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Examining Implementation and Outcomes of the Project On-Track High-Dosage Literacy Tutoring Program

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Examining Implementation and Outcomes of the Project On-Track High-Dosage Literacy Tutoring Program

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August 2024

School districts in northeastern Tennessee have had persistently low proficiency rates in grade 3 English language arts, which were exacerbated by disruptions in schooling due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In response, the Niswonger Foundation, a technical assistance provider that supports these districts, developed Project On-Track, a high-dosage, small-group literacy tutoring program for students in grade 1–3. Its online adaptive program, Amplify Reading, groups students by skill level and generates mini-lessons aligned to the science of reading that are delivered by tutors. Although the content of the tutoring sessions is highly structured, Project On-Track offers schools flexibility in how they implement the program, including when they provide tutoring, who provides tutoring, in which grade levels they offer tutoring, and how they identify students within a grade level for tutoring. This flexibility can make it easier for schools to adopt the program, particularly rural schools, which may face greater challenges in hiring tutors or delivering tutoring outside of school hours. However, variation in implementation may also affect program effectiveness. To inform future implementation of the program, this study describes the characteristics of students who participated in a full year of Project On-Track and how schools implemented the program, with a focus on three implementation features: when and how frequently tutoring is offered and who provides it. By reporting on the association between variations in implementation and student literacy scores, the study offers important insights to inform future program implementation.

The study found no differences in student literacy scores based on timing or frequency of tutoring. Most schools (66 percent) offered tutoring during school and more than twice a week (64 percent). Rural schools were more likely to offer tutoring during school (92 percent) than were nonrural schools (47 percent). Most tutors were current teachers (55 percent) or retired teachers (12 percent). This study does not provide evidence of differences in student literacy scores based on tutor qualifications. More than half the students who participated in a full year of Project On-Track tutoring started the year with literacy assessment scores identifying them as most at risk for reading difficulties, and 42 percent of them improved to a lower risk category after one year of tutoring. Although this study uses descriptive methods and cannot assess effectiveness, the findings suggest that schools and districts using a highly structured tutoring program like Project On-Track might be able to exercise flexibility in when and how often tutoring is offered and by whom without compromising program quality and benefits to students.

Why this study?

School districts in northeastern Tennessee are facing an urgent literacy crisis. Low proficiency rates for grade 3 English language arts are a persistent issue in the region (Tennessee Department of Education, 2019). The literacy crisis was exacerbated by disruptions in schooling caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, which prompted the Tennessee Commission on Education Recovery and Innovation (2020) to prioritize "aggressively address[ing] learning loss with a keen focus on early literacy" (p. 23).

In response to the crisis of low literacy, the Niswonger Foundation, a technical assistance provider that supports school districts in northeastern Tennessee,

For additional information, including background on the study, technical methods, and supporting analyses, access the report appendices at https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/Products/Region/appalachia/Publication/108132.

developed Project On-Track. Launched in 2021, Project On-Track provides high-dosage, small-group literacy tutoring to students in grade 1-3. All Project On-Track schools maintain tutor-student ratios of 1:3 and provide tutoring in 30-minute sessions at least two times a week. All schools use the same curriculum, Amplify Reading, which draws on data from regular progress monitoring to generate customized tutoring lessons that are highly structured and prescribed.

Beyond Project On-Track's minimum tutoring dosage requirements and the consistent curriculum (see box 1), schools have some flexibility in when they provide tutoring, who provides tutoring, which grade levels they tutor, and how they identify students to be tutored (box 1). Such flexibility can make it easier for schools to adopt new programs, such as literacy tutoring, and can support schools in meeting the needs of the student populations they serve. This flexibility can be particularly helpful for rural schools, which may face greater challenges in hiring tutors or delivering tutoring outside of school hours. However, variation in implementation might also affect program effectiveness.

