

Teachers and tutors together: Reimagining literacy instruction in Oakland

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Introduction

Concern about the state of literacy instruction in America's classrooms has recently exploded.¹ As a result, policymakers, school system leaders, and teachers have increasingly sought to remake how children learn to read in order to improve literacy outcomes²—a pursuit that has gained heightened urgency in the aftermath of the pandemic.³ This work, often referred to as the “science of reading,” has taken many shapes, but all emphasize the use of phonics-based instruction and early intervention to improve early readers' foundational literacy skills.⁴

This report considers Oakland Unified School District's (OUSD) efforts to reimagine early literacy instruction to improve student outcomes and close gaps between historically marginalized students and their peers. Like many school districts, OUSD has struggled to improve literacy outcomes. According to a 2022 state assessment, just 35% of OUSD students were reading at grade level. These results were worse for Black and Latine students, with just one in four achieving grade-level benchmarks.⁵

OUSD committed to a new early literacy strategy as part of its 2021-2024 strategic plan.⁶ A core component of that strategy is early literacy tutors who, alongside classroom educators, support differentiated literacy instruction using SIPPS, an evidence-based early literacy curriculum produced by [Collaborative Classroom](#). OUSD's early literacy tutoring program is managed in partnership with [FluentSeeds](#) and [The Oakland REACH](#), which together help recruit, train, and support early literacy tutors.

- 1 Dana Goldstein, “In the Fight over How to Teach Reading, This Guru Makes a Major Retreat,” *The New York Times*, May 22, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/22/us/reading-teaching-curriculum-phonics.html>; Emily Hanford, “Sold a Story: How Teaching Kids to Read Went so Wrong,” features.apmreports.org, 2022, <https://features.apmreports.org/sold-a-story/>.
- 2 Rachel M. Cohen, “The New ‘Science of Reading’ Movement, Explained,” *Vox*, August 15, 2023, <https://www.vox.com/23815311/science-of-reading-movement-literacy-learning-loss>; Sarah Schwartz, “Which States Have Passed ‘Science of Reading’ Laws? What’s in Them?,” *Education Week*, July 20, 2022, <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/which-states-have-passed-science-of-reading-laws-whats-in-them/2022/07>;
- 3 Sarah Mervosh, “The Pandemic Erased Two Decades of Progress in Math and Reading,” *The New York Times*, September 1, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/01/us/national-test-scores-math-reading-pandemic.html>.
- 4 Mark S. Seidenberg, *Language at the Speed of Sight: How We Read, Why so Many Can't, and What Can Be Done about It* (New York: Basic Books, 2017). For an accessible review of the research, see Sarah Schwartz and Sarah D. Sparks, “How Do Kids Learn to Read? What the Science Says,” *Education Week*, October 2, 2019, <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/how-do-kids-learn-to-read-what-the-science-says/2019/10>.
- 5 State of California, “2021-22 Smarter Balanced ELA and Mathematics Test Results at a Glance—CAASPP Reporting (ca Dept of Education),” *California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress, 2023*, <https://caaspp-elpac.ets.org/caaspp/DashViewReportSB?ps=true&lstTestYear=2022&lstTestType=B&lstGroup=1&lstSubGroup=1&lstSchool-Type=A&lstGrade=13&lstCounty=00&lstDistrict=00000&lstSchool=0000000>.
- 6 Oakland Unified School District, “OUSD Strategic Plan 2021-2024—Oakland Unified School District,” Oakland Unified School District, 2020, <https://www.ousd.org/about-us/strategic-plan>.

This report presents findings from our in-depth look at early literacy tutoring in OUSD. We set out to understand the key features of the literacy tutoring program in practice, to examine the school- and district-wide conditions that shaped its efficacy and sustainability, and to explore how tutoring shaped students' literacy outcomes. Our conclusions (see box below) are based on a mixed-method study that included interviews with school and partner staff, a survey of literacy tutors, and an analysis of data on students' literacy outcomes.

Key findings on Oakland's early literacy tutoring program

- Early literacy tutors allowed schools to offer significantly more differentiated literacy instruction, enabling educators to better tailor instruction to student needs. Teachers and school leaders pointed to the importance of having additional trained adults available to provide small group literacy instruction and suggested that, without this support, students would not have gotten the help they needed.
- Tutoring may work best at schools where tutors are well-integrated into a coherent, school-wide approach to supporting literacy. SIPPS, the district-wide foundational skills curriculum, provided a foundation for collaboration among teachers, tutors and instructional leaders. Communication about student progress among the adults responsible for literacy instruction helped them adjust their approach based on student needs. However, at many schools, tutor communication with educators was spotty, suggesting further work is needed to integrate tutors into the fabric of literacy instruction.
- Teachers, tutors, coaches, and school leaders reported that staffing, facilities and scheduling constraints made it difficult to optimize the work of early literacy tutors. In addition, some schools were piloting promising practices—such as tutor specialization—that may help tutors improve the quality of instruction, but these had yet to be systematized. As a testament to the importance of implementation, literacy gains made by tutored students varied dramatically—from a low of 79% to a high of 188% of typical growth.
- A majority of early literacy tutors reported being at least somewhat prepared for the job. Available data suggest that tutors, like other educators, improve their practice rapidly as they become acclimated to the role. Many tutors pointed to their FluentSeeds coach, who provided bimonthly observations and coaching sessions, as a key to navigating early challenges in their work with students.
- A new approach to recruiting and training early literacy tutors piloted by The Oakland REACH and FluentSeeds helped schools tap new talent pipelines and fill tutor vacancies. The Literacy Liberator fellowship aimed to equip parents and caregivers with the mindsets, skills and support they needed to succeed in the tutor role—far exceeding the conventional goals and methods for training tutors and other paraprofessionals.
- Despite these investments, inadequate pay remained a critical obstacle to recruiting and retaining early literacy tutors. While many tutors were motivated to contribute to the work of early literacy, low pay was frequently cited as a challenge that undermined their commitment to the role.
- Students who worked with tutors made larger gains in literacy compared to their peers who lacked access to small group literacy instruction, though these differences were driven in large part by gains in kindergarten. Students who received SIPPS instruction from a tutor made similar literacy gains as those who primarily received instruction from Oakland teachers.

As states and districts around the country work to make good on the shift toward evidence-based early literacy instruction, OUSD shows how tutors can complement and streamline broader efforts to dramatically improve literacy outcomes.

History of early literacy tutoring in OUSD

In 2021, OUSD launched a new literacy strategy to rapidly accelerate literacy outcomes for Oakland students.⁷ The strategy sought to remake early literacy instruction from top to bottom, including the adoption of a new curriculum, implementation of curriculum-aligned assessments and a universal screening system, investment in teacher professional development and support, and the hiring of dozens of new early literacy tutors to provide additional instruction in foundational literacy skills.

This shift came about as prominent community-based organizations had become increasingly vocal about the shortcomings of the district’s approach to early literacy. Just one-third of students achieved grade-level benchmarks and the district’s historically decentralized approach left many students without access to evidence-based literacy instruction. The Oakland REACH and the Oakland NAACP privately and publicly lobbied district leaders to invest in evidence-based literacy strategies. Their advocacy efforts led to a unanimous vote by the Oakland school board to move the district toward the science of reading in 2020.⁸

The board’s support built momentum for a fledgling early literacy program that had begun years prior. The Oakland Literacy Cohort launched in 2016 in 16 elementary schools with support from the Kenneth Rainin Foundation. Cohort schools piloted a new approach to early literacy that focused on providing students with high-quality, tutor-supported literacy instruction starting in kindergarten, as well as deep professional support for leaders and educators. The Rainin Foundation previously supported a similar approach in transitional kindergarten in OUSD as well as in Oakland-based charter schools.

By the start of the pandemic in early 2020, the district was primed to embark on a new approach system-wide, thanks to what one district leader called a “perfect storm” of action by advocates, support among central office leaders, and lessons from the Oakland Literacy Cohort. The Rainin Foundation doubled down on its original investment, committing an additional \$1.85 million to support scaling the Oakland Literacy Cohort model to more district schools. Partnerships with FluentSeeds and The Oakland REACH, two nonprofits working to improve literacy practice in OUSD, infused the scaling effort with needed capacity by recruiting, training, and coaching newly hired tutors. In the 2022-23 school year, the district funded 90 early literacy tutor positions across 38 schools.⁹

Key features of OUSD’s early literacy tutoring program

OUSD’s early literacy tutoring program is designed to provide differentiated, small-group instruction in foundational literacy skills for K-2 students. Tutors are based at individual school sites and tutoring takes place during the school day. Tutors work alongside teachers to support small group instruction in SIPPS.

