

# Think Forward New England: Profiles of Innovation

## Great Oaks Charter School Bridgeport



Image courtesy of Great Oaks Bridgeport High School

### Key Lessons

- High-dosage tutoring programs help ensure that all students receive individualized attention.
- To staff high-dosage tutoring programs, schools can draw on an untapped resource: service-minded recent college graduates.
- Through relationship building, tutors can provide more than academic support.
- Service programs can create new pipelines for prospective teachers, helping to grow and diversify the workforce.

### Key Questions

- How could a service-year program expand staff capacity in high schools and scale the availability of high-dosage tutoring?
- How might high-dosage tutoring and individualized, small-group instruction benefit all students?
- How can tutors work with school faculty to maximize impact?
- What support and training are tutors likely to need?

## Introduction

“It’s like our own little world, Great Oaks’s universe.” These are the words of a Great Oaks Bridgeport fellow, one of the 37 recent college graduates who provides tutoring to students at Great Oaks Bridgeport (GO-BPT) school in Connecticut.

GO-BPT has a fellowship program designed to provide high-dosage tutoring and individualized, small-group instruction. The Great Oaks Fellowship, supported through an AmeriCorps partnership, facilitates relationship building that emphasizes the value of community and promotes collaboration between students, families, fellows, teachers, and administrators. The school’s director of intervention and curriculum described her experience with the “Great Oaks universe” as family-like: “I would say the thing that makes us different and why I like where I work is we have a community that becomes a small family.” This fellowship also provided critical support to students and families during the pandemic-prompted shift to remote learning.

As schools across the country continue to search for innovative practices to address pandemic-related learning loss and combat social isolation, [experts are pointing to high dosage tutoring](#)

as a strategy worthy of consideration. GO-BPT offers an example of a high-dosage tutoring model that has been refined and adapted to meet local needs.

## A model designed to provide students with access to high-dosage tutoring

High-dosage tutoring has always been at the core of the Great Oaks school model. Drawing on his experience with the Match School in Boston, Michael Duffy founded the Great Oaks Foundation in 2011 with the intention of establishing a network of schools that provides all students with access to high-dosage tutoring. Embodying this model, Great Oaks Bridgeport (GO-BPT) opened in 2014-15 with just sixth grade and, in 2021, graduated its first class.

The Great Oaks Foundation supports a network of affiliate schools in Newark, New Jersey; Wilmington, Delaware; New York City Bridgeport, Connecticut; and Baltimore. Rather than operating schools, the foundation's primary role is to "recruit, train, and support a corps of young adults who are placed in partner schools where they intensively tutor students as a part of a year of service through the federal AmeriCorps program." However, the foundation does not dictate how fellows (the Great Oaks name for tutors) are used at each affiliate school. A GO-BPT leader explained, "There isn't a prescribed manner in which you have to use fellows. It's non-prescriptive, it's supportive. School leaders really have as much flexibility as they take from the foundation."

The current GO-BPT model calls for students to work with fellows, who are assigned by grade level and content area, in both teacher-led classes and during dedicated small-group tutoring

time. Like many communities, GO-BPT has benefited from the lessons that come with time. The framework and implementation of the high-dosage tutoring program has required tinkering and adaptations. The flexibility of the Great Oaks network enabled these changes to build a more resilient and effective fellowship program.

Perhaps most importantly, GO-BPT leaders noted that the school needed to have strong systems in

place—structures and relationships—in order to effectively integrate and make use of up to 50 new college graduates on their staff. "I would be lying if I said that taking 45 fresh-out-of-college students, the overwhelming percentage of whom are dedicating a year of service because they think it is going to have a major social impact, doesn't come with challenges," the GO-BPT head of school said. "But when you listen to the way the students talk about their relationships with the fellows, it doesn't matter."

### Great Oaks Bridgeport at a glance

- Bridgeport, Connecticut
- Part of the Great Oaks Charter Schools network
- Supported by the Great Oaks Foundation, an AmeriCorps partner
- Grades 6-12
- 670 students
  - » 48% Black, 46% Hispanic, 5% White
  - » 18% Students with Disabilities
  - » 12% English Language Learners
  - » 70% Free/Reduced-Price Meals

Source: [Connecticut Report Cards](#), 2020–21

### Core principles

- High-dosage tutoring
- Individualized support
- Focus on college success
- Community investment

## Adjusting during the pandemic

During the pandemic, many teachers found themselves teaching to black squares on Zoom. One common refrain among educators during this time was concern about their inability to support students' [social and emotional well-being](#) and address [unfinished learning](#) while being physically apart from their students.

The Great Oaks Fellowship at GO-BPT helped mitigate these challenges at the school. School administrators leveraged fellows to maintain strong relationships with students and their families and ensure student engagement during instruction. In January 2020, the head of GO-BPT had a prescient sense that schools would shut down as a result of COVID-19 and, along with the director of intervention and curriculum, began planning for an alternative model of schooling. In this new model, teachers and fellows met with students in small groups of three to seven students for 20 to 30 minutes at a time. Students alternated between receiving direct instruction from teachers and getting support from fellows to complete work assigned by teachers while teachers delivered lessons to other students.