To understand how schools implemented the program and how variation in implementation is associated with student literacy scores and to inform future implementation of the Project On-Track tutoring program, the Regional Educational Laboratory Appalachia partnered with the Niswonger Foundation, Project On-Track staff, and participating districts to conduct this study.

Box 1. Project On-Track intervention

Project On-Track is a technology-supported, small-group tutoring intervention. All Project On-Track schools use the mCLASS intervention component of Amplify Reading, an online adaptive program, to develop students' foundational literacy skills in alignment with Tennessee Foundational Literacy Standards (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.). The mCLASS intervention provides additional support to students who are identified as struggling readers and can be used as a Tier 2 or Tier 3 intervention in a response to intervention (RTI) system or a multitiered system of supports (MTSS). Amplify Reading and mCLASS are aligned with the science of reading (National Center on Improving Literacy, 2022) in focusing on phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension (Amplify Education, n.d.). There are three components to mCLASS: the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) assessment, which tutors administer to assess students' literacy skills; supports for tutor-delivered small-group instruction (tutor-student ratio of 1:3); and an online platform with reading games that students can play during tutoring or outside of tutoring sessions.

All Project On-Track schools incorporate the first two components to provide tutoring sessions with highly structured and prescribed content. Amplify Reading uses data from the DIBELS assessments to suggest how tutors should group students by skill level and generates mini-lessons on foundational literacy skills for use during small-group instruction. Mini-lessons take about 30 minutes to deliver. After six to eight mini-lessons, tutors reassess students so that Amplify Reading can update student groupings and generate new mini-lessons based on student progress. This cycle of assessing students to understand areas of strength and growth, differentiating instruction to target areas for growth, and reassessing to continually adjust instruction is aligned with evidence-based recommendations for supporting struggling readers (Gersten et al., 2008).

Project On-Track schools can choose to incorporate the third component during tutoring sessions rather than outside of tutoring sessions. In that case, the third component incorporates a blended learning approach to tutoring, with students splitting their time between receiving tutoring in small groups and playing online Amplify Reading games for targeted practice.[1]

Project On-Track schools can choose whether to deliver tutoring during school or outside of school hours.

Project On-Track sets minimum requirements for the frequency and duration of tutoring. Schools must provide in-person tutoring to students at least two days a week for at least 30 minutes a session. Tutoring must be delivered for at least 12 weeks a semester. Schools must ensure that all students work for a minimum of 30 minutes with a human tutor during each session. Time spent on the Amplify Reading platform does not count toward this 30-minute requirement.

Schools can choose their tutors, but all tutors, regardless of teaching experience, must participate in the same training on the Project On-Track model. Project On-Track provides the training, which includes a one-hour introduction to the program; four hours of asynchronous training modules on how to use the Amplify Reading system platform and lesson

plans, which include strategies aligned with the science of reading; a one-hour discussion and debrief about the asynchronous training modules; and a two-hour training on trauma-informed care. During the school year, two Project On-Track staff members who are experienced tutors offer weekly virtual office hours to answer tutors' questions and problem-solve. Project On-Track staff also conduct regular site visits to provide feedback to tutors and identify any additional support that a curriculum specialist could provide.

Schools participating in Project On-Track also have flexibility in what grade levels to engage and which students to serve within those grade levels. Project On-Track staff expect schools to provide tutoring to students who need extra literacy support but do not specify how to identify those students. Schools have latitude in how they use Project On-Track in conjunction with other early literacy supports, such as Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports provided to students as part of an RTI system or MTSS, to address the needs of each student.

Note

1. Project On-Track did not collect reliable data about whether schools used the blended learning approach, so the study did not examine this aspect of implementation.

Many aspects of the Project On-Track program align with a growing body of research that demonstrates the effectiveness of tutoring programs to support students who are struggling academically. This research provides evidence for the effectiveness of programs like Project On-Track that offer tutoring to small groups of students (no more than four students per tutor) and incorporate ongoing, formative assessment to differentiate instruction (National Student Support Accelerator, n.d.; Robinson et al., 2021).

