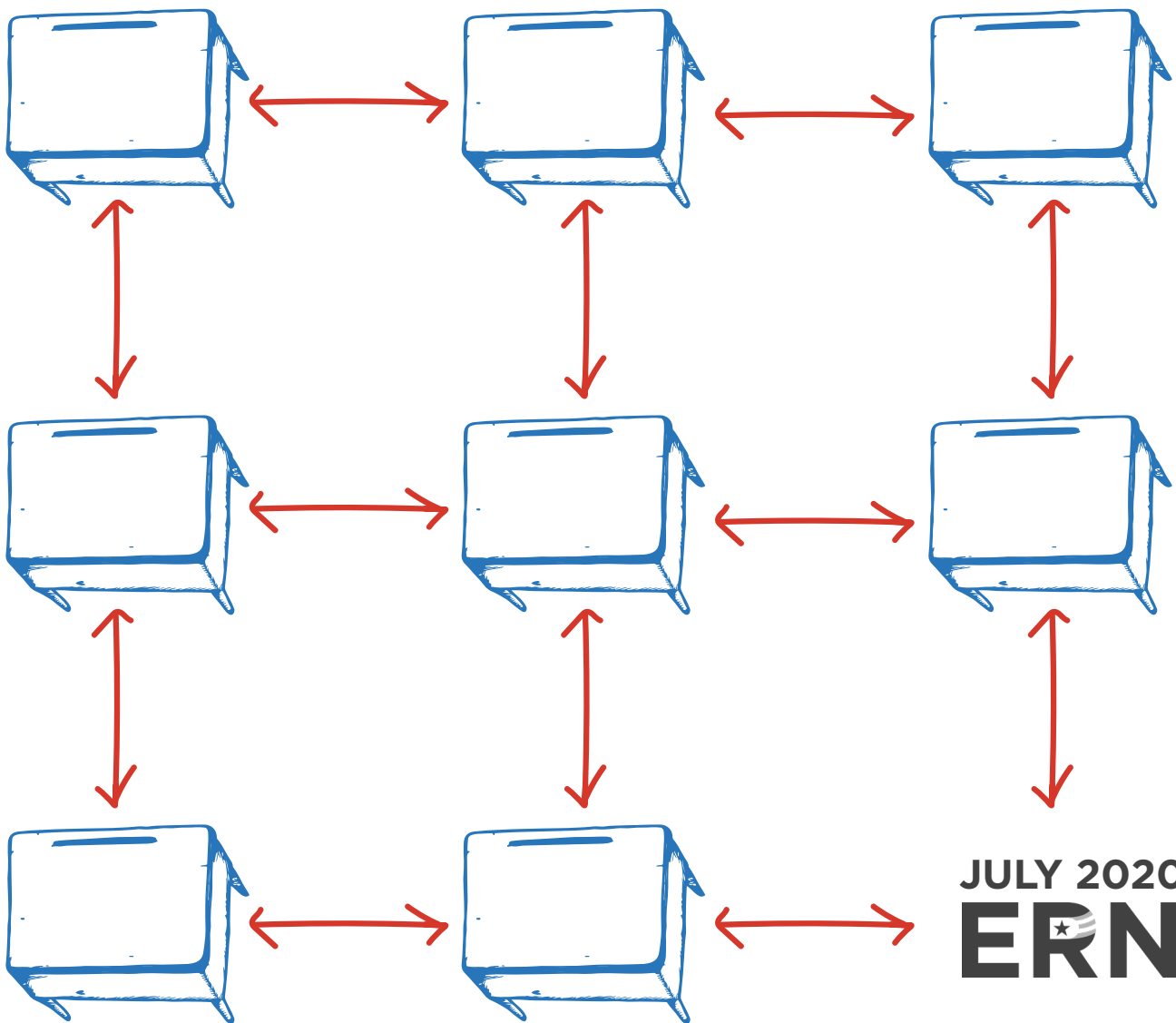


# COVID-19 RESPONSE: High Dosage Tutoring to Accelerate Student Learning

*By Nicholas Munyan-Penney and Charles Barone*



There is virtually universal agreement that distance learning in general—and distance learning as it was conducted last spring in particular—are woefully inadequate for realizing learning gains, especially for students from historically disadvantaged groups. Many, if not most, school districts will begin the 2020-21 school year with either 100% distance learning or a hybrid approach with both in-school and at-home components. Regardless of which path states and districts choose, as the 2020-21 school year begins, policymakers must find bold and creative ways to address ever-widening gaps in opportunity, something we've seen too little of since schools began closing in March.

The Washington Post recently reported that [affluent families are hiring private teachers and tutors](#) to offer one-on-one or small group instruction. Similarly, the New York Times covered the growing popularity of these “[pandemic pods](#)” and pointed out, rightly that because “pods can be pricey, complicated to organize and self-selecting, they are likely to be most popular among families of privilege...and may worsen educational inequality.”

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**Affluent families are hiring private teachers and tutors to offer one-on-one or small group instruction this fall. Our public education system should provide similar modes of personalized instruction to students whose parents cannot afford it—especially those most negatively impacted by closures.**

In a previous brief, we advocated for the use of statewide diagnostic assessments to inform instructional decisions in the fall. We believe **high-dosage tutoring (HDT) is** a natural companion to these assessments, as **a way to provide personalized academic intervention that allows students to accelerate student learning and more quickly access grade-level content** after months out of the classroom.

