

LIFE

‘Helping move the needle’

High-dosage guidance can aid in kids recovering from pandemic learning loss. Tutoring Chicago is a free program stepping up to help.

By Darcel Rockett
Chicago Tribune

Like many parents, South Shore mom Benita Mills saw how the lockdown part of the pandemic set her daughter Kris’ Tina behind — academically, socially and emotionally. When Kris’ Tina was doing remote schooling, Mills found herself watching YouTube to learn how to do the math her daughter was learning so she’d be able to help with her homework. “To get through an assignment, it would take us an hour or two,” Benita recalled of her now fifth grade daughter.

Then in late 2020 she discovered Tutoring Chicago, a 58-year-old nonprofit whose mission is to offer free one-on-one tutoring and social-emotional programming to first through 10th grade students, in person or virtually. “I’ve had her in various tutoring programs, but the one that worked and is the best is Tutoring Chicago,” Mills said. “You have one on one, undivided tutoring; they work with the student’s teachers, so the teachers can also tell tutors where there’s a need, what they need practice on, and then the tutor and child build a relationship, (the tutor) learns the kid’s personality and is working with them, teaching them. My daughter went from a C, D student to an A, B student.”

Kimberly Rocha, a high school English teacher living in the Tri-Taylor area, could relate to Mills’ situation. Her son, Elijah, was below grade level with reading and math four years ago.

“Me spending additional time with him with homework, his teacher Kevin Piehl at Mitchell Elementary doing pull outs with him, and Tutoring Chicago — these three factors have made him increase significantly,” Rocha said.

Now an eighth grader, Elijah is at grade level in reading and doing math at an 11th grade level. Rocha chalks that up to the connection her son has with his one-on-one tutor at Tutoring Chicago, a young person who talks sports and really got to know Elijah. It was perfect timing as far as Rocha is concerned because she is starting the process for her son to apply to Chicago Public Schools’ selective enrollment high schools, either Whitney M. Young Magnet High School or Westinghouse College Prep.

Elijah said he and his tutor have a connection and his tutor knows how to explain things to him that others really don’t. “He’s super kind and thoughtful and really helped me with school and as a person,” Elijah said.

Families like the Millses and Rochas are not outliers given the impact the pandemic had on education. CPS CEO Pedro Martinez said recent data shows improvement in the average Illinois Assessment of Readiness scores, the state’s federally mandated measurement of students’ mastery of Illinois Learning Standards in English language arts and math for grades three through eight in public school districts. It indicates some rebound from pandemic learning loss, but not enough to match levels prior to 2020. And the disparities that continue in math and literacy for low-income students and students of color indicate that more support is needed.

“Research is pointing to the fact that students are not on track to catch up to where they would have been before the pandemic,” said Sonia Lal, Naperville resident and founder of education consulting practice Ivy League Potential, which has been providing tutoring and educational services since 2011. “The learning loss from the pandemic ... we haven’t recovered from it, but we have found that high-dosage tutoring is very effective in helping to reverse pandemic learning loss.”

High-dosage tutoring is intensive tutoring where educators meet with students at least three times a week during the school day for a minimum of 30 minutes — either one-on-one or in small groups. Lal said her business created a new division to conduct high-dosage tutoring virtually called Common Ground Tutors. She said high-dosage tutoring is more effective than tutoring done after school or once a week.



Clifton Clarke works with fourth grade student Jeremy Ampadu at Tutoring Chicago on Oct. 3. Volunteers like Clarke, who is a pulmonologist at Advocate Illinois Masonic Medical Center, help educate youths with Tutoring Chicago. VINCENT D. JOHNSON/FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE



Kris’ Tina Mills works on math homework with her tutor during a session in the West Loop on Sept. 26. TRENT SPRAGUE/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

“A lot of schools have programs for after-school tutoring, but a lot of kids are not able to stay for that,” Lal said. “Research is finding if you do tutoring during the school day, students’ attendance is better, engagement is better. And that’s where you see the real difference in helping to recover from the pandemic, but research is showing that less than 10% of students get intensive tutoring. There’s a teacher shortage and schools are struggling to find tutors. There is hope, but how to implement that at scale is turning out to be a major challenge.”

Tutoring Chicago has been doing this kind of tutoring Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays virtually and in person at facilities on the city’s West, North and South sides from 6 to 7:30 p.m., according to Executive Director Sandy Marek. The nonprofit offers a number of tutoring programs: one for first through fifth graders centered on social-emotional learning, mathematics, accountability, reading and technology; another focused on literacy intervention for first through fifth graders; and programs for middle schoolers and high schoolers transitioning to their next educational environments.

“We’ve got over 1,100 kids that we’re supporting,” Marek said. “About half do digital and half are in person. One-to-one tutoring helps everybody. There’s such a need and that was one of the reasons we opened the South Side location.”