A recent meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials found that the impacts of tutoring programs varied by student grade level and the characteristics of program implementation for which Project On-Track provides flexibility to schools (Nickow et al., 2024). For example:

- Literacy tutoring programs that serve older students (grade 2–5) tend to have smaller effects than those serving younger students (preschool through grade 1).
- Tutoring offered during school tends to be more effective than tutoring offered outside of school hours; however, this finding should be interpreted with caution because the meta-analysis does not include any rigorous evaluations of tutoring programs delivered by teachers out of school hours.
- Tutoring offered three days a week is more effective than less frequent tutoring, and students in preschool through grade 1 may benefit from tutoring more than three days a week.
- Tutoring is more effective when delivered by teachers, teaching assistants, or paraprofessionals than when delivered by nonprofessional tutors or parents. Another meta-analysis suggests no difference in effectiveness between literacy tutoring delivered by teachers or by paraprofessionals (Neitzel et al., 2022).

The current study builds on this research by examining how Project On-Track was implemented, the characteristics of the students served by the program, and variations in student literacy scores across the different implementation approaches used by Project On-Track schools. Results of the study can help education leaders understand how one high-dosage tutoring program was implemented in the region.

Research questions

The study addressed three research questions (see box 2 for more detail about methods):

1. How did schools implement Project On-Track during the 2022/23 school year (timing of tutoring, frequency of tutoring, and tutor qualifications)? Did implementation vary by the rurality of the participating schools?

2. What were the grade levels and beginning-of-year reading skill levels of the students whom Project On-Track served for a full school year? Did these student characteristics vary by implementation approaches (timing of tutoring, frequency of tutoring, and tutor qualifications)?

3. Among students who started the year most at risk for reading difficulties,[1] how much progress did students make in their literacy skills during a year of participation in Project On-Track?
   a. Did progress vary by student grade level or the rurality of participating schools?
   b. Did progress vary by timing of tutoring (during school or outside of school hours)?
   c. Did progress vary by frequency of tutoring (two days a week or more often)?
   d. Did progress vary by tutor qualifications (teachers, administrators, or paraprofessionals compared with college students or others)?

Box 2. Data sources, study sample, methods, limitations, and positionality statement

Data sources. The study relied on five types of data about schools that implemented Project On-Track literacy tutoring for students in grade 1–3 during the 2022/23 school year. Additional details about each data source are in appendix A.

- *Timing and frequency of tutoring.* Project On-Track staff provided information about the timing and frequency of tutoring from program records. Some Project On-Track schools offered tutoring to some students during school and to others outside of school hours. Project On-Track staff provided data about the timing of tutoring at the student level (the time of day when each student was scheduled to receive tutoring). Frequency refers to the planned number of days tutoring was to be offered for all students at each school and was measured at the school level. The study team divided schools into two categories based on tutoring frequency: schools that offered tutoring two days a week, which was the minimum frequency required by Project On-Track, and schools that offered tutoring more frequently.
- *Tutor qualifications.* Project On-Track administered a survey to tutors asking whether they were a certified teacher, assistant/paraprofessional, retired teacher, school or district administrator, college student, or other. A school's tutors could have different qualifications (for example, in a school with three tutors, one might be a certified teacher, one a retired teacher, and one an assistant/paraprofessional). The study team calculated the percentage of tutors at each school who were current or retired teachers, administrators, or paraprofessionals and classified schools into one of two groups: those that used only teachers, administrators, or paraprofessionals as tutors and those that used as least some tutors who were not teachers, administrators, or paraprofessionals.[1]
- *Student early literacy level.* Project On-Track tutors administered the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) assessment at the beginning and end of the year, which yielded composite scores of students' early literacy skills. The publishers of DIBELS provide cutpoints for the composite scores that define four categories of risk for reading difficulties (negligible risk, minimal risk, some risk, and at risk).
- *Student characteristics.* Student characteristics included in the analysis were grade level, reported race/ethnicity, receipt of multilingual learner supports, and receipt of special education services.[2]
- *School characteristics.* Data on the rurality of schools came from the Common Core of Data (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021/22), and data on the previous academic performance of schools came from the Tennessee Department of Education (2019). The percentage of students who scored proficient on the 2022 English language arts subject-area test of the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program in grade 3–5 was included as a school-level covariate in the models used to address research question 3.