For many schools, a significant challenge of remote learning was the lack of personnel available to provide personalized instruction for students who were both physically and academically in different places. The head of GO-BPT shared that fellows played a key role in ensuring that students had sufficient individualized attention: "One of the things that we were immediately able to remain consistent on, even going back to March of 2020, was we were able to maintain small-group settings the entire time through the pandemic. So by using fellows as check-ins, teachers more as lesson delivery, we were able to really focus on students' maintaining engagement and engaging in the work in a much more manageable environment." One fellow shared their perspective on this strategy's impact on students:

*I would say that it was a huge difference for some kids because, in virtual learning, all they hear is the teacher's voice. They can see his face as well, but maybe they misunderstand one thing. Then they just feel too embarrassed to say, "Hey, can you go back to that? I didn't hear that." ... As fellows we were able to...have after-school sessions with them. We could tutor them on those things that they missed.... Just little things like that really helped a lot of the students. They would tell me, 'I really needed this tutoring session, thank you for doing this,' that sort of thing. So you see it in their improved grades and in their improved attitudes about school.*

Many existing inequities, such as opportunity gaps for students with disabilities and English language learners, [were exacerbated during the pandemic](#). At GO-BPT, as one of the fellows explained, those students received support from both teachers and fellows:

*I think it just gives a really big boost.... The students who were struggling the most in virtual learning were also the same groups of students who had more difficulties, who were English language learners or who were on IEPs...those were the students who were hit the hardest. So having fellows working with them, providing them individual attention, focusing on specific skills—like if they are really struggling with reading, doing reading practice with them, being available and monitoring them. We had access to, for the most part, all the data systems that the teachers had access to. So, we could also track their grades, track their progress, and support them accordingly.*

Fellows also provided support to students through a program known as ZAP—Zeros Aren't Permitted. When students do not complete what the school calls “significant assignments,” they are flagged through an online ticketing system. Teachers provide feedback to students with the expectation that the assignment will be submitted. If students still do not submit their assignments, they are directed to ZAP, where a fellow works with them on the assignment during the student's choice of a common period, a non-core class, or after school.

The GO-BPT model demonstrates how having sufficient staff and deploying them strategically can make a school nimble in the face of crisis and rapid change.

## Innovation Spotlight

**“We've gone through different iterations. There's been a journey on how we've gotten to where we are.” — Head of school**

The [research on high-dosage tutoring](#) provides strong evidence that it can accelerate learning. However, as Matthew A. Kraft and Grace T. Falken note in [A Blueprint for Scaling Tutoring Across Public Schools](#), “Successfully taking education reforms to scale is a balancing act between maintaining fidelity to the core components of a program and providing flexibility for local actors to shape implementation within their contexts.” Here we describe how GO-BPT adapted high-dosage tutoring to maximize impact as their students returned to school in fall 2021.

### Tutoring structure

Fellows work with students throughout the school day. Specifically, students work with fellows both in core classes (alongside teachers) and during dedicated time for small-group tutoring that relies on an extended school day. Fellows are assigned to both grade levels and content areas—for example, one fellow may work with 9th graders in STEM subjects while another may work with 10th graders in the humanities. (GO-BPT administers the SBAC IAB assessments to fellows in order to assess their skills and place them: “We're very strategic regarding which fellows we put in our upper grades.”)

During core classes, each teacher has two or three embedded fellows who support instruction in various ways. For example, during a teacher-led mini lesson, fellows support students to maintain attention (using techniques such as proximity, visual cues, or quiet redirection) and model note-taking, active listening, and asking questions. During guided practice, fellows participate more actively by checking for understanding, identifying and notifying teachers of any trends in student misconceptions, and providing general behavior and attention support. At this time, the teacher primarily works with struggling students and the fellows work with students who are either on track or need to be pushed. “the rationale for that is you take your highest skilled person and put them with the neediest students,” the head of school explained.

The second context in which students work with fellows is during small-group tutoring. Tutoring occurs in 45-minute to one-hour blocks and spans all content areas; students have two hours of tutoring each week in the core subjects of math, science, English language arts and history/social studies. The fellow-to-student ratio is approximately 1:4. During this small-group time, fellows work with students on focused, targeted skills personalized to each student's needs.

Fellows identify students' individual needs through ExactPath assessments as well as regular meetings with teachers during planning periods. Fellows also use tutoring time to help students catch up on homework and for general relationship-building.

## Selecting and training fellows

AmeriCorps does the initial screening for corps members (volunteers who receive a small monthly stipend). Then the Great Oaks Foundation screens candidates. Finally, GO-BPT conducts interviews with all prospective fellows, looking for a service mindset, a strong interest in education, and diversity of background, gender, and race and ethnicity. “The first thing is service mindset,” the high school principal said. “What is [the fellow’s] mindset around service? Because that’s really what this year is.” GO-BPT looks for individuals who are considering a career in education because they seek to use the fellowship to create a pipeline into the teaching profession—not just for Great Oaks, but for wherever the fellow may choose to work in the future. And they look for diversity—in particular fellows of color so students see mentors who look like them in positions that they may see themselves in one day.

