

# Tutoring as a Student Catch-up Strategy, Episode 312

Tuesday, Feb. 7, 2023

## Speakers:

- **Kavitha Cardoza**, EWA Radio
- **Jill Barshay**, The Hechinger Report

## Keywords:

tutoring, students, education, studies, research, schools, jill, researchers, pandemic, noticing, catch, reporters, child, lesson plans, company, chat, review, talking, greek letters, learning

---

### **Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio** 00:00

The Collaborative for Students Success is crisscrossing the country on the Route K12 Exploring Education Recovery podcast to showcase how federal recovery funds are reshaping schools. Join Collaborative Director Jim Cowen as education commissioners, K12 reporters and advocates share how historic funding is accelerating learning and meeting the diverse needs of students. Catch up at [EduRecoveryHub.org](https://EduRecoveryHub.org) or wherever you listen to your favorite podcasts.

### **Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio** 00:43

This is EWARadio, the podcast at the Education Writers Association. I'm public editor and your host Kavitha Cardoza. I'm thrilled to talk to Jill Barshay, a senior writer with The Hechinger Report. She's the author of the weekly column "Proof Points," about education, research and data, covering topics from early education to higher education. In 2019, Jill received the American Educational Research Association's award for Excellence in Media Reporting on education research. She has recently been focused on tutoring, looking at how successful it is at helping students regain lost academic ground. Jill, welcome to EWARadio.

### **Jill Barshay, The Hechinger Report** 01:27

Kavitha, thank you for having me.

### **Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio** 01:30

So, tutoring has come up a lot recently, Jill, as a way to catch children up after months of disruptive learning during the pandemic. Are most states or school districts using some form of tutoring?

### **Jill Barshay, The Hechinger Report** 01:45

The answer is yes. We hear that most states and school districts are using some form of tutoring and the keywords there are "some form." They really range a lot. Some schools have some sort of after-school homework help, others have drop-in online homework help. And others are really investing

in tutoring during the school day -- adding a tutoring class where students can have tutoring every single day.

**Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 02:15**

How much money are we talking about? So, I know billions of dollars is being spent on these catch-up efforts in general for students. What portion of the pie is tutoring?

**Jill Barshay, The Hechinger Report 02:29**

We don't know yet. I keep asking that exact same question. All we know is that schools are supposed to use 20% of their federal money, which is \$122 billion dollar. "B," billion. And they're supposed to use 20% of it on catch-up strategies to help kids in math and reading and other subjects. But that could be anything -- that could be summer school, that could be after-school, that could be new curriculum. And we don't know how much is going to tutoring.

**Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 03:01**

So, I should say, Jill, I had a tutor for Hindi for years. I'm awful at languages. And even with tutoring, I barely scraped by. And, so, I'm kind of curious about what the research says.

**Jill Barshay, The Hechinger Report 03:18**

I became interested in tutoring beginning in 2018 because I was looking at rigorous research on what helps kids who are well behind grade-level catch up. Because the truth is: We don't we don't really have good ways of helping kids catch up. If you look at national statistics, only a third of U.S. children are proficient on grade level in reading or math -- sort of an average. And you know, most kids are way behind. And, so, I'm always interested in interventions that help. And, back in 2018, there was a researcher at Johns Hopkins who was noticing that certain kinds of tutoring was getting enormous benefits. I mean, like effect sizes that you never see. And he equated it to five months of extra learning during the course of a year so that a student who was, say, one year behind grade level could completely catch up in less than two years.

**Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 04:16**

Wow.

**Jill Barshay, The Hechinger Report 04:17**

But, it's a very specific kind of tutoring that he was noticing. And I should also say that these are really rigorous research studies like drug trials where you randomly assign students to get this kind of tutoring. And what it is, is it's every day, and it's a set curriculum or set lessons and the tutors have lots and lots of training and so they know what they're doing. They know how to assess what the child or the student's deficiencies or weaknesses are. And the lessons are tailored exactly to what the student needs to know. And there's a lot of practice and a lot of repetition and this is where we see the very strong results. It's not after-school homework help. It's not volunteers. It's paraprofessionals, or, you know, very well-trained educators, sometimes certified teachers -- this is where we are seeing strong results. So, in 2018 was when I started to notice this and it wasn't about pandemic catching up. And then later when the pandemic hit, this research kept popping into my head. I thought, well, can this be used for pandemic catch up? Because we all knew that kids were behind when schools were closed.