The study team also conducted qualitative interviews with representatives from six schools that were selected because of the variation across these schools in how they implemented Project On-Track. These interviews with five school or district leaders and seven Project On-Track site coordinators (one interviewee served in both roles) provide context for the quantitative findings for the first research question. The interviews included questions about factors that influenced school leaders' decisions to use particular implementation approaches, challenges with implementation, and ways schools used Project On-Track in conjunction with other literacy supports to meet the needs of all students. Additional details about how the study team selected schools and these interviews are in appendix B.

Study sample. The study sample included students in grade 1–3 who participated in a full year (that is, at least 12 weeks a semester, for two semesters) of Project On-Track at a school-based tutoring site that collected tutor survey data during the

1. Students were assigned to risk categories (negligible risk, minimal risk, some risk, and at risk) based on their assessment scores on the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (see box 2). The study team considered students in the "at risk" category to be most at risk.

2022/23 school year. The study sample did not include students who participated in less than a full year of Project On-Track tutoring. Project On-Track schools discontinued tutoring during the school year for students who made sufficient progress to no longer meet the school's criteria for participation. The study team was not able to gather information about students who left the program, including the number of students who left the program and why they left the program.[3]

Analyses of the first two research questions used the full study sample of 1,126 students in 56 school-based tutoring sites. Analyses to address the third research question on how much progress students made in literacy skills used data only on students who were classified as at risk for reading difficulties based on their DIBELS assessment at the start of the school year: 622 students in 54 school-based tutoring sites. The study team assumed that this group of students, who had the lowest scores on the DIBELS at the start of the year, would be least likely to include students who made enough progress over the course of the year to discontinue tutoring; additional details about the study sample are in appendix A.

Methodology. For the first two research questions, the study team calculated descriptive statistics and frequencies. For the third research question, the study team conducted two types of analyses. First, they examined the extent to which students changed risk categories from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. Second, they used multilevel regression models to examine the associations between the three variable tutoring implementation features (timing of tutoring, frequency of tutoring, and tutor qualifications) and end-of-year student literacy scores. Multilevel regression models account for the likelihood that students in the same school were more similar to one another than they were to students in other schools. Additional details about the methodology are in appendix A. The main report presents any associations that were significant at $p < .05$. Additional analyses, including associations that were not significant, can be found in appendix C.

Limitations. The study design is limited in that it does not support causal interpretations. There is no comparison or control group, so the study offers no information about how students who participated in tutoring compared with students who did not. The study may underestimate the progress that students made during their participation in Project On-Track because the analyses excluded students who made enough progress during the year to be considered no longer at risk for reading difficulties. Tutors did not administer end-of-year DIBELS to students who discontinued the program during the year, and thus students who made enough progress to no longer need tutoring are not included in the analyses presented in this report. Additionally, the methods in this study can account only for factors for which data are available. Data on attendance at tutoring sessions were not available, so the study examines only variation in the number of days of tutoring a week that students in each school were scheduled to receive. All participating students were expected to attend tutoring every day that it was scheduled, although some students likely missed some tutoring sessions. Without attendance data, this study cannot draw conclusions about the importance of tutoring dosage for student outcomes. Additionally, the study team was unable to link students to individual tutors, so they examined tutor qualifications only at the school level. Without student-level data, the study could examine only differences in outcomes for students who received tutoring in schools that employed tutors with different qualifications, rather than differences in outcomes associated with having a tutor with particular qualifications. Lastly, variation in implementation might also be associated with other, unmeasured school, district, or student characteristics that are also associated with student literacy scores.