School staff use a curriculum-aligned placement assessments to create initial groups of students with similar skill levels. Students progress through the SIPPS curriculum based on the completion of mastery tests, administered by tutors or teachers at defined points in the scope and sequence, typically after five to ten 30-minute lessons.¹⁰ Because students progress through the curriculum at different rates, group composition

7 *ibid.*

8 Lakisha Young, “Business as Usual Won’t Get Our Kids Reading,” Center on Reinventing Public Education, February 22, 2023, <https://crpe.org/business-as-usual-wont-get-our-kids-reading/>.

9 The number of tutors actively working with students fluctuated throughout the school year due to recruitment, retention and staff turnover.

10 District guidance suggests that staff may place returning students in groups based on the last master test they passed in May of the prior year.

changes over the course of the school year and students may interact with more than one adult—both tutor and teacher—during small group instruction. In the 2022-23 school year, the district expected all K-2 students not meeting grade-level benchmarks to receive 30 minutes of small group SIPPS instruction every school day to support acquisition of foundational literacy skills.

Early literacy tutors were targeted to schools that serve historically marginalized students, including English language learners, Black students, Hispanic students, and students from low-income families (see Table 1). The number of tutor positions in each school varied based on the size of the school—larger schools received more tutors than smaller schools.

Table 1. Descriptive characteristics of schools in the centrally-supported early literacy tutoring program

Mean (St. Dev.)	Participating schools	Non-Participating Schools
Enrollment	384.9 (152.9)	437.3 (100.8)
% Socioeconomically Disadvantaged	88.7 (10.2)	31.6 (17.0)
% Black Enrollment	23.2 (15.7)	11.4 (2.4)
% Hispanic Enrollment	52.3 (26.5)	16.4 (5.9)
% Asian Enrollment	8.6 (15.2)	15.6 (18.2)
% White Enrollment	5.8 (16.5)	12.0 (11.6)
% English Language Learner Enrollment	16.5 (12.4)	11.6 (3.0)
Early Literacy Tutor FTE Allocations	2.1 (0.7)	0.0 (0.0)
# of Schools	38	12

Source: Data on the demographic characteristics of participating and nonparticipating schools for 2022-23 school year from DataQuest, California Department of Education. Data on FTE tutor positions drawn from OUSD school-level budget reports. Table reports mean and standard deviation.

Prospective candidates were required to have a high school diploma or equivalent and pass a background check. All newly hired tutors engaged in pre-service training led by FluentSeeds, the organization behind Seeds of Learning™, a relationship-based professional development and coaching model focused on supporting educators to use effective early literacy instructional techniques. This training provided tutors with the skills to implement SIPPS, a structured, foundational skills literacy program, as well as create positive learning conditions for students.

In the 2022-23 school year, OUSD partnered with The Oakland REACH and FluentSeeds to launch the Literacy Liberator Fellowship, a program designed to build a new pipeline of early literacy tutors and address unfilled tutor vacancies. REACH targeted community members with a direct stake in Oakland schools by canvassing school sites and encouraging parents, family members, and other invested parties to apply for the fellowship. Selected applicants went through an eight-week training program led by REACH and FluentSeeds that sought to develop trainees’ mindsets and skills related to literacy instruction, as well as their leadership capabilities. Altogether, 16 prospective tutors participated in the Fellowship and 11 were ultimately placed in OUSD schools in the 2022-23 school year.

All centrally funded tutors had access to biweekly coaching sessions with either a FluentSeeds or district coach, who observed tutoring sessions and provided rubric-based feedback to tutors. In the 2022-23 school year, FluentSeeds coached most OUSD-funded tutors. Individual school sites also could hire their own literacy tutors, either site-funded or volunteers, but these tutors did not have access to the same district-funded supports and typically did not use the SIPPS curriculum.

While tutoring is centrally funded and supported, school leaders are responsible for hiring tutors, managing their work with students, and integrating that work with the other staff responsible for literacy instruction. The program does not include any limits around when tutoring occurs, what other responsibilities tutors may take on above and beyond early literacy instruction, or tutor working conditions (including group size, location of tutoring, and planning time). As discussed below, how schools deployed tutors to support differentiated literacy instruction varied.

Study Methods

This project was made possible by an investment from The Oakland REACH, which has partnered with OUSD to ensure schools are supporting improved literacy outcomes for Oakland students. We used a mixed-methods study design to address the following research questions:

1. How did Oakland schools implement the early literacy tutoring program and what school- and district-wide conditions supported or hindered effective implementation?
2. How did tutoring affect students' literacy outcomes?

To answer these questions, we drew upon multiple data sources and a mixed-method study design. We conducted two rounds of semi-structured interviews with OUSD and partner staff involved in the tutoring initiative (42 interviews in total). Questions focused on staff's perceptions of the early literacy tutoring initiative, how the initiative was implemented at local school sites, and perceived impacts of the work. These interviews included four case study schools where we spoke with the principal, classroom teachers, teachers on special assignment, and tutors. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Qualitative data were analyzed through the creation of a detailed case narrative that the research team used to identify key themes.

We also leveraged a 30-question survey distributed by researchers via email to all 84 early literacy tutors working for OUSD in the spring of the 2022-23 school year. The survey asked tutors about their motives for taking on the role, their working conditions in schools, and the challenges and benefits they experienced as a tutor; 55% of central-funded tutors responded.

To understand how tutoring shapes students' literacy outcomes, we used student roster data collected by tutors supported by FluentSeeds coaches in the spring of the 2022-23 school year. These roster data indicate whether a student was receiving tutoring by a FluentSeeds-coached tutor as of April 2023. We used the roster data to compare changes in literacy scale scores and percentage of typical growth as measured by iReady between tutored students, students who received small group instruction in SIPPS from another adult (typically a classroom teacher), and students who did not receive SIPPS instruction from either a tutor or another adult. We did not have information on how students were selected to participate, nor could we manipulate treatment assignments. As a result, we used observational methods. Our statistical models control for students' prior achievement, demographic factors, and school characteristics, but cannot fully rule out that tutored students differ from the comparison groups in important ways.

In addition, our primary treatment indicator captures tutor rosters at a single point in time and does not differentiate between students who received more or less tutoring during the school year. These limitations constrain our ability to estimate the true effect of tutoring on students' literacy outcomes, though our

descriptive results are robust to a variety of alternative modeling specifications. See the Methodological Appendix for more details on study methods.

Definitions of key terms

Early literacy tutor: A paraprofessional role in Oakland Unified School District responsible for supporting small group instruction in SIPPS.

FluentSeeds: A nonprofit focused on providing early literacy training and coaching related to SEEDS of Learning™, an evidence-based literacy program.

iReady: An adaptive diagnostic screening tool that assesses student learning in phonological awareness, phonics, high-frequency sight words, vocabulary, comprehension of informational text, and comprehension of literature.

SEEDS of Learning™: An evidence-based professional learning program that equips adults with the skills needed to support early literacy development. The SEEDS approach emphasizes “Sensitivity, Encouragement, Education, and Development of Skills through Doing.”

SIPPS: An evidence-based foundational skills program by [Collaborative Classroom](#) that develops literacy skills using a structured scope and sequence.

The Oakland REACH: An Oakland community-based organization that has advocated for evidence-based literacy practices and has partnered with OUSD to bring those practices to OUSD schools.

Early literacy tutors helped schools offer more differentiated literacy instruction

Among the sites for which we conducted interviews, teachers and tutors supported small group instruction in foundational literacy skills using SIPPS. This enabled schools to offer literacy instruction that was more tailored to each student’s needs. As one school leader described, “Tutors play a critical role in [differentiation]. It’s hard for a classroom teacher to differentiate on the level that they need to in order to meet students where they’re at.” Another leader said, “This program has allowed us to differentiate ... I think that’s critical, especially coming out of Covid.”

Principals and teachers described the importance of small group instruction to manage widely-varying literacy skills in their classrooms. One teacher, who used SIPPS before having tutor support, suggested that the curriculum worked best as a small group activity; otherwise, instruction was not appropriately leveled. Another elaborated, “15 years ago my class size was 19 or 20 and it still felt big. Now I’m ranging between 25 and 28 and it’s just not the ideal way for a child to learn how to read, especially if they’re not coming in with any skills.” Another said, “I have 26 students now and ... we put them in five groups to differentiate instruction ... [Without the tutor] I would do it in two groups and the students wouldn’t get what they needed.” A principal described how his school’s tutors helped support a combined class of first- and second-grade students whose literacy levels differed significantly, a feat that he said would have been difficult otherwise.