While the overall body of research surrounding tutoring shows few measurable academic benefits, recent studies of **high-dose tutoring programs show clear, positive results, particularly for the lowest-achieving students.** Successful tutoring programs share some key commonalities, which likely lead to their strong results. These programs:

- 1) Offer daily instruction**, for an extended period, so students receive consistent instruction;
- 2) Provide each student the same tutor throughout the year** to bolster consistency and continuity and build rapport.
- 3) Occur during the regular school day**, rather than after school, to ensure strong and consistent attendance. HDT could potentially also be used as a part of distance learning, though no current research we are aware of examines the impact of remote tutoring.
- 4) Consist of small groups of no more than 2-3 students**, so students receive individualized instruction.

HDT programs also place a heavy emphasis on student wellbeing, which is particularly important given the increased focus on social-emotional learning both in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the elevation of racial justice concerns. Tutors are near-peers who are able to build strong mentor relationships with students and offer increased social support, both of which provide a stronger foundation for learning, help build students' confidence, and increase their ability to access and concentrate on academic content.

A randomized controlled trial—the gold standard for research—of a HDT program in Chicago Public Schools found that participants in groups of two gained an [additional one to two years of math](#)—on top of what they learned in the classroom—compared to nonparticipants. Similarly, a study of a tutoring program in a Boston charter school was found to produce the equivalent of an [additional year of learning in English language arts \(ELA\)](#), with students working with tutors both individually and in groups of two to four. And a recent [post](#) from the Fordham Institute cites research that high dosage tutoring programs results in stronger outcomes than other academic interventions in both math and ELA.

However, a recent [study](#) of HDT in New York City that used only groups of four students found no statistically significant impact on achievement, suggesting that fewer students may be a key to success. Tutors can, of course, be assigned to more students as long as they meet at separate times.

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### *HDT and School Reopening*

The body of research on high-dose tutoring, while helpful for creating a basic framework for new programs, obviously doesn't reflect the current realities of schooling in the era of COVID-19. We realize that some of the above components of successful HDT programs may need to be adapted to COVID-19 learning circumstances, particularly when students are not engaged in full-time, in person instruction. However, that does not preclude the possibility of creating successful programs in the coming school year and adapting what we know works to current conditions. In some ways, various reopening scenarios may actually be well suited for implementing HDT.

**First**, districts will likely have a larger pool of potential tutors than they would during a typical year. Recent college graduates are entering an [extremely weak job market](#); and record numbers of students are planning on [changing their plans for the fall](#), including going part-time, deferring until the spring, or taking a gap year. As a result, new programs may have the **ability to be selective, creating a highly-qualified group of tutors.**

**Second, tutors could provide critical additional learning time for students.** States such as [Maryland](#) and [Louisiana](#) are encouraging districts to consider adding instructional time to the regular school day. However, efforts to do so may be stymied by teacher contracts that have strict limits on the length of the school day. Designating this additional time to be used for HDT could be a way to avoid further burdening teachers and contentious negotiations while still providing students with needed additional instruction. In districts using exclusively distance learning, tutoring could also allow time in the existing school day to be used more effectively, with students meeting with tutors when class isn't in session.

**Finally, HDT could be incorporated into various hybrid or full-time distance learning schedules.** For districts planning on very limited in-person instruction, tutoring groups are small enough to comply with even the strictest social distancing measures and allow in-person learning while limiting the potential exposure of students and staff. Conversely, small tutoring groups of one to three students could more easily be scheduled for synchronous online learning than working to accommodate an entire class. Districts using alternating schedules could also have tutors and students meet in-person some days and online

others. However, districts should be cautious of using tutors only on distant days or vice versa, since best practice dictates HDT should occur daily.

### **Potential Roadblocks**

The largest obstacle to implementing HDT this fall is likely its cost. Current high-quality programs [cost approximately](#) \$3,000-4,000 per student participant, even when tutors are paid modest AmeriCorps stipends. However, states or districts could use federal funds to pay for the tutors, either through Title I, the CARES Act, or the “Phase 4” COVID relief funding bill currently being debated in Congress. Additionally, districts can determine the scale of programs based on their budgetary limitations.

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The other main challenge for districts interested in creating a HDT program is simply the time required to implement a high-quality program. With the impending start of the 2020-21 school year—for most students, in August or September—districts will need significant capacity in order to devote resources to program development at a time when leaders are already overwhelmed with various other aspects of reopening schools. To ease this burden, districts could potentially leverage AmeriCorps' recruitment infrastructure. Existing programs such as [SAGA Education](#), [City Year](#), and [Tennessee Tutoring Corps](#) could also license their training materials or create versions that could be shared freely to districts, rather than having districts across the country duplicating efforts.

Educators face an unprecedented challenge when the school year begins. Many students had limited access to learning opportunities in the spring, particularly those from historically disadvantaged groups. High-dosage tutoring is a tool for accelerating student learning and increasing access to grade-level content. While implementation challenges exist, HDT is well-suited to adjust to the complexity of the coming school year and has the potential to improve both academic achievement and student social-emotional well-being.