Positionality statement. The study team includes former educators, some of whom have experience working as tutors, and researchers without direct classroom experience. Additionally, study team members have varying levels of experience working in high-poverty education settings and in rural communities. All members of the study team identify as White and female. The team drew on these experiences as well as existing research and an understanding of local context from study partners to inform the study design and develop the qualitative data collection protocols.

Notes

1. The study team grouped administrators with teachers when examining tutor qualifications because administrators were assumed to have been former teachers or to have comparable training to teachers.

2. Reflective of the communities in which the schools were located, the study sample included only a small proportion of students receiving multilingual learner supports, and the vast majority of students identified as White. Because of this, the study team was unable to examine whether implementation varied for students who did and those who did not receive multilingual learner supports and by student race/ethnicity.

3. It is possible that students left Project On-Track for other reasons besides making progress. For example, students might have discontinued the program due to parents opting out of the program or students moving out of Project On-Track schools.

Findings

This section describes how schools implemented Project On-Track and how implementation varied by rurality of participating schools, the characteristics of the students who participated in a full year of Project On-Track, and the progress students made in their literacy skills after a year of participation in Project On-Track. Only a small proportion of the sample included students who received special education services (15 percent), so those analyses should be interpreted with caution and are presented in appendix C, along with additional supporting analyses.

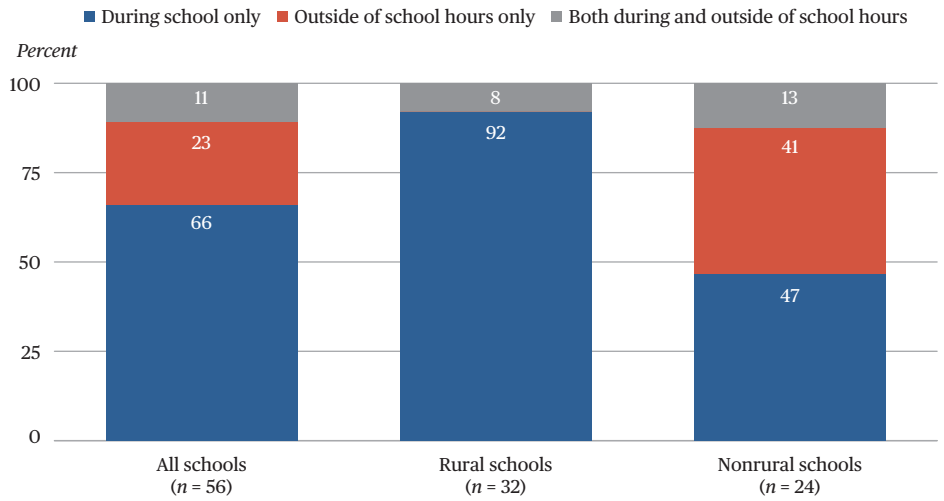
To provide additional context for the findings, this section also includes quotations and illustrative examples from interviews with five school leaders and six site coordinators at six case study Project On-Track schools. Even though the study team aimed to select schools for these interviews that varied in both school context and approach to implementing Project On-Track, these examples are not generalizable to all schools across the region that implemented Project On-Track. (Refer to appendix B for more detailed case studies about each school.)

Nearly half of nonrural schools and almost all rural schools offered Project On-Track tutoring during school

Two-thirds of all Project On-Track schools offered tutoring only during school (66 percent; figure 1), though rural schools were more likely to do so. Ninety-two percent of rural schools offered tutoring during school only, compared with 47 percent of nonrural schools.

