# Getting Real About **Tutoring**

Research–informed options for navigating barriers to moving from ESSER plans to real implementation

Many districts have bet big on tutoring as a key investment in their ESSER plans as a way to rapidly accelerate students' learning. And for good reason — research shows that effective tutoring programs have a high ROI and can move the needle quickly on student outcomes. But like most initiatives, tutoring programs aren't necessarily a "golden ticket" and require careful planning and implementation — which have begun to feel more and more challenging for many of our district partners recently, in light of widespread burnout and needing to "put out fires" elsewhere in their systems.

**In this moment, it's important to not let perfect be the enemy of good.** What districts are able to do right now may not match what they would like to do under ideal circumstances or what they hope to do longer-term. But being deliberate about the starting point, measuring success, and adjusting along the way will enable continuous improvement over time. It's also helpful to explore ways to "shrink the change" as much as possible right now — by building on existing bright spots and offering time-strapped school leaders concrete staffing examples and scheduling models so that they don't need to develop their tutoring programs from scratch.

To support these efforts, we recently convened our ESSER Strategy Network (a cross-district learning community), along with tutoring researcher and expert, Professor Matthew Kraft, to talk about some of the biggest barriers districts are facing right now around designing and implementing a tutoring strategy. Together, we also discussed what we can learn from research and from creative practice about how to navigate these obstacles, including where to prioritize design and implementation efforts.

Table #1

## Tutoring Program Design: What the Research Says

*Informed by Education Resource Strategies, EdResearch for Recovery, and discussions with Matthew Kraft*

| Component of Plan | Research–Backed Considerations *Design elements backed by strong evidence* | Context–Dependent Considerations *Design elements that need to be adapted based on context* |
|---|---|---|
| **Students & Subjects** | • Target tutoring to align with district priorities. The best results from research are seen in **early elementary literacy and high school math**, but tutoring is a flexible model that could likely be applied in many areas. | • Concentrate on **clusters of students** (such as a single grade level, classroom, or school building) if you start with a pilot or if you can't find enough tutors to serve all students. This can help avoid stigmatizing the few students who receive tutoring. |
| **Scheduling** | • Schedule sessions **2-3 times per week, for 30-60 minutes** each time.<br>• Maintain **group sizes** of 1-4 students per group, with a lower ratio for less-experienced tutors.<br>• Think critically about what students would have been doing if not in tutoring, to minimize **lost opportunities** for learning. | • Prioritize **in-person tutoring** when possible — early research suggests that the best results tend to come from in-person tutoring. Research about online tutoring is still emerging, but is likely to suggest it is more effective than no tutoring if the model holds tight to other research-backed considerations.<br>• Ensure that any after-school tutoring is operated with seamless **logistics** (such as transition time and transportation) and a **strong culture** that mirrors the school-day experience. |
| **Curriculum & Materials** | • Use **highly-scaffolded**, standards-aligned materials.<br>• Encourage a **dual focus** that includes both mentoring/relationship building *and* academic support. | • Align tutoring to **classroom pacing and content** to mitigate challenges around coordinating with teaching staff. |

Table #1 / **Tutoring Program Design:** What the Research Says >> *Continued*

| Component of Plan | Research–Backed Considerations<br>*Design elements backed by strong evidence* | Context–Dependent Considerations<br>*Design elements that need to be adapted based on context* |
|---|---|---|
| **Tutor Profile** | • Use **certified teachers** who are shown to be most effective, particularly for larger tutoring groups of 3-4 students.<br><br>• Ensure that tutor-student **relationship building** is an essential element of all tutors' skillset. | • Adopt a **portfolio approach to hiring** tutoring staff by leveraging available combinations from a variety of sources and adapting expectations for what the tutoring relationship looks like based on skillset.<br><br>• Consider **student-to-student tutoring operations**, such as high school students tutoring middle- or elementary-aged students.<br><br>• Incorporate **pre-existing district staff** creatively, including central office, food service, paraprofessionals, and student teachers. |
| **Training & Support** | • Provide **differentiated training** and support to match tutors' skill level. | • Ensure that program managers coordinate and lead professional development and **feedback sessions** with tutors. |
| **Program Management** | • Ensure that district leadership carefully checks for both **fidelity to design principles and impact**.<br><br>• Start with a smaller, highly-effective program and grow it **over time**. | • Consider outsourcing coordination of the program to **district partnerships**, as managing a broad portfolio of tutoring providers can be challenging for district staff. |
| **Sustainability** | N/A | • Consider framing the program as part of an **instructional shift to personalized learning** (vs. a short-term response to acute pandemic-driven needs). |

Table #2

# Adapting Tutoring Program Designs for the New Reality: Research–Informed Options

For ESSER spending, scheduling, and staffing blueprints on tutoring — as well as related strategies, such as small group instruction and relationship building — explore our *Schools Start Here* series of guides.