According to the survey, tutors reported working with, on average, between five and six small groups of between three and eight students each, significantly increasing the number of literacy groups that each school could support. Based on interviews and survey data, these groups were flexible and data-based, their composition changing based on students’ progression through the curriculum and passage of interim

assessments. As one teacher described, “The best part about having [a tutor] is that the group can be fluid ... flexible. So ... [if] we need a couple of students to hear these sounds or see these sounds more often, let’s move them to this group.” 52% of tutors reported that assessment data determined the groups they worked with, while 48% said students were assigned to them by teachers or a literacy coordinator.

School staff also discussed the value of having multiple adults share the load of literacy instruction. One teacher on special assignment (TSA), coordinating the literacy work at her school, said, “I think that [tutoring] is helping distribute the big endeavor of trying to teach everybody to read.” An instructional coach described an “all hands on deck” approach: “We have eight classroom teachers. They all teach a group, our two literacy tutors teach a group, our prep teacher teaches a group, we have a reading intervention teacher who teaches a group. So really everyone who’s available pretty much teaches a group. So we really like to utilize our whole staff to be able to get kids at every level.”

A parent contrasted her child’s experience in an Oakland school supported by a tutor with her own experience as a student: “I think back to when I was in school. If you were behind where the class was, you were really left behind or if you were ahead then maybe you were bored and your mind was wandering and you weren’t paying attention. I feel like with SIPPS ... they get special time with an adult who is working with them. And I think that is really impactful.”

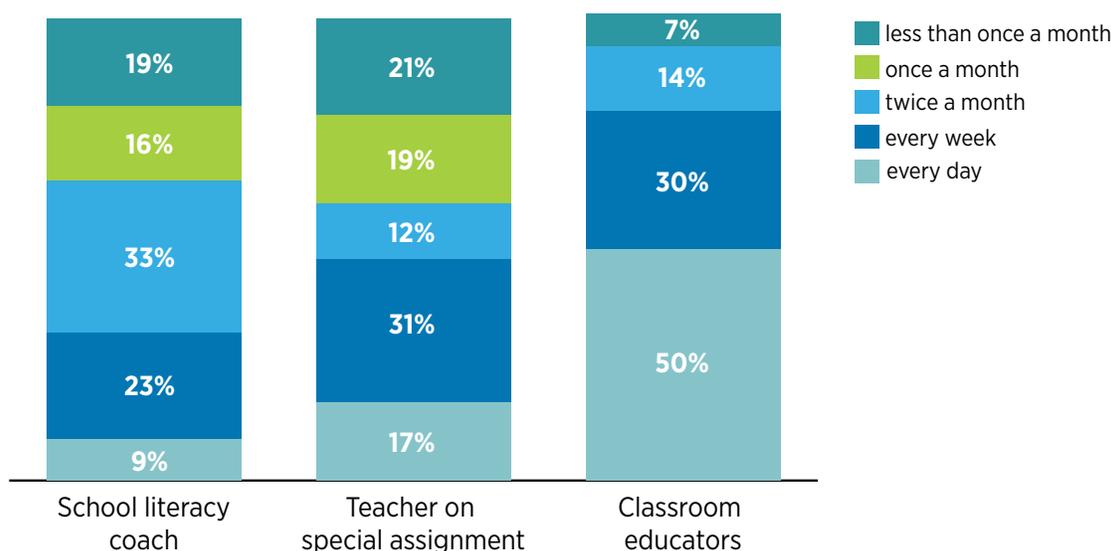
Collaboration and coherence were key to accelerating tutors’ impact

Among the schools we visited, principals, teachers, and tutors pointed to the importance of building collaborative and coherent instructional systems to address students’ literacy needs. Schools built coherence by having teachers and tutors use a common curriculum, systematizing communication among tutors, teachers and instructional leaders, and using student assessment data to guide tutors’ and teachers’ work.

For instance, early literacy tutors reported in interviews that regular communication with teachers helped them align instruction with student needs. A tutor shared, “I check in with teachers a lot depending on if I need to let them know where [students are] at, or we had a great session today.” A school-based literacy coach said, “[Tutors, teachers, and the coach] meet once a month to discuss [student] data. And when tutors do [student assessments] they share the data with me ... and with the teachers. Everyone is in collaboration.” A teacher from the same school commented, “We talk about how the kids are doing almost on a daily basis. [Tutors] will tell us how the kids are doing ... and if we need to adjust [groups].”

However, among tutors responding to the survey, only half reported daily communication with classroom educators and even fewer said they were in regular (daily or weekly) communication with school-based staff responsible for leading the literacy work at schools (Figure 1). This suggests there is room to build more collaboration between tutors and other staff responsible for literacy instruction.

Figure 1. Early literacy tutor communication with school-based instructional staff was inconsistent



Source: Survey of OUSD Early Literacy Tutors. Participants were asked “How often do you speak to the following individuals about your work?” Percentages based on 46 respondents.

SIPPS, the curriculum that teachers and tutors alike used with students, was the foundation that made school-wide collaboration possible. As one TSA suggested, “[SIPPS] provides a common language across grade levels and an understanding of where students are in their phonics development.” A coach at a different school said implementation of SIPPS created “consistency” in educators’ work with students.

Schools also used data to align adults responsible for literacy instruction around student needs. One TSA described the importance of regularly reviewing data with tutors and teachers: “I am like the hawk eye for the [school]. So it’s like, ‘I noticed you haven’t given a mastery test or I noticed you just gave one. Let’s talk about those kids.’” However, according to data collected by OUSD and FluentSeeds, schools are struggling to reach district goals in the administration of mastery tests, reinforcing the importance of site-level leadership around data monitoring.

In some cases, staffing challenges undermined schools’ efforts to build collaboration and coherence. One TSA suggested that performing her role was made challenging by the myriad of unrelated tasks she was pulled into as one of the few adults not committed to teaching in a classroom. She described being a substitute, conducting classroom observations in place of the principal, coordinating schoolwide assessment schedules, and organizing all of the school’s family events. As she said, “I feel like my challenge is really being able to dedicate the majority of my time to early literacy ... I’m the only person [doing that work].”

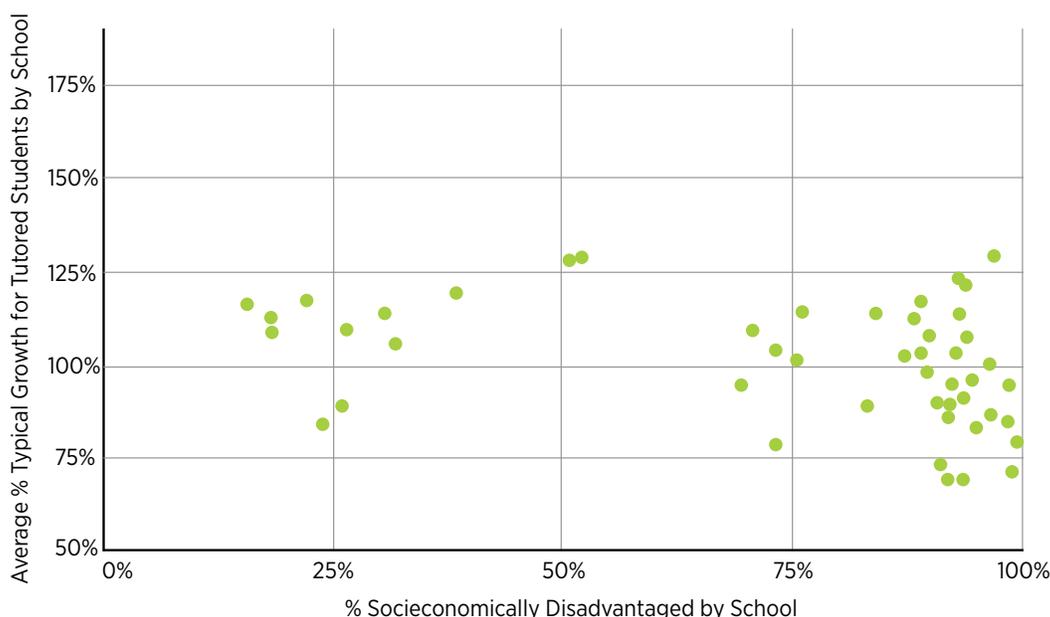
In a few cases, tutors and their coaches pointed to challenges working with teachers who did not use SIPPS in their classrooms. A tutor at one of the schools we visited reported that a teacher she works with refused to use SIPPS, viewing the foundational skills literacy program as inappropriate for all students. This tutor lamented not being able to help all students who needed support with foundational skills as a result of the teacher’s position: “It bothers me every day that I’m not able to reach them.” A FluentSeeds coach suggested that such gaps between tutors and teachers’ work weren’t uncommon. She said, “Sometimes there is teacher support. Everybody’s all in. Sometimes there’s a teacher who will tell you, ‘I don’t like SIPPS.’ [The tutors] actually feel that, right? You’re feeling like, ‘okay, I’m not respected here.’”