During interviews, one school leader noted that tutoring during school was particularly important in her rural school because of challenges with transportation before and after school: "[Our district is] exceptionally rural. Transportation is a huge barrier to our kids. If we don't get them to and from [tutoring sessions], then we don't get them [to attend]. We made the decision that whatever we did [with Project On-Track], we would have to work it out during the school day." Leaders at another rural school had originally planned to offer Project On-Track tutoring after school, but quickly realized it would be easier for students to attend tutoring sessions during the school day. The site coordinator explained, "We found that we weren't reaching as many students

Figure 1. Rural schools were more likely than nonrural schools to offer Project On-Track tutoring during school, 2022/23



Source: Analysis of data provided by Project On-Track staff and National Center for Education Statistics (2021/22).

[after school].... We've got them here at school already, so that was the biggest reason we shifted [to offering tutoring during school]."

Interviewees in nonrural schools shared other challenges with implementing tutoring after school. One school leader mentioned that recruiting tutors was difficult when tutoring took place after school: "We were lucky to find the teachers that wanted to [tutor after school]. We also have other afterschool programs. We were competing against that. [Identifying tutors required asking] who wants to work after school and is not too tired to do it." Another school leader from a nonrural school noted that attendance during afterschool tutoring was inconsistent because students were often picked up early from afterschool programs.

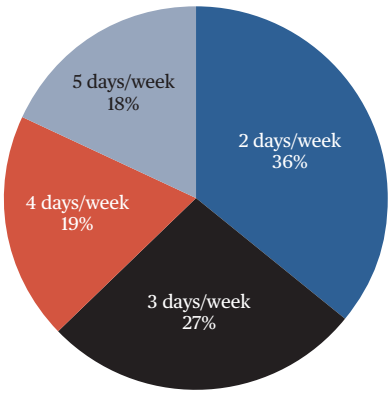
Information from some of the qualitative interviews revealed that offering tutoring during school came with its own challenges. Some interviewees described the complexity of scheduling tutoring sessions during the school day; leaders in all four of the case study schools that offered Project On-Track tutoring during school ultimately decided to address this challenge by providing tutoring during a block of time set aside for tiered response to intervention (RTI) supports (see cross-cutting themes in appendix B). Another interviewee mentioned that their school did not offer Project On-Track tutoring during school because their school used a different curriculum for RTI.

Most schools offered Project On-Track tutoring sessions more than twice a week

About one-third of schools (36 percent) offered tutoring sessions two days a week (figure 2). The remaining schools offered tutoring sessions more than two times a week, exceeding Project On-Track program requirements. Frequency of tutoring did not vary significantly by rurality (see table C2 in appendix C).

One interviewee explained that her school offered tutoring more than twice a week to ensure that students received the minimum tutoring dosage even if they were occasionally absent. She explained, "We started off with two [days a week], and I just felt like if a kid is absent one day, that's just one day a week [that they would receive tutoring], and it's not going to be effective that way." Adjusting the schedule in this way allowed the school to provide more equitable services by increasing the likelihood that each student received tutoring at least twice a week. Another school leader explained that their school decided to offer tutoring more than twice a week because "We figured more [tutoring] is better. We know we only had to do it two days a week, but if we

Figure 2. Most Project On-Track schools offered tutoring sessions more than two days a week, 2022/23



(*n* = 56 schools)

Source: Analysis of data provided by Project On-Track staff.

can get kids to do it and teachers to show up, I'm all for doing it [more frequently]. Our kids are so needy. So, the more [tutoring] that they can get, the better off they are going to be."

Sites that provided tutoring during school only were more likely than sites that provided tutoring outside of school hours to offer tutoring more than twice a week. More than three-quarters of sites that provided tutoring during school only offered more than two tutoring sessions a week (78 percent) compared with less than one-quarter of sites that provided tutoring outside of school hours (23 percent; figure 3).

