

TUTORING CASE STUDY

Denver Public Schools

Denver Public Schools (DPS) piloted a district tutoring initiative in October 2021, as students returned to schools en masse after a year and a half of pandemic-disrupted learning. We spoke with **Angelin Thompson**, the newly appointed Director of Extended Academic Learning, who's overseeing this initiative; she reported that it's been rolled out with strong commitment and oversight on the part of district leaders; has generated an enthusiastic response in schools; and is poised to expand dramatically this year. Below, we summarize DPS's approach to tutoring, as well as their learning journey in year one of the initiative.

DPS by the Numbers

TOTAL POPULATION



89,081
students



207
schools

% OF STUDENTS WHO ARE ENGLISH LEARNERS



36%

RACIAL & ETHNIC MAKEUP



- 52% Hispanic
- 25% White
- 14% Black
- 9% Other

FUNDING PER STUDENT



\$16,849

% OF STUDENTS WITH FREE AND REDUCED MEALS



67%

Tutoring Program Overview

The Vitals



Model

High-dosage. (3+ sessions per week, at least 30 minutes per session)



Program Type

Administered by **2 external partners, Cognition and University Instructors.** The district also has a more ad hoc, after-school tutoring program that predates the formal initiative; but Thompson's goal is to phase out school-based tutoring "pockets" in favor of a more equitable, district-wide approach.



Student Group(s) Prioritized

The program **explicitly targets students of color, English learners, students with disabilities, and those most adversely affected by the pandemic.** Teachers play a key role in identifying students to participate.



Grades Served & Subjects Covered

In the pilot year, Cognition provided **math tutoring for grades 4-12.** The following year, University Instructors provided **early literacy tutoring for all elementary grades and math tutoring for K-3.** During the pilot, the program served 1069 students in 19 schools. Participation is set to expand in years two and three, with at least 1500 students participating in 2022-23, and at least 1800 in 2023-24.



Session Timing

Both math and early literacy tutoring sessions take place **during the school day.** Math is 3 sessions per week; early literacy is 3 to 5 times a week.



Delivery Method

Math tutoring via Cognition is **virtual, one-on-one;** early literacy tutoring via University Instructors is **in-person, in small groups.** Tutors work from the **adopted grade-level curriculum,** and/or they may bring in **supplemental materials** as well. The district's sole requirement for such materials is that they be **research-based.** ("Nothing from Teachers Pay Teachers," Thompson noted.)

Program Journey

From Decision-Making to Outcomes-Monitoring



Deciding on Tutoring

DPS's decision to launch a tutoring program was a direct response to the academic setback of COVID. District leadership anticipated a wave of students in 2021-22 who were minimally or sporadically engaged with school throughout the acute pandemic — and they sought a coherent, research-based way to respond. With ESSER funds available to get the initiative off the ground, Thompson said, tutoring “just made sense.”



Setting Requirements

DPS had 3 core needs for a tutoring program: that it focus on grade-level content; that outcomes monitoring be rigorous and ongoing; and that the district “pay for success,” not just for the baseline existence of the program. Thompson spoke pointedly about the acceleration (vs. remediation) focus, and her adamance that tutoring time be spent not playing catch-up, but “giving kids exposure to grade-level content, just with the scaffolds that they need.” She also described outcomes-monitoring (more on this below) as a key feature; and finally, the importance to DPS – as laid out in their initial RFP for tutoring services – that contracts with providers be outcomes-based. As Thompson remarked, “vendors who believe in the product – they’ll do it.” With both Cognition and University Instructors, contracts are structured such that there is a base pay to cover cost, but DPS pays a higher rate if at least 75% of enrolled students achieve 1.5 years of growth during the year, and higher rate still for 2+ years of growth.



Implementing

Thompson's foundational "must" is sustained commitment of district leadership. As she said, "what we know is, nothing will work if you don't do it with fidelity." She is highly involved in implementation and results-focused, holding weekly progress meetings with both Cognition and University Instructors. More practically, she discussed the need to actively overcome logistics struggles at the beginning of the year. She further noted that, in response to district feedback, Cognition has supplied DPS with a dedicated staff member to monitor tutoring on the ground (at no additional cost), and that her office regularly solicits teacher input on tutoring as well. DPS keeps in-house staff "eyes" trained on implementation, and their input is invaluable to district leaders.



Monitoring Outcomes

In addition to progress-monitoring that Cognition and University Instructors provide, DPS has its own, multi-layered system in place to measure tutoring effects. The providers, per their agreements with DPS, embed weekly assessments in tutoring sessions and report on results. In addition, DPS looks at student performance on district-wide benchmark assessments; and surveys school leaders, teachers, and students about how tutoring is influencing academic performance and student confidence. The district has already used formative data to course-correct on aspects of programming, but a more definitive "verdict" on the success of the pilot will come at the one-year mark, in October 2022, and will be leveraged to set a strategic direction for the upcoming year(s).

Thompson, for her part, sees a strong early indicator of success in the number of schools now reaching out to her, clamoring to participate. She expects DPS will have many more schools and students participating in 2022-23 than her team projected, and that they will expand their planned budgets and contracts with both providers. "And," she noted, "if we determine over these 3 years that this has been an effective strategy, it will not go away because federal funding goes away. We'll find other funds, and we'll keep the program."

“What would you do differently?”

Top Tips from DPS



STRESS TO SCHOOLS THE IMPORTANCE OF SCHEDULING TUTORING AT THE BEGINNING OF THE YEAR, AS PART OF THE MASTER SCHEDULE.

When tutoring was carefully scheduled within the school day, occurring during predictable periods each week, it worked much better for everyone involved.



CONSIDER THE DOWNSIDES OF TAKING “FUN” TIMES AWAY FROM OLDER STUDENTS.

Middle and high school students struggled to engage in tutoring when they were missing elective classes, lunch, PE, etc. – as Thompson put it, “time when they’re typically social creatures.” Tutoring for this age group likely works better in a dedicated period that’s academic for everyone – rather than as a replacement for the diversion time and space that many of them look forward to.

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