Schools varied in how they implemented early literacy tutoring

While OUSD centrally funds and supports tutors, school sites are charged with organizing and monitoring tutors' work. Unlike many tutoring programs, OUSD's tutoring model is intended to be integrated with the work of classroom teachers and school-based literacy coordinators. This means that tutors' work varies across sites.

As shown in Figure 2, literacy outcomes for tutored students varied dramatically across school sites. Among schools serving a greater number (>75%) of socioeconomically disadvantaged students, the average typical growth for tutored students varied from a low of 69% to a high of 188%.

Figure 2. Tutored students' growth in literacy varied dramatically by school



Source: Figure presents data on average percent typical growth for tutored students and percent socioeconomically disadvantaged students, as reported by the California Department of Education. Socioeconomically disadvantaged students are defined as students: (1) who are eligible for the free or reduced-price meal program, (2) who are migrant, homeless or foster youth, or (3) where neither of the parents were a high school graduate.

While all schools leveraged tutors to support more differentiated literacy instruction, how they organized tutors' efforts varied. Differences in practices across schools seemed to be in part a function of the number of tutors available. For instance, while two of the schools in our interview sample had two early literacy tutors, another school had four. The two schools with two literacy tutors used volunteers and academic mentors to help manage SIPPS instruction, but non-tutors did not receive the same level of training and support as OUSD literacy tutors. Even with volunteer support, group sizes sometimes grew large. One school described a literacy group of 19, which suggests that small group instruction wasn't always optimized.

In addition to variability in the number of tutors and the size of groups, working conditions for tutors differed across schools. A FluentSeeds coach, who provides biweekly observation and coaching sessions to tutors, said some tutors worked in their own dedicated classroom space, while others were relegated to hallways or pushed-in to various classrooms. She felt that tutoring worked best when tutors were provided dedicated classroom space. As she described:

I've been to schools where you have early literacy tutors pushing into classrooms...The teacher is teaching SIPPS and there's three other SIPPS [groups] going on. So you have four different small groups happening at the same time in one classroom ... When I would walk in and have four groups of SIPPS going, my brain would hurt, right? Because it's so loud ... When you're teaching SIPPS and you are doing it well, you have a setup, you have sound cards, you have a word wall, you have all the tools that you need that give your students the best opportunity to take in that information. And if you are pushing into a classroom, you're a mobile teacher. Right. And you don't always have that set up. So your instruction is not as good as it could be.

A tutor at one of the sites we visited described having access to her own classroom as “a big deal.” She said the alternative of working in the halls “can be challenging [for tutors] and distracting to kids.”

Schedules also proved challenging, as tutors rapidly moved from group to group with little time between to prepare. One tutor shared, “I feel the schedule of moving one group to the next is hectic.” In another example, a school leader suggested that, for consistency, it would be best to have a school-wide SIPPS block where all students would receive SIPPS instruction across the lower grades. In that way, students would not miss other content in order to receive their small group literacy instruction. However, due to scheduling constraints and staffing issues, the school was not able to organize this way. Only one school in our interview sample had a dedicated SIPPS block for each grade level.

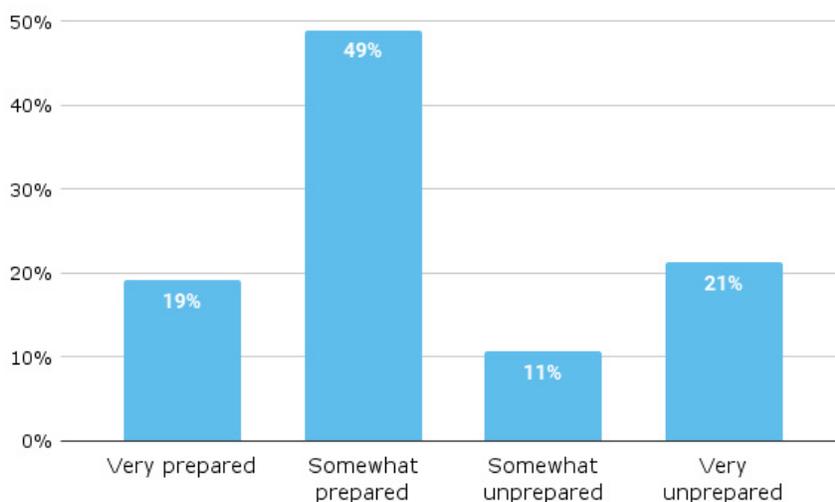
A final area of variation related to tutor specialization. Teachers on special assignment (TSA) across multiple schools suggested that tutors were expected to master many SIPPS levels simultaneously with perhaps not enough attention to quality and fidelity. One TSA stated: “I think that I want to support tutors to really master one of the SIPPS level curriculums. I think this year tutors were teaching the beginning, an extension, plus a challenge, it was just sort of like all of them. And I think in terms of having the best implementation, I should help tutors focus on becoming experts in one before building into a different [one].” There was only one case study school that reported encouraging literacy tutors to specialize in a level.

While we cannot definitively say whether any of the practices that schools used were more or less effective, the variability points to the importance of closely monitoring implementation and using the results to inform codification of effective practices over time.

One-third of tutors reported not being well-prepared for the job

Overall, a majority of tutors who responded to the survey reported being somewhat (49%) or very (19%) prepared for the job (Figure 3). Still, some tutors described in interviews the difficulties building confidence to support small group literacy instruction. One tutor said her first experiences in supporting small group instruction were “kind of wild,” despite having previously held positions working with children. As she described, “[B]eing one-on-one and expecting them to learn is different ... learning how to establish relationships not just with teachers but with kids too ... [it's] a different interaction.” Another said, “We can't always be a hundred percent prepared if you haven't done the job before. You have to really just work on it every day.” One-third of tutors reported on the survey that they were somewhat (11%) or very unprepared (21%) for the job.

Figure 3. A majority of tutors reported being at least somewhat prepared for the job



Source: Survey of OUSD Early Literacy Tutors. Participants were asked “Thinking back to your first day as a tutor, how prepared did you feel for the role?” Percentages based on 46 respondents.

The tutors we interviewed said working with students was the best way to become truly prepared to lead small group literacy instruction; until then, the training materials were largely theoretical.

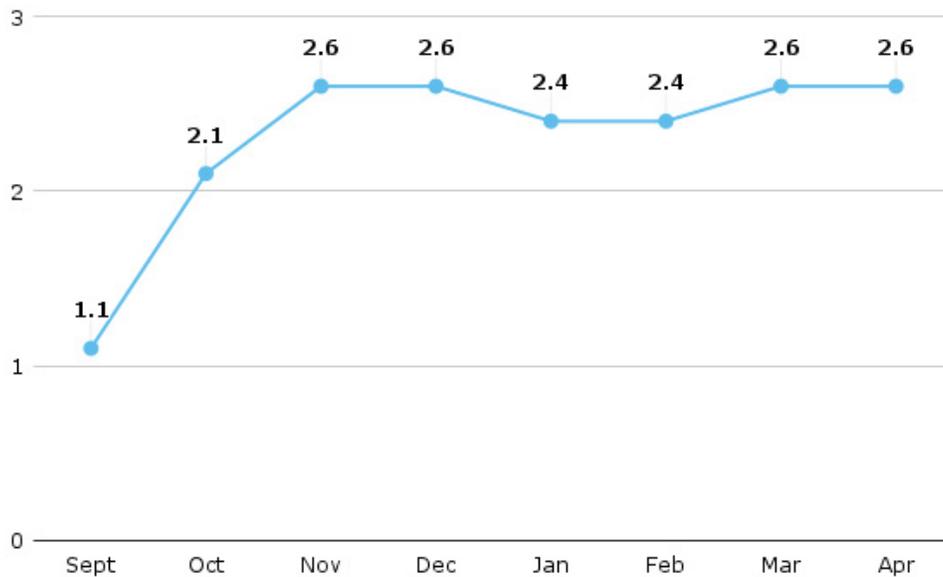
Coaching helped tutors improve their practice

Tutors pointed to the support of their coaches as key to navigating the challenges they experienced. Coaches observed tutoring sessions and provided feedback to tutors twice a month. They also acted as ambassadors for tutors to advocate for improved working conditions or support. One tutor described how her coach helped model effective practice: “She gives constructive criticism and support. If I have a question, even in the middle of teaching a group, she will answer it ... If I say, ‘hey, can you go ahead and model this portion of the lesson?’ She’s able to get right up and model it for me.” Another said, “[The coach] demonstrated how to do the lessons and then I got the hang of it ... she would always ask for updates and see if I needed help with anything too.”