Tutoring Chicago Program Director Ravi Shah said the nonprofit is serving students from nearly 300 schools throughout Chicagoland with the help of program managers, part-time site coordinators and volunteers. Whereas certified teachers help educate kids for Common Ground, volunteers help educate youths with Tutoring Chicago — volunteers like South Side resident Clifton Clarke, a pulmonologist and chief medical officer at

Advocate Illinois Masonic Medical Center; Lucia Stumbras, a Barrington resident and sales and marketing firm employee; and Gil Fitzpatrick, a Winnetka resident working in a financial services firm’s investment management division.

Tutoring Chicago trains its volunteers on its curriculum and the volunteers tend to stay for years, often with the same student. The tutors know their students, work with the school curriculum and get input from parents. Tutors will throw a football around in the hallway, draw or play a game with their students in between doing work during their session. Tutors give back, students are enriched and both parties get something positive out of the experience. That’s their secret sauce, Marek said.

“The one-on-one, it’s relationship building, which ultimately translates to customized learning based on the needs of the students and the curriculum,” she said. “We do focus on families that couldn’t otherwise afford tutoring.”

Shah said students and tutors stay together for years, building mentorship and another support system.

“When parents and guardians are looking for an opportunity to continue that enhancement for their student’s educational experience, whether that is coming from a deficit where they are behind in reading or math, or if it’s a continued check-in with another adult who is able to provide them with examples of success or so that they feel confident going into school the next week — we include all of it,” Shah said. “It’s an ongoing assessment of what their needs are and the tutor is told to be open to whatever it is that their student needs to really make that tailored experience for the student.”

Laura Reber, founder and CEO of Chicago Home Tutor, said the efficacy of tutoring is just as much about the skills of the tutor as the

tutor-student relationship, building trust, and feeling a sense of safety to be able to make mistakes and have that be a learning experience.

Her staff of certified teachers, reading specialists, learning behavior specialists and general education teachers has been helping students and families figure out what the new normal looks like. Her firm’s clientele is up about 10% this year over 2022.

“During the first two years of the pandemic, we felt surviving was enough for a while, but now some of the high stakes feel like they’re coming back — admissions, testing,” Reber said. “We have to get back beyond survival again and that’s a path that parents are trying to navigate, especially if their child did have a more dramatic response to the pandemic. It’s normal that some kids are going to need extra help ... don’t hesitate to seek out that help. Even if it’s just once or twice a week, if it is what you can afford, I think that individualized help goes a long way.”

When students know there’s a caring adult, that makes a huge difference in their academics, Lal said. “The way that we have structured our lessons is we support what the teachers are teaching at school,” she said. “So we use the curriculum that teachers are using but we add social-emotional learning. That helps to build their overall well-being because we all have gone through trauma, and we all need that kind of healing relationship. Education really should be healing.”

A number of tutoring groups have partnered with CPS to help with math and literacy. CPS has allocated at least \$10 million in funding for Tutor Corps for the fiscal year 2024 budget. University of Chicago Education Lab is helping CPS with research, implementation and improvement of the Tutor Corps program, established during the 2021-22 school year. For the current school year, the program is in 229 schools,

providing high-dosage tutoring with the support of more than 600 tutors as of Sept. 1. During the 2022-23 school year, the Tutor Corps program provided at least one tutoring session to 10,000 students in 232 CPS schools.

“The district has made a lot of great efforts with the Tutoring Corps that they’ve developed,” said Katie Welsh, principal at Mitchell Elementary School, which Elijah Rocha attends. “We have to look to organizations like Tutoring Chicago or Chicago Public Library’s offering tutoring at our branch, not far from our school. There’s local churches that have some tutoring. I think what it comes down to is cost; tutoring is very expensive. So to know that we have this quality tutoring option (Tutoring Chicago) that we can refer families to is really helpful.”

Piehl, the special education teacher at Mitchell, said it’s been pretty cool to see Elijah grow academically over the past five years.

“Now he’s enrolled in two math classes. So he’s currently in our standard eighth grade math class. But he’s also in an advanced algebra class that he’s taking in addition, and I think a lot of that has to do with the time that he’s put in with his tutor,” Piehl said of Elijah, who wants to possibly become a computer engineer. “He’s had that tutor since fourth grade. There is a cumulative exam at the end of the year where he will be able to test out of Algebra 1 for high school and start a little more advanced math courses.”

Mills said Kris’ Tina went from being an average student to being on the honor roll since starting with Tutoring Chicago.

“I used to have to sit at the table with her and help her with all her homework assignments. When she got to Tutoring Chicago, all of a sudden she was like, ‘Mom, I don’t need you to help me. I understand,’” Mills said. “Once she started getting tutored, she had a concept, she understood, she was finishing her homework on her own and faster. It was her doing her assignment fully and saying, ‘Mom, can you check my assignment, see if I did it right?’ She completed it on her own.”

Adem Aluka, founder and executive director of the nonprofit Youth For a Better Future, said now is the time for people to help support groups like his who are ensuring youths have options. He said it’s necessary to drive the movement forward with more volunteers, funding and spaces in which to do the work.

“A lot of kids fell behind and everybody’s getting recalibrated,” he said. “We need support. We need spaces. We need mentors. We need volunteers. We need finances to be able to hire and create a system ... to provide support for those that are younger, all the way up to working professionals. We need people who are capable and willing and committed to helping move the needle.”

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