And then in the summer of 2020, so just a few months after the pandemic came in, there was a breathtaking review of 96 randomized controlled trials of tutoring. So this is the highest quality research. And again, they were noticing phenomenal gains for students -- like an effect size of over 0.3, which is unheard of in education. Those researchers said it was the equivalent of lifting kids from average from the 50th percentile to the 66th percentile in a very short time period. So, you know, we rarely have magic bullets in education. But this just seemed really amazing. And I wanted to keep writing about this research and share it with the public.

**Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 06:21**

I'm so glad you did. Because I did not know about how big the gains could be. And as education reporters, we don't often have a ton of positive stories to share. So, this is great. You've talked about this particular kind of tutoring. What are most school districts and schools doing?

**Jill Barshay, The Hechinger Report 06:43**

So, the short answer is we don't have good surveys yet of exactly what schools are doing. So, I can't tell you X-percent of schools are doing this kind and X-percent are doing this kind. All we know is that more than 50% of schools say they're doing some kind of tutoring. Anecdotally, I am hearing that not many schools are able to launch these high-dosage tutoring programs that have done well in the research. It is so hard for them. They have to reschedule the school day, add daily tutoring sessions. They have to hire tutors, train tutors, create lesson plans or contract with an organization that knows how to do these tailored lesson plans.

They have to find space in the school. I mean, it is a whole new operation and principals, superintendents, they have so much else on their plate. Starting these new tutoring operations is just not in the cards for many of them. And, so, what a lot of them are doing is that they're contracting with either established outside tutoring companies or very new outside tutoring companies. And several of these are very, very far away from what the research shows. But they're marketing themselves as offering this kind of tutoring. Sometimes, this efficacious tutoring is called "high-dosage" or "high-impact" tutoring. And what you see on the websites of all these tutoring companies that have grown and gotten lots and lots of contracts from all over the country, is they're marketing themselves with the same language that's in the research literature and say, "We are offering high-dosage tutoring." But what it actually is a sort of drop-in tutoring. It may be available 24/7 and you can log in whenever you want. But it's not scheduled. It's not during the school day. There are no clear lesson plans, and they're not working on specific things to help kids catch up.

**Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 08:43**

So this is mostly online, then?

**Jill Barshay, The Hechinger Report 08:47**

Correct. It's so much easier for schools not to create space for tutoring and have all these new adults come in person. So, it's much, much easier to have students log in, and especially if the students are logging in from home and they don't even have to worry about the computers.

**Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 09:02**

Is it kind of like a Zoom meeting? Or is it like a chat box?

**Jill Barshay, The Hechinger Report 09:07**

So, it really ranges. There are some online companies that are doing Zoom meetings and some are trying to replicate the kind of tutoring that has worked in research studies with good lesson plans. And some actually have certified teachers and I'm hearing about some very good results from them. But then there's also -- and I think it might be more common -- this chat-tutoring where, imagine that you're online with GAP and you want to do a return instead of calling them or going into the store, you do an online chat. You've probably been there where it takes a while for "John" to come help you when you might have a couple of minutes in between each text for him to respond. Well, this is what a lot of the online tutoring is like.

There's a company called Paper, which might be the largest online tutoring company serving schools right now. I'm not quite confident of that. And it does a chat session with students. And it's homework help. And, so, students log on when they want to. Most students never ever log on. The students who try it, most of them never log on again. And, it can be kind of slow and sluggish while you're waiting for a chat answer. And it's really hard for young kids who are still learning to read and write to even chat well. Very recently, this month, or last month, the company announced a new voice service. And I'm not quite sure how it works. I think you record your voice and send it, but I need to test it.

**Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 09:08**

It seems to me that online tutoring would have all the same challenges as like virtual learning, right? I mean, technology may not work, you know, kids won't log on. Children get distracted. I mean, there are just a host of reasons why virtual learning with teachers didn't work during the pandemic.

**Jill Barshay, The Hechinger Report 10:45**

That is true. You'll have all the tech troubles. But I can also see why virtual tutoring could be more effective than remote instruction. Because if you're working one-on-one with a tutor, and it's very active learning where you're trying something and immediately getting feedback, and there's a back and forth, just the way you and I are talking right now, you could imagine much more engagement rather than having to sit there patiently on mute.

**Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 11:36**

But a lot of the online tutors are not doing one-on-one tutoring, are they?

**Jill Barshay, The Hechinger Report 11:42**

So, some are. I really don't want to lump everything together. I mean, theoretically, even Paper, which is doing this chat tutoring, primarily, a tutor is working one-on-one with a student from that student's perspective. The tutor might be tutoring seven students simultaneously in seven different chats. But from the student's perspective, he or she has a question about his multiplication homework and that questions being directly answered. So it's one-on-one on that level.

**Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 12:18**

What did you find, Jill, while reporting on these tutors? Like, who are they? How are they getting paid? Why are they doing this?

**Jill Barshay, The Hechinger Report 12:27**

I interviewed one tutor from Paper, this very large company that's doing the drop-in, 24/7 Homework Help. And this was a young man, 23 years old, who started tutoring while he was in college as a part-time job. I think he started in about \$16 an hour. And he stayed with it after graduation because it was kind of a gap year for him applying to grad school. And this was a nice, easy, well, not easy, but convenient part-time job that he could do from home. But what I learned in talking with him is that the sessions can be quite exhausting. It's quite a mind-bender to be simultaneously chatting with, you know, three different people on three different subjects. So, he might be dealing with one student on French verb conjugations, who, say, in eighth grade, he might be dealing with a history student in high school, and then maybe working on English Language Arts with a fifth grader and toggling between all three of them simultaneously is sort of a lot to keep track up and it's hard.

**Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 13:36**

It sounds like a nightmare.

**Jill Barshay, The Hechinger Report 13:39**

He's actually switched a lot to a service that the company has called Essay Review, which sounds like a lovely service of a student and it has a draft of an essay, they can upload it. And then, I think, within a day or so get feedback on the essay. But from the tutor's perspective, he is supposed to review these essays very quickly. So a 500-word essay has to be reviewed in less than a half hour. He has to make a paragraph of macro-comments, about strengths and weaknesses. And then notice five issues on each page and he can't simply edit it and correct it like you and I would do with if you filed me something and there was a mistake. It's very quick to just fix a capitalization. It all has to be done through the Socratic method. And so these comments have to be done in the form of a question to help guide the student to the answer. And so it is an enormous amount of pressured work for these tutors to have to accomplish and it sounds like their brains are a bit fried after a four hour work session.

**Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 14:44**

How are they vetted? You know, with teachers we have like all these different ways we know like if a teacher is a teacher. How are tutors vetted?

**Jill Barshay, The Hechinger Report 14:55**

Well, each tutoring company has their own process. I mean, there are companies like Tutored By Teachers where you have to be a certified teacher to be part of their cadre. With Paper, they say they have a very rigorous process. They only take people who already have bachelor's degrees or are in their senior year of a bachelor's program. So, the tutor I talked to, he was originally hired, you know, in the spring of a senior year, and he already had experience tutoring. That's another thing that company says is they have to have had prior tutoring or teaching experience. But, you know, it's very hard, especially in this tight job market to hire tutors, and every company has its own standards.

**Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 15:38**

And I'm assuming that the tutors aren't working with the same group of children, right? It's, like, whoever needs help at that moment?

**Jill Barshay, The Hechinger Report 15:49**

Well, if we're talking about this 24/7 On Demand drop-in tutoring, right. The student is helped when he or she drops in. But then there are other tutoring programs where it is scheduled, and you have to log in at a set time every day or three times a week, and you are seeing the same tutor. So, it really depends upon the company or the organization.

**Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 16:14**

There's so much money involved. And that always makes me nervous. How are school districts or school administrators, like, actually checking to see like, does this help? Are there, kind of, benchmarks like children's academic scores need to go up? Or, how how do we know it's working?

**Jill Barshay, The Hechinger Report 16:37**

I think each district is deciding how much to track and monitor this. I am aware of one study out in California, a charter school network used Paper, this on-demand tutoring service. And it had researchers look at all the data and monitor what was happening. And they noticed that there was very low take-up. I'm trying to remember the figures, I think it was less than... far less than 20%. And the researchers even tried to nudge and text the families to use the service more. And even with all the nudges, it didn't get very high. And, so, they noticed that use was just very, very low. It was largely unused. With that study, they didn't track how the students were doing academically. But you can imagine if you're not using it, it's probably not going to help very much.

**Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 17:29**

Right, right. I'm curious all this talk about research, Jill. How did you get interested in research and specifically education research?

**Jill Barshay, The Hechinger Report 17:40**

I used to be a business and economics reporter. And one of my sweet spots in that coverage was covering research because I had studied economics in grad school. And also I had taken a lot of statistics and data analysis classes, and I've run regressions and things like that myself. So it's a little bit like my comparative advantage as a journalist, that I can read lots of Greek letters and understand what they're saying. And it was sort of a way to distinguish myself. And I knew that there were really good stories buried in these Greek letters, if you could just translate them into English. And, so, then, a little over a decade ago, when I switched from financial reporting to education reporting, I had a very young daughter at the time, and I just wasn't in a position to run around with a tape recorder in the rain. I needed to be home more. And research is a really convenient thing to do from home because I can read articles online or get them PDFs sent to me and then interview the researchers by phone.

**Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 18:49**

I just have like 10 more questions after that. (laughter). So, for those of us without a master's degree in business and economics, where do you find high-quality studies? Like what are some of your go-to places?

**Jill Barshay, The Hechinger Report 19:06**

I have a bias towards economists, I will admit that and so I really like checking the National Bureau of Economic Research. There's been a huge transformation in the field of economics, where they're not just doing research on money supply and corporate finance. But there is a whole group of economists that study education. And I really liked the rigor of their studies. They tend to have control groups and good methodology and so I like to monitor the working papers there. But also word-of-mouth is helpful. It's just like old shoe leather reporting as you start to find researchers that you like in certain areas, whether it's early childhood education, or maths or reading, I asked these people "Well, who do you read?" And you start looking at reviews and syntheses. And I keep lists of researchers on various topics.

**Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 20:06**

Do you have any tips for journalists who would like to incorporate more research into their reporting that they kind of nervous?

**Jill Barshay, The Hechinger Report 20:14**

I highly recommend that whatever topic you're doing, look for a meta-analysis. That's META and again, analysis, sometimes hyphenated, sometimes not. These are such important studies because it's so easy to find a one-off study that shows a benefit here, and then a one-off study that doesn't. I love these studies that summarize all the research on a topic, because then you can say where the preponderance of the evidence lies. And I just, I want to encourage myself and my colleagues to write about meta-analyses and research reviews more than we write about individual studies.

**Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 20:55**

Where basically researchers -- tell me if I've got this right -- where, basically, researchers have looked at, kind of like the tutoring, all the research done in that area that is rigorous. And then they've tried to see well, with all the drawbacks, and with all the challenges, and with all the findings, what is the, kind of, sum outcome?

**Jill Barshay, The Hechinger Report 21:19**

Right. They, sort of, average things together, but they average it in very technical ways, so that they weight different studies appropriately, because you don't want to equate one study with 10 kids with another study with 2,000 kids, right? So, they have statistical ways of weighting things properly. And, I should also let my colleagues know that not all the studies in every meta-analysis are well done and rigorous. I've seen meta-analyses of really crappy studies, like whatever you throw in the kitchen sink, and then mush together. You know, that's what pops, you know, you'll get some summary of it that pops out. And so it is worth looking at the underlying studies and if they are randomized control trials, if they have control groups. Because one of the problems in education is that every intervention can seem to work if all you do is test a child, give the intervention, and test the child again after because all kids are always learning. Like, you're, you know, if you do nothing, a child's reading ability will probably be better a year from now than it is today. And so you could say, "Oh, nothing works," right? So, you always you always need a control group, a comparison group to see how the child would have done otherwise without that intervention.

**Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 22:37**

Do you have any ideas for reporters who want to cover tutoring, specifically?

**Jill Barshay, The Hechinger Report 22:44**

I would highly recommend that they see what tutoring is offered in their district in-person and virtual, and to talk to students and families that are using this tutoring and to see what their experiences are. I would love more stories from the student perspective.

**Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 23:05**

This was just so helpful and so interesting, Jill, thank you very much for making the time to speak with us.

**Jill Barshay, The Hechinger Report 23:12**

Thank you. It's helpful for me to consolidate my thoughts as well. So, I'm grateful to be here.

**Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 23:18**

We've been talking with Jill Barshay, senior writer at The Hechinger Report. You can follow her on Twitter at @JillBarshay. And, while you're at it, sign up for her newsletter, "Proof Points." That wraps up this episode of EWARadio. I'm Kavitha Cardoza. Do you have any questions for Jill? Let's continue the conversation on Twitter at @EdWriters. And if you have stories about how tutoring is playing out in your state or district, please share them at #TellEWA.

Special thanks to Angelina Liu and Kristan Obeng from EWA and Raul Garcia for production assistance. The mission of the Education Writers Association is to strengthen the community of education journalists and improve the quality of education coverage. For more than 75 years, EWA has helped reporters get the story right. Thanks for listening and lifting up education journalism. The Collaborative for Student Success is crisscrossing the country on the Route K-12: Exploring Education Recovery podcast to showcase how federal recovery funds are reshaping schools. Joint Collaborative Director Jim Cowen as education commissioners, k-12 reporters and advocates show how historic funding is accelerating learning and meeting the diverse needs of students. Catch up at EduRecoveryHub.org or wherever you listen to your favorite podcast.