FluentSeeds coaches are not supervisors. Perhaps as a result, tutors felt they could be open about their struggles and trust that coaches would lend a helping hand. One tutor said, “She’s fantastic, very helpful, very encouraging, [she] is always someone who can come up with a strategy if you’re struggling.” Another reported communicating with her coach when she experienced challenges supporting a student in one of her groups: “I emailed her [to] ask for her advice and I think she’s helpful.” A third said, “She’s always supported me ... I feel like there’s [a] comfort level to go to her.”

Tutors rapidly improved their practice during the first months of the school year (Figure 4), according to data collected by FluentSeeds coaches during bimonthly observations and coaching sessions. In 2022-23, tutors started the year at early “emergent” levels in their practice and ended approaching “fluency” (based on a 1 to 3 rating scale). School-based literacy leaders pointed to the web of support for tutors as critical to driving impact. One said, “I know that the teachers and the tutors teaching [SIPPS], in order to be successful, have to get to a level of quality, and you don’t get to a level of quality on your own, you get to a level of quality the more you understand the program, the more you feel supported in the program, and supported in the work.”

Figure 4. FluentSeeds-coached tutors showed regular gains in their skills over time



Source: Based on observation data collected by FluentSeeds' coaches over the course of the 2022-23 school year.

The Oakland REACH and FluentSeeds helped schools tap new talent pipelines to address tutor vacancies

In the 2022-2023 school year, The Oakland REACH and FluentSeeds partnered with OUSD to address a key challenge: recruitment and retention of tutors who were working in some of the hardest-to-staff schools in the district. Recognizing that Black and Brown community members would be the most invested in educating students who attend schools in their own neighborhoods, REACH and FluentSeeds designed the Literacy Liberator Fellowship to equip community members with the mindsets, skills, and support they needed to succeed in the literacy tutor role and beyond. As a REACH leader shared, "It's different when you feel vested because this is me and I know that if I do this, there's going to be a change within my community. My community, not that community, my community, my area, my neighborhood."

Before partnering with REACH and FluentSeeds on the fellowship, OUSD had invested little in a centralized tutor recruitment strategy. The result was that schools largely built their own pipelines—often leveraging adults already in their school community, including parent volunteers and after-school program staff. But not all schools had these pipelines, leaving some with consistently unfilled tutor positions. Based on OUSD data, 20% of tutor positions remained unfilled in November 2022—three months into the new school year.

To address this challenge, REACH leveraged its pool of Parent Liberators—trained parent advocates—to canvas school sites, sharing information about the literacy crisis and the opportunity for community members to have a hand in addressing it through tutoring. Altogether, they recruited 16 community members into the eight-week fellowship training program co-led by Fluent Seeds.

As we detail in a [companion report](#), REACH's outreach yielded a diverse cohort of prospective early literacy tutors, including a former security guard, a retired educator, and a stay-at-home mother. One fellow spoke of being motivated to become an early literacy tutor to better support her own child who was struggling with reading. As she said, "I was behind and felt that I was doing the best that I could with my skills and knowledge of reading. But it wasn't enough."

“Solution builders:” The Oakland REACH’s push for improved literacy outcomes inside and outside OUSD

The Oakland REACH’s strengths in advocacy and innovation in service delivery make the organization a key partner in OUSD’s literacy work. The Oakland REACH—a Black and Latine parent advocacy group—began advocating for a new approach to early literacy in 2019 with its “Literacy for All” campaign. REACH was motivated to act based on what they heard from parents. Lakisha Young, The Oakland REACH’s founder and CEO, recalled, “When we asked our families what was keeping them up at night ... most of our parents said literacy.”

The pandemic brought more urgency to these concerns. As school buildings closed, REACH created the HUB in summer of 2020 to offer virtual tutoring and enrichment to families needing reliable support. In building the HUB, REACH was able to implement many of the literacy practices that it had called on OUSD to adopt. The Literacy Liberation Center (LLC), as it came to be known, tapped early literacy tutors already working in OUSD and local charter schools and leveraged them to provide evidence-based literacy instruction virtually.

Their work to deliver the literacy solutions that families most needed was “game changing,” according to Young. It showed that community-based organizations could move quickly to address families’ highest priorities. However, building solutions outside the district also presented a dilemma for the organization, given that the vast majority of students and families would continue to be served in OUSD, where evidence-based literacy practices were still taking root.

Thus, REACH pivoted to a new approach rooted in partnership with OUSD leaders. Between 2021 and 2023, REACH worked closely with district leaders to provide virtual tutoring in Sojourner Truth Virtual Academy and to support tutor recruitment and retention efforts.

Along the way, REACH has continued to use its advocacy roots to call for changes that make the literacy tutor role more sustainable. For example, the literacy tutor was originally a part-time position in OUSD and tutors were not eligible for benefits such as healthcare. REACH advocated for literacy tutors to become benefit eligible, and starting in the 2022-23 school year, tutors qualified.

Advocacy, coupled with hands-on implementation support, has been a potent combination. One district leader reported, “Sometimes, districts can go slow and there’s a lot of red tape. But I think, when you have someone [like REACH] with such a powerful voice, and such a clear why, ‘Yeah, there’s urgency around this, and we can do this part. If you can do this’ ... I think that’s where [the literacy work has] been able to move.”

Fellowship participants learned about the history of literacy instruction in OUSD and the science of reading, engaged in a simulation exercise to build understanding of dyslexia (a common challenge for younger readers), and learned strategies for supporting literacy in students with complex needs. The training was designed both to equip tutors with content knowledge and empower them to act as advocates in the system. Upon graduation, prospective tutors attended a two-week residency that included four additional days of training in SIPPS instruction and school visits to observe instruction.

REACH and FluentSeeds designed the training with the understanding that community members would confront power dynamics within school buildings. One local advocate noted that REACH worked to highlight the “equity implications” of the literacy tutor position and the need to be “really explicit about the support that tutors need as Black and Brown people in these buildings.”

Of the 16 fellowship participants, 11 ultimately became early literacy tutors in OUSD in the 2022-23 school year. They filled positions long left vacant, using traditional recruitment methods and helping the early literacy tutoring program end the school year at 98% staffed. Schools with fellows served a higher percentage of socioeconomically disadvantaged students than other OUSD schools (92% vs. 74% of student enrollment) and their students were less likely to meet typical growth literacy targets on iReady compared to other OUSD schools (83% of typical growth vs. 102%). This suggests that the recruitment initiative helped ensure investments in early literacy tutoring were reaching schools serving the most at-risk students.

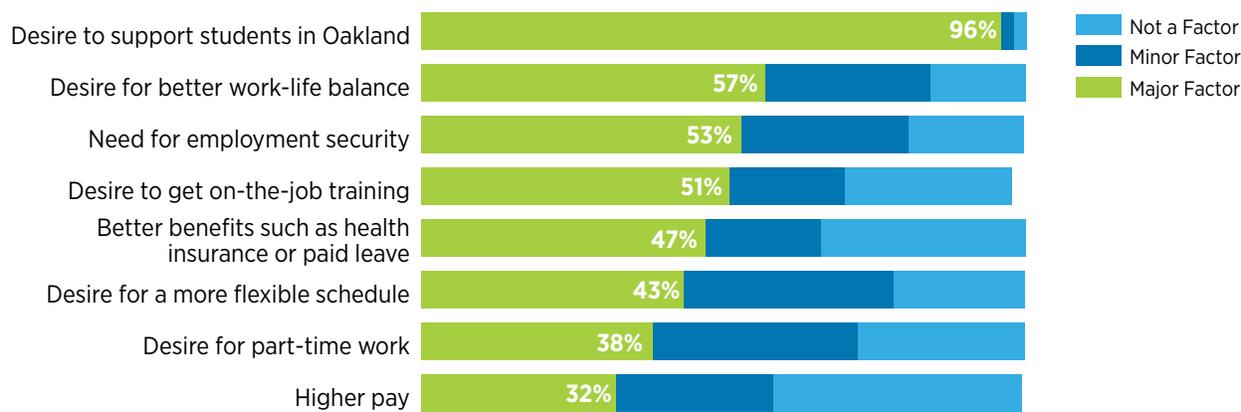
However, while the fellowship successfully brought new adults into school buildings to support literacy instruction, retaining them proved more challenging. Of the 11 fellows placed in OUSD schools in the 2022-23 school year, just five returned the following fall. Unfortunately, we were unable to conduct follow-up interviews with departing staff to identify the main factors driving attrition, nor does OUSD currently track system-wide attrition of early literacy tutors. Future research should consider the factors driving attrition and potential strategies for addressing the challenge.