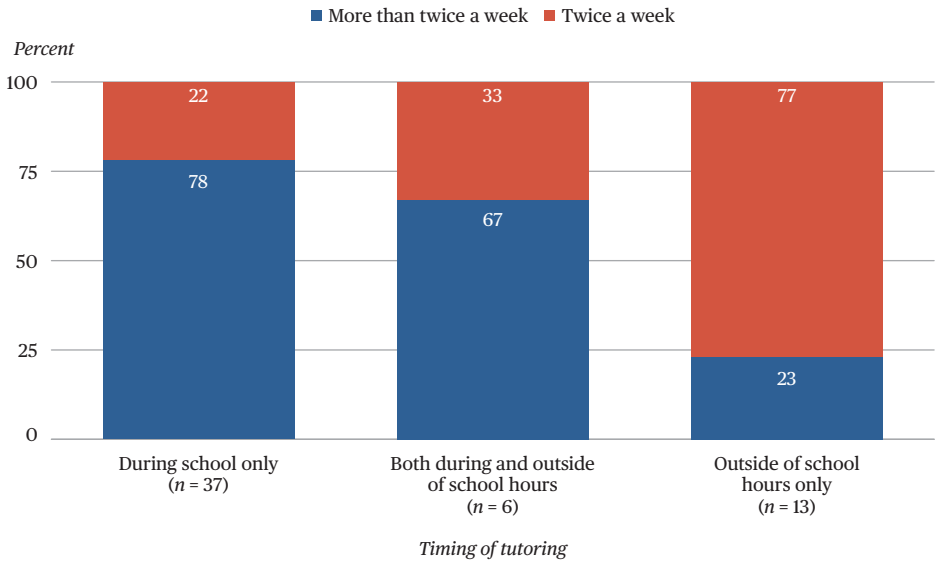
Most Project On-Track tutors were teachers, but tutor qualifications varied depending on whether tutoring was offered during school or outside of school hours

On average, each Project On-Track school employed 2.5 tutors (standard deviation of 1.97); the number of Project On-Track tutors employed by a school ranged from 1 to 8 (see figure C1 in appendix C). Most Project On-Track tutors were teachers (55 percent current teachers and 12 percent retired teachers; figure 4). Over two-thirds of the tutors in the sample (69 percent) were teachers, retired teachers, or administrators, and 17 percent were paraprofessionals, who previous research finds are as effective as teachers in delivering literacy tutoring (Neitzel et al., 2022).

Schools implementing tutoring during school only were less likely than schools implementing tutoring outside of school hours to employ only teachers, administrators, or paraprofessionals as tutors (figure 5).

Tutor qualifications did not vary significantly by rurality (see table C3 in appendix C); however, one site coordinator indicated that recruiting tutors was more difficult due to her school's rural location: "Niswonger had a list of potential tutors. Unfortunately, a lot of the people that put their name on that list, they were more interested in serving in [more urban] area[s], not so much in [our rural county]."

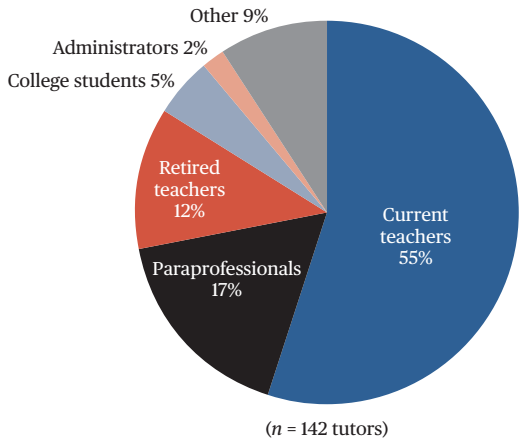
Figure 3. Sites that provided Project On-Track tutoring during school offered more tutoring sessions a week than sites that provided Project On-Track tutoring outside of school hours, 2022/23



Note: Chi-square tests of independence conducted to examine associations between pairs of tutoring implementation features found a significant association between the timing and the frequency of tutoring ($\chi^2(2) = 12.83$, $p < .01$).

Source: Analysis of data provided by Project On-Track staff.

