teacher-level decisions on which group of students received the tutoring. A CMO math teacher said, "In non-tested subjects, it's the 'lowest kids' [who receive the intervention]. In tested subjects, it's the 'bubble kids' [who receive the intervention]." In the TSD, by school staff estimation, close to 10-20% of the school population participated in the intervention, while the CSD's intervention served 15-30% of the population. Levels of participation differed by subgroup. Students who attended high-impact tutoring were more likely to be identified as an English learner, female, or Black/African American. Conversely, students who attended tutoring were *less* likely to be identified as eligible for special education services, White or Asian. These differences were statistically significant.

Within the group of participating students, students attending more than ten tutoring sessions differed from students attending fewer than ten sessions. Specifically, Black or African American students and students eligible for special education services were 8% less likely to attend ten or more tutoring sessions than non-Black and non-special education students. White and multi-racial students were 12 and 11 percent more likely to attend ten or more sessions respectively. English learner status, gender, and other ethnicities had no significant differences in the likelihood of attending ten or more tutoring sessions (National Student Support Accelerator, personal communication, October 24, 2023).

4.   *Even with central office support, school level costs to implement tutoring remained*

considerable.

The school-level costs of scaling tutoring were complex and significant for both the district and charter network. They included *personnel* efforts across school staff, including teachers, support staff, administrators, aides, and curriculum supervisors, among others. They also included *facilities costs* such as designated classroom space, shared spaces for regular and small group instruction, adequate lighting in areas (such as rooms) repurposed for instruction, maintenance, and cleaning of spaces designated for tutoring. One curriculum facilitator noted that her school's tutors were "supposed to have… a trailer village of our own. That hasn't materialized yet." There also were *equipment and materials* costs such as having adequate desks, chairs, white boards, curricular materials, computers, and books that are essential for small group instruction, including the tools' ability to increase privacy. As one TSD principal stated, "I'm trying to find whiteboard dividers where I can build halls in the hallways [for tutoring sessions]. Tutors [currently] set up in the alcoves… as soon as lunch and recess start, it's very distracting." Other school level inputs included "donated time" from curricular coordinators to analyze and interpret data to better identify eligible students, identify skill foci for tutoring, and assess program impact on student learning. A TSD principal stated that she was currently advocating for the hiring of a lead tutor to be in charge of the "full-time job" of "managing the data and the flexibility" that is currently being tasked to the school's curriculum facilitator. To implement high-impact tutoring in the traditional school district, the work of curriculum coordinators was redefined such that a significant amount of time was spent on organizing tutors' schedules.

Implications

High-impact tutoring has emerged as a promising strategy for addressing lost learning opportunities linked to the pandemic and structural inequalities. Thinking about high-impact

tutoring as a single type of program risks glossing over context dependent challenges faced by districts and schools implementing high-impact tutoring in their classrooms.

District-level decisions and resources play an important role in the successful implementation of high-impact tutoring in schools, but school-level decisions and resources are equally important. The role of centralized support is key in recruitment and initial hiring of tutors and establishing data systems to track student progress. Schools determine many aspects of the program including, among others, the location of tutoring, the intensity of the intervention, and which eligible students receive tutoring.

Central office policies may also require investments and adjustments at the school level, some of which are challenging and may not be sustainable. Tutors and administrators made compromises to the tutoring intervention, for example, using cramped spaces under staircases as instructional settings. These creative workarounds serve as just in time solutions; however, if normed over time, they undercut the very principles (targeted high quality supplemental instruction provided as part of a shared curriculum) that makes tutoring effective.

We identify practical steps that both school and central office/CMO staff can take to navigate these challenges. Districts and charter networks alike can build capacity for these decisions at the school level by:

1. Investing in permanent designated tutoring spaces. Schools should also consider bringing tutors inside the classroom when scheduling does not allow for pulling the students out of instruction.

2. Hiring a lead tutor coordinator to manage program master scheduling. If high-impact tutoring during the school day is infeasible, districts should establish adequate transportation for intervention before or after school.

3. Creating and managing partnerships with external institutions (e.g. colleges or universities) to establish a well-trained supply of tutors. Re-staffing retired district teachers as school tutors, who have experience building relationships with students and are acclimated to the school culture.

4. Investing in data systems that support record keeping and data analysis to identify eligible students and track progress. Assigning a lead tutor coordinator to manage data analysis and tutor training.

These decisions grant school staff the flexibility to build capacity by:

1. Creating a designated and appropriate space for tutoring where students have privacy and the requisite materials on hand to learn.

2. Ensuring adequate time for tutoring during the school day so that students can receive the intervention without missing core classroom instruction.

3. Hiring additional tutors to supply high impact tutoring to all eligible students.

4. Prioritizing data-driven decisions on which students are eligible for the intervention, particularly populations who face the largest academic opportunity gaps, while giving discretion to the teachers as to which groups of students to prioritize.

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