Pay and working conditions may have affected recruitment and retention

Given the growth in tutor efficacy over time, retaining tutors is an important part of building capacity around literacy instruction. It is also important to ensure the investment in training and coaching pays off over the course of more than a single school year. Improving tutor recruitment and retention in OUSD offers both challenges and opportunities.

Tutors were highly motivated to contribute to the work of teaching children how to read. According to the survey, 96% of tutors originally applied to the job out of a desire to support Oakland students (see Figure 5). When asked what they liked about their jobs, one tutor described “the sense of purpose when students’ literacy improves”; another reported “making a difference in children’s life”; a third said “seeing the ‘aha’ moment a child experiences when they learn to read.” These motivations are especially important given that well over half (57.5%) reported taking a pay cut in order to become a tutor.

Figure 5. The vast majority of early literacy tutors were motivated to apply for the role based on a desire to support Oakland students



Source: Survey of OUSD Early Literacy Tutors. Participants were asked “Please indicate how important each of the following factors was in shaping your decision to apply for the tutor position. Was it a MAJOR FACTOR, MINOR FACTOR, OR NOT A FACTOR?” Percentages based on 46 respondents.

Inadequate pay was cited as a critical obstacle to supporting tutor recruitment and retention. Tutor hourly pay ranges from between \$16 to \$18. In the survey, when asked what they disliked *most* about the job, the most common response was low pay (cited by 23% of respondents). Other staff pointed to compensation as a key obstacle to recruiting tutors. For instance, a TSA shared: The starting rate is very low. And so when sites are saying, “hey, I’m hiring a tutor”. No one’s interested in the amount [of pay] for the amount of work you’d actually do for the pay ... They do hold a lot of important work, and it’s lower pay than they probably deserve.”

Frustration over pay could contribute to a sense of being undervalued by the school system. As one tutor wrote in response to the survey, “How can we say we value teaching reading when it is not reflected in our paychecks?” Overall, 73% of tutors responding to the survey agreed that they personally felt valued for their work, leaving more than a quarter of tutors feeling undervalued.

Tutors received an increase in hours (.8 FTE with benefits) and pay in the 2022-23 school year, thanks in part to the work of The Oakland REACH to transform tutoring into a meaningful economic opportunity for community members. The tutors we interviewed suggested that these changes helped improve their quality of life as well as solidify their place in schools. One said the increase in hours “make me feel like I’m part of the school.”

OUSD staff acknowledged the challenges related to pay, but pointed to limitations in how much they can increase compensation given contractual limitations on pay for paraprofessional positions that do not require a college degree. The district has considered increasing qualifications in order to increase pay, but has been reluctant to pursue this approach given uncertain implications for tutors currently working in schools.

Tutors also pointed to difficult working conditions as a key challenge in their day-to-day work. Tutors expressed frustration over insufficient time with students to support their literacy goals, lack of communication with school administrators, overcrowded groups, inadequate preparation time, and the lack of dedicated teaching space, to name just a few examples.

While pay and hours for tutors are set centrally, working conditions are in large part a function of how schools organize the tutors’ work. Addressing poor working conditions—an essential step for any long-term solution to the tutor recruitment and retention challenge—requires more monitoring of how schools are

currently organizing tutors' work and efforts to shift practice when conditions negatively affect tutor working conditions.

Early literacy tutors are supporting improved literacy outcomes but these gains are mainly concentrated in kindergarten

OUSD invested in early literacy tutors as part of a larger effort to dramatically improve literacy outcomes. While a comprehensive evaluation is outside the scope of this study, we conducted an exploratory analysis that assessed the gains in students' iReady literacy scores as a function of their receipt of early literacy tutoring.¹¹ Our analysis compared three groups of students: (1) Students who received SIPPS instruction from a FluentSeeds-coached tutor (N=1,169); (2) students who received SIPPS instruction from another adult, typically a teacher (N=5,110; and (3) students who did not have evidence of any SIPPS instruction (N=2,288). While our focus in this report is on tutored students, we also examine gains made by students who received SIPPS instruction from teachers. For students to be counted as having received instruction in SIPPS, they had to have evidence of completing at least one mastery test. Mastery tests are administered after five to ten SIPPS lessons, where each lesson is approximately 30 minutes.

Table 2 summarizes the descriptive characteristics of students in the two intervention groups—teacher and tutor-led SIPPS instruction—and the comparison group. Students with evidence of SIPPS instruction had lower baseline achievement (as measured by fall iReady scale scores) than those who did not. Students who received tutor-led SIPPS had the lowest baseline scores. Students who received SIPPS also were less likely to have disabilities and more likely to be boys than students who did not use the SIPPS curriculum.

Interestingly, the mean differences in baseline iReady scores across the three groups are driven by compositional differences in the three groups across grades K-2 (see Table A1 in the Appendix for grade-level mean differences). At kindergarten and first grade, differences in baseline iReady scores across the three comparison groups are much smaller; in contrast, the difference among the groups is very large in second grade. Students not in SIPPS had 66 points higher baseline achievement than those in tutor-led SIPPS. Because all our models use fixed effects for grades, they only compare students within grades. As we discuss below, we find our substantive results are robust to a variety of approaches that include the regression-based approaches we prefer as well as matching approaches that compare students who are more similar on baseline achievement.

Table 2. Descriptive characteristics of K-2 students who received SIPPS instruction compared to their peers

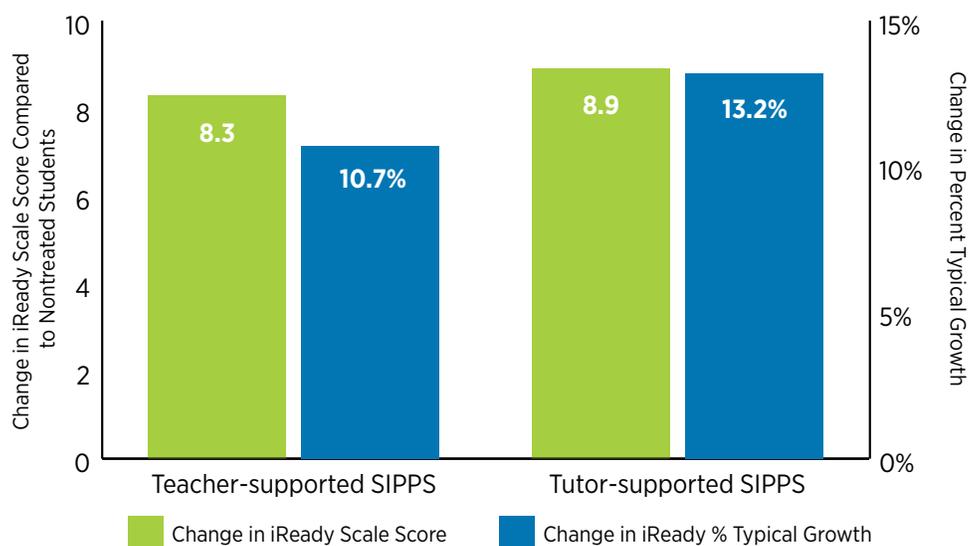
Characteristics	Neither	Teacher-Led SIPPS	Tutor-Led SIPPS
Baseline iReady score	403.3	391.4	367.9
% Black	19.2	15.7	24.5
% Hispanic	43.5	39.3	47.6
% Asian	8.4	11.1	10.9
% White	15.5	18.3	5.9
% English learner	37.0	34.0	45.8
% Female	46.0	50.1	49.7
% Special Education	22.8	10.4	13.2

Source: OUSD. Bolded cell values indicate the characteristic is statistically significant ($p < .05$) across the three comparison groups.