The fellowship begins in early August. GO-BPT provides housing for fellows, so their initial training is focused on community building. Then, with a focus on “why do we do what we do and what will your role be,” the three-week summer training covers the following topics:

- What is tutoring and why do we provide it?
- What does a year of service mean and how are we going to support our students?
- How do we build community? How do we build relationships with students? How do we collaborate with adults and teachers? What does a culture of a school really look like?
- Why do we teach what we teach (curriculum and standards)? What does testing look like?
- What does mentorship look like?
- What about afterschool clubs and organizations?

Because GO-BPT leaders have found that the fellows require additional training to be effective tutors, they recently hired an in-class instructional coach to support fellows during small-group tutoring by providing real-time coaching. The coach provides the fellows with the instructional materials to use and teaches them how to use the materials.

Finally, fellows prepare for tutoring through the collaboration with classroom teachers. For instance, involving fellows in core classroom instruction ensures the fellows know what the teacher has taught in class. In addition, the fellows join weekly collaborative grade-level meetings of fellows and teachers to discuss and plan curriculum and participate in professional learning with teachers.

## Establishing clear roles for fellows and teachers

**“If I was walking into a new school, the first thing that I would do would be to clearly establish the roles of each participant. It’s huge.” — Principal**



As leaders at GO-BPT adapted the fellows model, one of the challenges they sought to address was the ill-defined roles of fellows and teachers. They noted that a lack of clarity initially caused a lack of cohesion and some tension. As the principal explained:

*One of the things that we were doing the last few years was having our teacher and our fellows work out responsibilities with the understanding that the teachers understood their role and the teachers understood the fellows' role, and they would kind of help guide the conversation. What we realized was a lot of our teachers didn't understand the fellow's role either.*

To address this lack of a shared understanding of roles, school leaders spent time clearly defining the role of the fellow and the role of the teacher. They now have a written document for teachers and fellows, called *Leveraging the Fellow Within the Classroom*, that specifies what the fellow and the teacher should be doing during whole-class instruction.

## Fellows' unique relationships with students

The GO-BPT model puts on display the benefits of near-peer relationships as they relate to college and career planning. Beyond tutoring, the fellows serve as mentors, especially when it comes to the college admissions process. During the disrupted 2020-21 school year, GO-BPT used fellows to support seniors with the process of writing their personal statements. The head of school shared that many students keep in touch with former fellows and reach out to them for support during the college application process. According to the head of school, one student even chose to attend the same college as her mentor, a former fellow; the former fellow helped the GO-BPT student with her application while attending graduate school at the same institution. "It just shows you...the power of their relationships of former, past fellows as mentors, true mentors to help them through their process," the head of school said.

Fellows' relationships with students can also be valuable channels of information about the support students need to thrive. Referencing the *Diplomas Now* model of relying on an early warning indicator system, the GO-BPT principal described the data they look at—attendance, behavior, course performance—to make sure students are on track to graduate. He then added, "But there's this qualitative element where if you don't have this communication between fellows and teachers and administration in a strategic and meaningful way, there's information that AmeriCorps members are able to gather based on the relationships they develop that's always the missing piece of the data." Fellows have the opportunity to share such insights with teachers during weekly data team meetings where fellows and teachers work together to identify student challenges and adjust instruction based on data.

## Creating a new teacher pipeline

The Great Oaks Foundation recognizes that tapping into AmeriCorps National Service and offering high-dosage tutoring has the potential to create a new pipeline for prospective teachers. Moreover, by recruiting and selecting fellows that reflect the diversity of the communities they serve, the Great Oaks Fellowship can help diversify the teacher workforce.

When AmeriCorps members sign on to serve as fellows, they make a one-year commitment. However, they can opt to stay for a second year—and many do. Of the 37 fellows at GO-BPT

in fall of 2021, 13 were returning for a second year. Returning fellows can take on additional responsibilities—for example, some become fellow leads, while others enter a teacher residency program. At the start of the 2021 school year, three full-time classroom teachers were former fellows who had gone through a teacher residency program at GO-BPT. As the GO-BPT high school principal explained, “We’re really starting to try to become also a teacher residency program, [asking ourselves], ‘How can we potentially, in the long-term, influence and impact the teacher shortage? How do we become a pipeline for teachers, not only at Great Oaks, but in general?’”

## Conclusion

Thought leaders in education are [considering ways to scale](#) access to tutoring as a response to both the current pandemic-promoted crisis and the persistent opportunity gaps in the U.S. education system. Moreover, drawing on AmeriCorps to support schools is consistent with increasing calls to [reimagine the role of national service](#). Great Oaks exemplifies how one school drew on AmeriCorps volunteers to design and strategically adapt a high-dosage tutoring program.

School and district leaders as well as policymakers interested in expanding access to high-dosage tutoring should consider the following questions:

- How could a service-year program expand staff capacity in high schools and scale the availability of high-dosage tutoring?
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## About the Authors

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## About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

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## Acknowledgments

This case study was made possible by the generous support of the Barr Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the foundation.