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## EDUCATION

# Why tutoring is key to get Tennessee students caught up after time outside of the classroom

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Charles Lampkins was already concerned about his two oldest sons before their Memphis school closed due to the coronavirus pandemic last spring.

Both his fifth-grader, Jermaine, and his fourth grader, Justin, have individualized education programs, or IEPs, plans outlining accommodations for students with disabilities ranging from an ADHD diagnosis and dyslexia to cognitive disabilities.

Jermaine's reading comprehension wasn't where Lampkins wanted it. Justin wasn't reading on level, either.

Normally the kids, who like more than 75% of Shelby County Schools students are African-American, would attend a summer reading program to help them catch up.

But last summer, the programs weren't held.

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Now, after a year of learning virtually at the home they share with three other brothers and a little sister, Charles Lampkins said adults have failed the kids.

It's time to get them caught up, he said. And he's ready to do whatever it takes.

Whether it means more tutoring, longer school years or even getting the church involved.

Families like the Lampkins are why educators, state officials and others are worried about "learning loss" — knowledge or skills lost while students spent months outside the classroom — and are seeking ways to get students caught up.

Tennessee is embarking on a \$160 million effort to bolster intensive programs outside of the traditional school day, like summer school or after-school tutoring, aimed at getting the most vulnerable students back on pace with their peers.

And school districts like Metro Nashville Public Schools are piloting programs like individualized tutoring during the school day to help.

It may work, too, experts say.

One of the best ways to get students up to speed, they say, is through high-quality, personal tutoring. Now school districts across the state are working to provide such tutoring on a scale like never before.

## 'Learning loss'

Before it became a political buzzword amid the pandemic and reopening schools debate, “learning loss” was typically associated with what educators called the “summer slide.”

Research dating back to the 1970s shows kids often lose ground while school is out for the summer, not only not gaining new knowledge or skills but even starting the new school year further behind than they ended the last one.

Learning loss is often evident disproportionately in low-income students and students of color who might not have access to summer camps, extended learning programs and even family vacations with cultural stops at museums or art exhibits.

Now lawmakers, parents and educators alike are concerned about the learning a generation of students might have lost since many schools closed last March.

National data varies, some suggesting the loss isn't substantial and others hitting the panic button, But in a state where only about 36% of third-graders read on grade level, many educators say students need all the help they can get.

***LEARNING LOSS:*** *Reopening schools has been expensive. Making up for student learning losses may be worse.*

“There is also that notion of, ‘Why does it matter if this kid is reading at this level at seven rather than this level at eight?’ If we are all competing with one another and we all lost a year, what difference does it make?” said Ellen McIntyre, dean of the College of Education, Health and Human Sciences at the University of Tennessee — Knoxville, said. “I think it is

absolutely a moral issue that we as educators do everything we can possibly do to help make up learning loss and help kids get back on track.”

One of the ways that Tennessee is looking to do that is through tutoring programs.

Whether through intensive summer programs that lawmakers have directed to launch this summer, targeted after-school tutoring for a whole school year or even individualized tutoring sessions during the school day already being piloted in Metro Nashville Public Schools, with many eyes on student achievement now and in the post-pandemic world, educators are working to ensure they can elevate it.

## Lawmakers' proposal

Though some think of tutoring as glorified homework help, one-on-one or small group work on specific subjects is one of the oldest forms of education. Research shows when done right, it's one of the most effective ways of increasing student achievement.

“It is widely agreed upon in the education world that it is the most effective way of getting kids the support they need if they are behind,” McIntyre said. “There has been research that shows that kids who start at the 35th percentile can be moved to the 50th percentile nationally, which puts them back in the middle after maybe only a summer's worth of pretty intensive tutoring. But there are a lot of buts to it.”

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The biggest hurdle is most often access. Though millions of U.S. students participate in tutoring every year, it has historically been limited to wealthier students whose parents can afford what can be thousands of dollars a year for one-on-one tutoring in anything from literacy to SAT/ACT prep.

High-quality tutoring is often cost-prohibitive for families like the Lampkins and many of the other students who attend Tennessee's urban school districts. School districts, strapped for cash and teachers are usually limited to providing intervention during the school day. Even then, the help might not be targeting students one-on-one.

But Tennessee lawmakers directed more than \$160 million during a special legislative session focused just on education this year to tackle learning loss and the state's stagnant literacy rates made worse by the pandemic.

As part of the education package passed this spring, lawmakers have mandated school districts provide robust summer learning and tutoring opportunities to students, especially those who might eventually be impacted by Gov. Bill Lee's new plan to hold back third-graders who aren't reading on grade level.