¹¹ According to the National Center for Intensive Intervention, iReady is an adaptive reading assessment with proven reliability and validity for assessing core literacy domains including phonological awareness, phonics, high frequency words, vocabulary, comprehension of informational text, and comprehension of literature.

Students who received tutoring from an early literacy tutor or teacher made statistically significant gains during the 2022-23 school year compared to students who did not receive any SIPPS instruction. Tutored students' gains were comparable to improvements among students who received SIPPS instruction from classroom educators (Figure 6). The results of our preferred model, which controls for students' prior achievement, demographic factors, and school characteristics, indicate tutored students in grades K-2 gained 8.9 additional points ($p < .001$) on the iReady scale.¹² This is equivalent to a 0.14 standard deviation improvement in iReady scale scores.¹³

Figure 6. Students who receive SIPPS instruction from either tutors or teachers made larger literacy gains compared to peers



Note: Figure displays the coefficient value for the effects of teacher supported and tutor supported SIPPS instruction based on a multivariate statistical model that controls for prior achievement, demographic factors, and school characteristics.

The results are similar if we look at the percentage of typical growth, an iReady metric that considers the average growth expected for a student taking the diagnostic. Under this metric, students meeting expected growth benchmarks score at or above 100%. As shown in Figure 6, compared to students who did not receive instruction in SIPPS, those receiving SIPPS instruction by a classroom educator increased their typical growth by 10.7 percentage points more ($p < .01$) and those supported by a tutor gained 13.2 percentage points ($p < .01$).

Though in both cases the gains for tutored students are more positive than those for students who received SIPPS instruction from a teacher or another adult, the difference is not statistically significant (i.e., the two coefficients are equal in magnitude). We take this as promising evidence that FluentSeeds-supported tutors

¹² Our preferred model compares two treatment groups of students: those who were identified as being tutored by a FluentSeeds-supported tutor and those who received SIPPS instruction by others (predominantly teachers but may also include some volunteer tutors though staff suggested this was unusual given the skills and materials required to implement SIPPS). We restrict our analysis to grades K-2 because these are the focal grades for daily SIPPS instruction. We discuss all our modeling choices in the methodological appendix, but all models have an outcome of Spring 2023 iReady scores and predictors including 1) student demographics (e.g., race ethnicity, gender, language spoken at home, English fluency, special education status), 2) Fall 2022 iReady scores, and 3) fixed effects for schools and grade levels, to control for average differences across grades and schools.

¹³ These coefficients are approximately 15-17% smaller than those in models that control only for fixed effects and prior achievement, implying that observed characteristics explain a modest proportion of the estimated difference in literacy gains among the three groups.

are providing SIPPS instruction at a similar efficacy rate as classroom educators, who provided the majority of SIPPS instruction for students not being tutored.

While the overall results show tutored students experienced gains in their literacy outcomes, supplementary analyses conducted separately by grade level reveal that the gains were driven substantially by results in kindergarten. Table 3 shows the coefficients overall and separately by grade level for both scale scores and percent of typical growth. The table shows large gains in kindergarten. For instance, kindergarten students receiving small group SIPPS instruction by a tutor had 38% higher growth than those not receiving any SIPPS instruction. Scale score gains were also large, approximately 46% of the baseline (Fall) standard deviation of kindergarten scores. Given that students who did not receive any SIPPS instruction in kindergarten gained an average of 19.1 points from Fall to Spring, these results indicate tutored students gained approximately an additional year's learning. However, it is important to note that the gains for students not receiving SIPPS during the kindergarten year were very low—just 39% of typical growth.

Table 3. Tutored students gained the most in kindergarten

Grade	Scale Scores	Percent of Typical Growth
Overall	8.85	13.2
K	17.58	37.7
1	2.38	3.0
2	1.73	-3.3

Note: Table displays the coefficient value for the effects of tutor-supported SIPPS instruction based on a multivariate statistical model that controls for prior achievement, demographic factors, and school characteristics. Coefficients in bold are statistically significant ($p < .05$).

Conclusion

The dismal state of literacy outcomes in public schools has caused concern for decades, but in recent years these worries have reached a new fever pitch. Between 2019 and 2022, state legislatures passed more than 200 bills that sought to push and pull public schools to embrace the “science of reading.”¹⁴ How these well-intended efforts fare will depend significantly on the extent to which leaders support educators to implement evidence-based literacy practices.

Oakland’s homegrown early literacy tutoring initiative provides instructive evidence on how districts can proactively support shifts in literacy instruction. The teachers and leaders we spoke with were clear: their ability to meet students’ individual needs for instruction hinged on the early literacy tutors who worked with them side-by-side. In turn, that collaborative work was dependent on a shared, evidence-based curriculum and a web of support that helped tutors become educators in their own right.

The promising results described here point to the potential for school-based tutors to accelerate literacy outcomes for students. Teachers also benefited, as tutors helped shoulder some of the burden of ever-growing student need, unwieldy class sizes, and too little time. But our findings also reveal the precariousness of these interventions. As our study was underway, the Oakland school board considered—and ultimately rejected—a proposal that would have cut dozens of early literacy tutor positions from schools. But financial stresses continue: tutors still aren’t paid a wage commensurate with the professional expectations associated with their roles, and schools still don’t have enough tutors to meet the need. OUSD’s ongoing budget challenges may further strain this promising yet still-fragile set of reforms.

Our findings also raise questions about whether the traditional model of one teacher to a class of 25 to 30 students, long a hallmark of the United State’s public education system, is well-positioned to deliver the advances in literacy that students need the most. Expecting teachers working alone in their classrooms to provide both differentiation and acceleration may always have been a fool’s errand; continuing to embrace this approach as students continue to struggle and deal with the lifelong consequences of illiteracy may be irresponsible.

For those who seek to help students make up ground lost during the pandemic, this report also has important implications. To date, researchers and policymakers alike have encouraged schools to invest in tutoring programs and other “add-on” learning acceleration strategies that leave the traditional classroom and teaching strategies largely untouched. Perhaps as a result, participation in tutoring and other academic interventions has not met expectations¹⁵ and district leaders are increasingly refocusing away from add-on programs like tutoring and back toward core classroom instruction.¹⁶ This report makes clear that these strategies are unlikely to be effective so long as they simply layer new expectations for greater differentiation and acceleration onto an already overburdened system.

14 Sarah Schwartz, “Which States Have Passed ‘Science of Reading’ Laws? What’s in Them?,” *Education Week*, July 20, 2022, sec. Reading & Literacy, <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/which-states-have-passed-science-of-reading-laws-whats-in-them/2022/07>.

15 Patrick Wall, Amelia Pak-Harvey, and Collin Binkley, “Tutoring Help Reaches Few Students despite Nationwide Push,” *Chalkbeat*, March 10, 2023, <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2023/3/10/23629236/learning-loss-tutoring-students-pandemic-funds-covid>.

16 Lydia Rainey, Paul Hill, and Robin Lake, “Teaching Recovery? Three Years In, School System Leaders Report That the Pandemic Weakened Instruction,” *Center on Reinventing Public Education*, 2023, https://crpe.org/wp-content/uploads/ASDP_Wave4_final.pdf.

Recommendations

As more schools consider a shift toward evidence-based literacy instruction, Oakland provides lessons for school systems that want to dramatically accelerate outcomes:

- **Leverage tutors and paraprofessionals to remake the traditional classroom model.** Now more than ever, students need access to meaningfully differentiated instruction. Tutors and paraprofessionals are well positioned to help schools achieve this end. While OUSD’s early literacy program did not place a tutor in every classroom, some Oakland-based charter schools have leveraged this approach, creating the opportunity to deepen the integration of tutors into the school day. This approach could also provide tutors with mentoring opportunities and a pipeline into teaching that could help sustain investments in tutor training and support over time.
- **Build coherence and systematize collaboration across the work of tutors and teachers.** The power of Oakland’s early literacy tutoring initiative rests in its integration into school-wide approaches to literacy instruction, starting by having an evidence-based curriculum like SIPPS. Tutors working alongside teachers could help shoulder the work of literacy instruction, reducing the burden on stretched teachers and providing children access to meaningfully differentiated instruction. Foundational elements of this approach include a common curriculum to guide both teacher and tutor-led instruction, a shared language about skill acquisition and development, and systems and structures for collaboration and monitoring student progress. Principals, teachers, and tutors should know they are on the same team—equally equipped and accountable for student progress.
- **Invest in intentional recruiting, training and support structures for tutors.** The Oakland REACH and FluentSeeds’ approach to supporting Oakland tutors shows the value in capitalizing on untapped pools of talent in the community and supporting them to develop the mindsets and skills necessary to become educators. To date, their partnership has helped 46 Oakland parents and other community members develop the skills to support early literacy instruction. More school systems should consider deliberately building talent pipelines and investing in community-based tutors to improve their practice over time. As part of this work, tutors need access to fair compensation and meaningful opportunities for advancement; otherwise, school systems’ investments in them will be lost as they seek out alternative opportunities.
- **Optimize tutor working conditions and monitor implementation.** Schedules, physical location, and group sizes all played a role in how well tutors could perform their duties and support students’ literacy skill development. Schools considering using school-based tutors should think intentionally about these and other factors that may affect the quality of their tutoring programs and student results. Centralized data monitoring may help school districts identify more or less effective practices that vary across schools as well as support refinements to the model and school supports over time.