Metro Nashville Public Schools is one example of a district that is making progress navigating the common challenges that many districts are facing right now. This video shares more about what their current work around tutoring programs looks like, including how they are implementing a portfolio approach and training their tutors.

If you have ideas, stories, artifacts, or additional resources to help districts and schools plan and implement effective tutoring programs in the face of current obstacles, please send them our way!

| Common Challenges | Pitfalls to Avoid | What the Research Says | Examples of What to do Instead |
|---|---|---|---|
| **"But all students need extra support right now."** | ✖ Choosing solutions that enable 24/7 access to academic help. | ✔ Create tutor-student relationship consistency, for a minimum of 9-10 weeks, meeting at least 3 times per week for at least 30 minutes each time. | • Embed **relationship building and whole-child supports** into the curriculum for tutoring.<br>• Start smaller (with however much scale you can generate), focusing on the **highest-priority students and schools** and holding tight to group size maximums. Then, **either scale up (if possible) or rotate** after a 9-10 week period. |
| | ✖ Increasing group sizes or decreasing frequency to maximize coverage. | ✔ Stick to group sizes of 1-2 students for non-certified staff and 3-4 students for certified staff. | • Target one grade level or even just one classroom at a time to create a new **vision for personalized instruction** and to avoid stigmatizing just a few students across multiple classrooms who are chosen for extra tutoring. |

Table #2 / **Adapting Tutoring Program Designs for the New Reality:** Research-Informed Options >> *Continued*

| Common Challenges | Pitfalls to Avoid | What the Research Says | Examples of What to do Instead |
|---|---|---|---|
| **"I have so many open teaching positions I can't fill — I'm not going to be able to find enough *tutors*."** | ❌ Lowering tutor reliability and quality by over-relying on volunteers. | ✓ Emphasize consistency and duration of tutoring responsibilities, and pay stipends accordingly. Ensure there is enough management capacity to organize tutoring relationships and maintain ongoing engagement. | • Adopt a **portfolio approach to hiring** tutoring staff by leveraging available combinations from a variety of sources and adapting expectations for what the tutoring relationship looks like based on skillset. Potential sources include: <br>   • Americorps <br>   • College students getting service credit or through federal work study <br>   • Online providers that guarantee consistent relationships <br>   • Students fulfilling credit or volunteer hours, such as JROTC or Honors Society <br>   • Retired teachers <br>   • Existing staff, including paraprofessionals, central office, personnel, food service workers, and others <br><br> • Consider using an **outside partnership to manage the portfolio** of tutors and hiring sources. |
| **"We are trying to do many things right now for our students — this is just one more thing competing for attention."** | ❌ Pulling students out of core instruction or other important learning opportunities to receive tutoring. <br><br> ❌ Setting up a tutoring program that takes place after school without buy-in from families. | ✓ Build tutoring into the school day or, if tutoring takes place after school, create an extended school day culture so that it is taken seriously. | • Develop **school schedules** that integrate tutoring into existing Tier 2 instruction time, intervention blocks, and advisory; or extend the day to create a new dedicated tutoring block. <br><br> • Invest in **program outreach** and coordination between tutors and families. |

Table #2 / **Adapting Tutoring Program Designs for the New Reality:** Research–Informed Options >> *Continued*

| Common Challenges | Pitfalls to Avoid | What the Research Says | Examples of What to do Instead |
|---|---|---|---|
| **"Our teachers, leaders, and central office staff are already stretched to capacity — they can't take this on too."** | ✕<br><br>Relying on tutor curricular materials that require coordination with teachers. | N/A | • Provide dedicated time for teachers to help make **tutor-teacher partnerships** successful, or leverage **curricular materials** for tutoring that don't depend on coordination (such as Khan Academy). |
| | ✕<br><br>Scheduling after-school tutoring without designing for transportation, smooth transitions, or sufficient culture building. | | • For after-school tutoring programs, invest in transportation, smooth transitions, and creating buy-in to build **a strong culture that mirrors the culture of the regular school day**. |