

For poorest pupils, access to tutoring

Reform law starts boom in low-income tutoring

By Laura Loh
Sun Staff

April 13, 2005

It's a cool spring evening in Edmondson Village, and children are playing outside Dontae Melton's house in the still-strong daylight.

The 11-year-old boy, however, is in his family's darkened living room, working by lamplight on a writing assignment under the supervision of a private tutor paid for by Baltimore's public schools.

"Structured activities are what he needs, if I'm going to win this battle against the streets," says his mother, Eleshiea Goode, who is raising two children on her own and worries that Dontae could lose interest in school and succumb to bad influences in their West Baltimore neighborhood.

Dontae is one of a growing number of children whose school experiences have been changed by a less-publicized provision of the No Child Left Behind Act that has made free private tutoring a routine part of life for a growing number of low-income families.

Now in its third year, the federal law has proved to be a boon for the tutoring industry, which is taking advantage of an estimated \$2 billion in federal poverty grants that school districts have set aside to help children in failing schools.

At the same time, parents who never dreamed of being able to afford tutors now talk about letting their children stay after school for "Sylvan" - a well-known tutoring firm - or juggling schedules suddenly made busier with sessions of private academic help.

Although research on the effectiveness of tutoring is scarce, the number of needy children in the country receiving after-school tutoring under the federal law nearly doubled last year to 218,000.

"Middle-class parents, in greater and greater numbers, are spending their money to send children to these after-school programs," said Michael J. Petrilli, a senior official at the U.S. Department of Education. "We think it's important that low-income families have these same opportunities."

Tutoring has become more popular among parents than the No Child Left Behind's more widely publicized option for children who attend failing schools, which lets them transfer elsewhere. Local school officials say that's because many parents object to sending their children to schools far from home. Only about 1 percent of eligible pupils have taken

advantage of the transfer option, compared with 11 percent who are receiving tutoring, according to federal education officials.

In Maryland, the number of children receiving tutoring more than doubled from the previous school year to this year, to an estimated 5,800 pupils.

After a cool initial reception, more and more parents have begun to view free tutoring as a way for their children to get ahead, rather than as a service that labels their children as low achievers, said Jane Fleming, who oversees the tutoring services for the Maryland State Department of Education.

"I think the program is going to grow like this because parents are going to see the benefits," Fleming said.

Most of the pupils who are eligible for the free tutoring in Maryland live in Baltimore and Montgomery and Prince George's counties.

In Baltimore, where 20,000 youngsters are eligible in 58 failing schools, demand for free tutoring has outstripped supply. More than 7,000 city parents applied this school year, and 4,300 pupils were selected - all the school system could afford. The system limits tutoring to the financially neediest pupils with the lowest test scores.

Barbara R. Davidson, president of StandardsWork, a Washington education nonprofit, said word-of-mouth about tutoring and better outreach by schools are reasons that more parents are signing up for the service.

"For many parents in Baltimore, they're just at their wits' end," said Davidson, whose group used billboards around Baltimore last year to advertise the services failing schools must provide. "These companies, many of them have had a very successful track record, and in many cases they've been out of the reach of parents who have limited means."

To be eligible for tutoring, pupils must attend a school that has failed to meet state academic standards for at least three years in a row and be from a low-income family.

School systems in Maryland pay companies or nonprofits about \$1,800 for 40 to 60 hours of tutoring per pupil. The two dozen vendors approved by the state include such major companies as **Huntington Learning Center** and the Education Station, a Sylvan Partnership, as well as smaller groups, such as the student-run nonprofit Baltimore Algebra Project.

Free tutoring for city pupils focuses primarily on math or reading, beginning after Thanksgiving and ending in March, when youngsters take the Maryland School Assessments.

On a recent afternoon at William H. Lemmel Middle School, a tutoring session run by Huntington Learning hummed along as five tutors assigned practice problems to

small groups of pupils, explained new concepts and gave tests to determine who had mastered skills.

Georgina Whalen, a science teacher at the Northwest Baltimore school who moonlights as a tutor for Huntington, leaned over Alexis Faulcon's desk to help the 12-year-old girl with a math word problem about a boy named Pablo buying jeans.

Alexis, one of four pupils in Whalen's group, was not paying attention. So the instructor improvised a new version of the problem, which required an ability to multiply and divide.

"Alexis went to Forman Mills and bought two pairs of jeans ..." Whalen said, successfully getting the girl's attention.

Katie Sutton, director of a Huntington Learning Center in Owings Mills, said No Child Left Behind has tripled the number of children her site serves, though many of the children receive tutoring only a few months of the year.

Without the law, "we would never have had this population," said Sutton, who comes into the city to run the tutoring sessions at Lemmel and another school.

Alexis, a lanky sixth-grader who aspires to be a basketball player or musician, said her math grades have improved since December, when she began the tutoring. In her regular math class, she said, "the teacher has to teach all the kids, and he might not get to you."

Now that more parents are aware of the option, said Petrilli, the federal education official, states need to ensure tutoring programs are helping to close the achievement gap between children of different races and income levels - the ultimate goal of No Child Left Behind.

Educators say evaluating such programs is difficult because other factors - including teacher quality and a school's reform efforts - could affect student test scores.

In a recent survey conducted by the Center on Education Policy, a Washington think tank that monitors No Child Left Behind, only 20 percent of more than 300 school districts believed tutoring was raising achievement. Forty-two percent of districts said they did not know what effect the services are having, and 38 percent said it was not raising achievement.

"It's a growing area. But is it working? That remains to be seen," said Fred Cusimano, director of federal programs for Baltimore schools.

But for Goode, the one-on-one tutoring her son receives has been a "saving grace."

Goode knew four years ago that tutoring might help her son overcome his difficulties in school, which were made worse by an attention-deficit disorder. But she abandoned the idea after learning of the \$75 cost of an initial assessment and the \$40-an-hour cost of

tutoring.

The city schools now pay a tutor to visit twice a week. Since he began the tutoring, the sixth-grader's math and reading skills have improved and he is better organized.

"He needed a different environment. He needed more one-on-one," said Goode, 36, who works part time and is studying to be a school counselor.

The mother doesn't want her son to just earn better grades. She hopes tutoring will help him succeed in school and keep him from being lured by the neighborhood drug dealers.

It took some time for Dontae to warm up to Daniel Russell, who works for Porter Education, a Landover-based tutoring company. But the boy now looks forward to the sessions.

Dontae said his math skills have improved because his tutor shows him several ways of solving a problem, while at school "they teach it halfway."

And Russell is more patient.

Said Dontae: "If I mess up, he won't get frustrated or nothing. He just keeps on helping me."

Copyright © 2005, [The Baltimore Sun](#)