Methodological Appendix

The following pages provide additional information about the research methods used to understand the implementation and impact of Oakland’s early literacy tutoring initiative.

Student outcomes analysis

Data and Sample

We merged two datasets for this analysis. The main dataset included student test scores, attendance data, and demographics for 17,798 Oakland Unified students in grades TK-5. We also received a dataset indicating students’ participation in tutoring provided by a FluentSeeds-coached tutor. This dataset contained 1,661 unduplicated records. These datasets were merged using anonymized student IDs.

Using the merged dataset, we made a number of sample restriction decisions to arrive at our final analytic sample. First, we excluded grades TK and 3-5, because early literacy tutoring is primarily targeted at grades K-2. Second, some students were assigned a tutor but did not complete any SIPPS mastery tests; we took this as an indication that they did not participate in tutoring and therefore assigned them to the comparison group of students who did not receive any SIPPS instruction (either tutor- or teacher-led). Table A1 provides descriptive characteristics of the sample, disaggregated by grade level.

Table A1. Baseline literacy assessment scores by grade

CHARACTERISTICS	NEITHER	TEACHER-LED SIPPS	TUTOR-LED SIPPS
KINDERGARTEN			
Mean	335.31	355.23	342.72
Standard Deviation	(39.44)	(37.95)	(31.78)
# of Students	426	1445	381
1ST GRADE			
Mean	383.71	388.07	369.90
Standard Deviation	(67.43)	(47.81)	(39.52)
# of Students	337	1797	385
2ND GRADE			
Mean	459.33	426.9	393.03
Standard Deviation	(81.19)	(58.22)	(44.41)
# of Students	634	1639	349

Source: OUSD. Table presents mean baseline (fall) iReady scale score by comparison group. All differences between groups are significant.

After these sample restrictions, 8,567 eligible K-2 students remained in the analytic sample. For our most restrictive analyses (i.e., the ones with the most control variables), missing data resulted in an analytic sample of 7,152 K-2 students (of whom 1,093 received tutoring, 4,770 received SIPPS instruction from another adult, and 1,289 received neither). Nearly all of the missing data were on the Fall 2022 achievement variable or students who did not take the baseline iReady assessment.

Statistical Model and Variables

We were interested in estimating the effect of tutoring and SIPPS instruction provided by another adult (typically a teacher) in the 2022-23 academic year relative to the group of students who did not receive SIPPS instruction. We did not have information on how students were selected to participate in SIPPS or SEEDs, nor were we able to manipulate treatment assignments. Thus, we used observational methods.

Conceptually, we wanted to compare three demographically similar children who began the 2022-23 school year with similar academic performance but who were assigned to the three different groups (Tutor-supported SIPPS, Teacher-supported SIPPS, Neither). These comparisons were carried out with several sets of controls:

- Most importantly, we controlled for baseline differences in reading performance using iReady scores taken in the Fall of 2022. In all models we controlled for students' Fall 2022 overall scale score.
- To address threats related to differences in school effectiveness, we employed school- fixed effects, meaning that all estimated coefficients were based on comparing students within schools, some of whom had received SIPPS or SEEDs and some of whom had not.
- To address threats related to differences in grade levels (e.g., differences in the properties of the iReady scores across the scale), we employed grad- fixed effects, meaning that all estimated coefficients were based on comparing students within grades, some of whom had received SIPPS or SEEDs and some of whom had not.
- To address additional threats related to differences in student composition among the treated groups, we used a set of controls for student demographics. Specifically, we controlled for the following: racial/ethnic group, gender, language spoken at home (English, Spanish, other), English fluency level, and special education status.

This was our preferred model. Our outcome variable of interest was students' iReady scores in Spring 2023, which are measured in two ways—scale score points and “percent of typical growth.” We regressed this outcome measure on the above controls, as well as dummy variables indicating students' treatment group (Tutor-supported SIPPS, Teacher-supported SIPPS, Neither). The coefficients on the treatment dummy variables were therefore taken as the effect of the treatments on student reading achievement on the Spring 2023 iReady.

In addition to the main models, we supplemented with an examination of the effects of student attendance and SIPPS mastery test passage on learning. For attendance, we used students' attendance rate from the 2022-23 school year (controlling for prior year attendance). For SIPPS mastery test passage, we used the Spring 2023 variable indicating 2022-23 total number of mastery tests passed.

We examined the robustness of our main results using several alternative models; the substantive findings we report in the text were unaffected by any of these modeling choices, though of course the exact coefficients and statistical significance levels fluctuated somewhat across these many models:

- We attempted various forms of “matching” models, including kernel density and nearest neighbor matching, that use the same sets of control variables but attempted to construct more exact matches between treated and control students.

- We used more restrictive forms of fixed effects (school-by-grade, rather than school and grade separately), again to compare students who were more similarly situated across the treatment groups.
- We leveraged the longitudinal nature of the test score data and conduct “difference-in-differences” models, which compare treatment and control students pre- and post-receipt of tutoring (these models have considerably smaller samples because the K students do not have prior year achievement data, nor do they generally have mid-year iReady scores).

Again, looking across these various models, the broad pattern of results aligns with what is reported here in the text—overall positive effects driven by substantial positive effects of the treatments in kindergarten.

Tutor Survey

We administered a 30-question survey to all centrally-funded early literacy tutors employed by OUSD in the spring of the 2022-23 school year. Survey questions asked about motives for applying to the role, working conditions in schools, and the challenges and benefits they experience working as a tutor. The survey was programmed into Qualtrics and distributed to tutors using personalized links to their OUSD email. Survey completers were offered a \$10 incentive. Three reminder messages went out to non-responders over the course of four weeks. The final sample of 46 respondents represents a 55% response rate. All survey data were analyzed descriptively.

Interviews and School Case Studies

We conducted two waves of interviews with participants with knowledge of and experience implementing the early literacy tutoring initiative. The first wave of interviews focused on understanding the historical context around early literacy in OUSD as well as the perspectives of key partners in the initiative. It also included interviews with seven prospective early literacy tutors going through the Oakland REACH’s Literacy Liberator fellowship program. The second wave of interviews focused on school-based staff responsible for implementing the tutoring initiative. We selected five schools for inclusion. We worked with OUSD staff to identify schools that were perceived by instructional coaches as representing “high” or “low” fidelity implementers of the central office’s early literacy strategy. We wanted to capture both high and low fidelity sites to understand whether school staff experiences and the impact of tutoring varied based on implementation conditions. We ultimately recruited three high-fidelity and one low-fidelity site into the study. At each site, we sought interviews with the principal, any literacy-focused instructional leads (e.g., TSA or coach), teachers who work with early literacy tutors, and the early literacy tutors. At one site, we also interviewed a parent whose child works with an early literacy tutor. We interviewed 46 stakeholders altogether across the phase 1 and phase 2 interviews. All interview audio files were transcribed and analyzed for key themes. For school-specific transcripts, we constructed a case narrative that described how each school organized early literacy tutoring and stakeholder perceptions of the tutoring initiative.

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The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) is a nonpartisan research organization at [Arizona State University’s Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College](#). We rigorously examine and test transformative ideas, using our research to inform action. We are truth tellers who combine forward-thinking ideas with empirical rigor. Since 1993, we have been untethered to any one ideology but unwavering in a core belief: public education is a goal—to prepare every child for citizenship, economic independence, and personal fulfillment—and not a particular set of institutions. From that foundation, we work to inform meaningful changes in policy and practice that will drive the public education system to meet the needs of every student.