***SHELBY COUNTY: Learning loss: More students are behind in math than reading, early tests show***

Within the legislation, lawmakers laid out plans for school districts to offer four to six weeks of intensive summer learning. Students should spend at least six hours a day in the classroom receiving instruction from certificated teachers.

Plans for afterschool tutoring, for both students already in summer school and for others throughout the entire school year, are also outlined in the legislation.

Educators, parents and lawmakers all agree these efforts are needed, but experts also worry about whether the state's plan is the right approach.

## **A 'gold standard' for tutoring**

When it comes to tutoring or remediation for students who are performing below expectations, how much tutoring a child gets matters, said Carolyn Heinrich, chair of the leadership, policy and organizations department at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College.

"What matters is the format of the tutoring, how much the kids get, how many hours and how targeted it is, and how connected it is to what's happening within the school day," Heinrich said. "Gov. Lee mentioned it in his State of the State address and the main thing I would urge is that there are enough resources to provide tutoring that will allow it to be effective. And implementing tutoring that will be effective isn't necessarily just about the hours."

Heinrich studied tutoring providers that cropped up across the country after the federal No Child Left Behind Act was passed in 2001.

She saw students participate in successful tutoring programs. But she also knows what can happen when money is thrown at such programs without a lot of thought about how to actually make them successful.

Successful tutoring is consistent and connected to what students are doing in the classroom each day. Barriers for kids can often include inconsistent schedules or lack of transportation

if they stay at school after the school day ends. As students get older, they often start to face the choice between tutoring and participating in sports.

Heinrich also recommends schools don't wait until the summer to play catch up when they know kids are behind.

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"Ideally you would have some consistency during the school year... and then having something over the summer could that could help prevent summer learning loss," she said. "Ideally you wouldn't wait until summer to do it all."

This spring, Nashville schools are piloting an individualized tutoring program that takes place during the school day.

The district is participating with BrightPath Tutors, a nonprofit tutoring service launched last year by recent Vanderbilt University graduates that helps match college students with kids and schools.

Through collaboration with BrightPath founders Sam Margolis and Brad Gellman, Keri Randolph, the district's executive officer of strategic federal, state and philanthropic investments, came up with what she says is a "gold standard" for tutoring Nashville students.

Students meet one-on-one with a tutor at least three times a week for at least 30 minutes during the school day if possible, Randolph said. Tutors receive training and are able to communicate with the student's teachers about their individual needs.

McIntyre emphasizes one-on-one or small group tutoring is ideal. She also said schools need to use some sort of standard assessment for finding out where a student is when they start tutoring and if they are making progress as they go.

For the tutoring must be individualized, the students must be assessed to find out where they are academically, McIntyre said.

"If we take a one-size-fits-all program, we could really be wasting a lot of money," she said. "For example, there are some first graders who need really direct reading instruction and other kids just need a lot of time reading and talking about books to build their reading comprehension."

Volunteers are great and schools have partnered with community groups like the Boys and Girls Club, AmeriCorps and even local churches for decades to provide tutors. But they need

to be well-trained, McIntrye said.

### ***TENNESSEE TUTORING CORPS: Haslams' tutoring program fills learning gaps at Franklin Boys and Girls Club***

BrightPath tutors are unpaid volunteers, but paying tutors can ensure students are engaging with high-quality professionals and can even help those who might be interested in teaching or minorities to take advantage of the opportunity.

Within months of schools shuttering in 2020, former Gov. Bill Haslam and his wife Chrissy Haslam launched the Tennessee Tutoring Corps, which paired about 430 college students with 2,000 students at Boys and Girls Clubs across the state for about eight weeks over the summer.

The tutors were paid and were required to commit to the entire summer and prove they attended a Tennessee university or state or community college.

On average, students across all grade levels who were tutored scored higher on a post-test than the pretest they were given in math and English language arts at the beginning of the summer, according to a report evaluating the program.

Before the state launched its own framework, the Tennessee Tutoring Corps planned to continue this summer, but now will try and complement the state's efforts.

## **What about summer break?**

Metro Schools also had its own plan for what summer programming might look like this year. The district typically offers up to 70 programs every summer, including high school credit recovery opportunities and programs for English language learners.

"We had already planned a pretty big expansion even before the legislation was passed," Randolph said. But the district had envisioned it as having more of a camp-like atmosphere than six-hour-plus school days, she said.

"We will be greatly limited some in the way the legislation is written," she said. "There was a slight bit of defeat on our end in not being able to have that full-day camp experience with that embedded enrichment and really not being able to look at some off-school-ground opportunities like trips for students."

The most successful summer programs provide this type of fun atmosphere, McIntrye said.