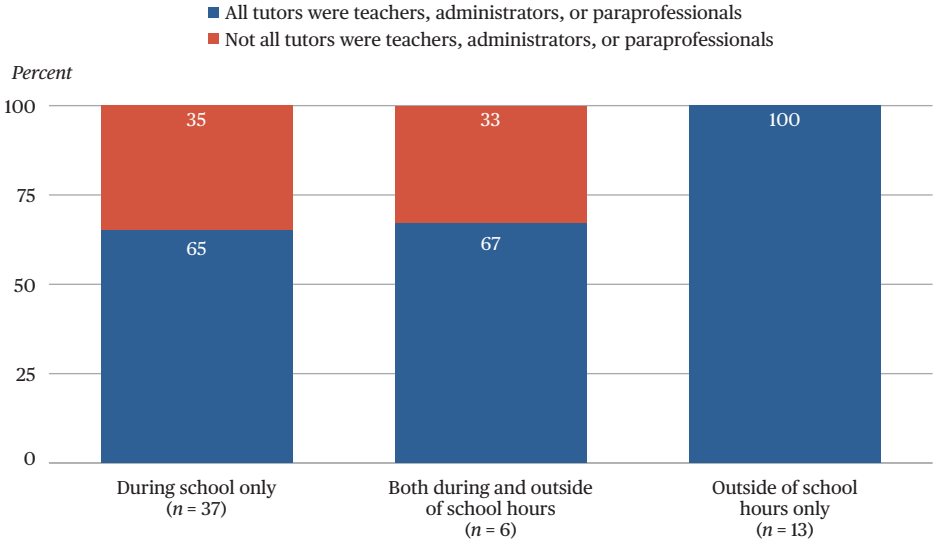
Figure 4. Over half of Project On-Track tutors were current teachers, 2022/23



Note: Respondents in the "other" category included those with some teaching experience in nonprofits, higher education, and private schools.

Source: Analysis of data provided by Project On-Track staff.

Figure 5. Timing of Project On-Track tutoring varied by tutor qualifications, 2022/23



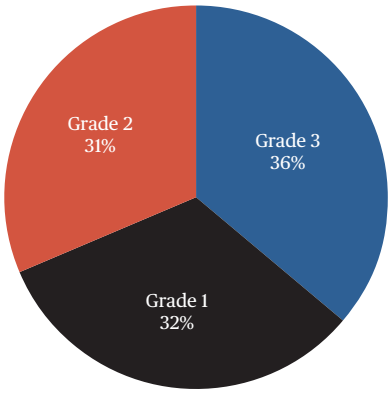
Note: Chi-square tests of independence conducted to examine associations between pairs of tutoring implementation features found a significant association between the timing of tutoring and tutor qualifications ($\chi^2(2) = 6.20$, $p = .04$).

Source: Analysis of data provided by Project On-Track staff.

Across all schools, similar numbers of students in grade 1, 2, and 3 participated in a full year of Project On-Track

Across all schools, the study sample included a similar number of students from each grade (figure 6). Most Project On-Track schools (71 percent) offered tutoring to students in grade 1, 2, and 3, but 14 percent offered tutoring to students in grade 2 and 3 only and 7 percent to students in grade 3 only (table 1). All other grade combinations were less frequent, with each combination used by only one school.

Figure 6. A similar number of students in grade 1, 2, and 3 participated in a full year of Project On-Track, 2022/23



(*n* = 1,126 students)

Source: Analysis of data provided by Project On-Track staff.

Table 1. Grades in which Project On-Track schools offered tutoring to students, 2022/23

Grade levels	Number of schools	Percentage of schools
Grades 1, 2, and 3	40	71
Grades 1 and 2 only	1	2
Grades 1 and 3 only	1	2
Grades 2 and 3 only	8	14
Grade 1 only	1	2
Grade 2 only	1	2
Grade 3 only	4	7

Note: *n* = 56 schools.

Source: Analysis of data provided by Project On-Track staff.

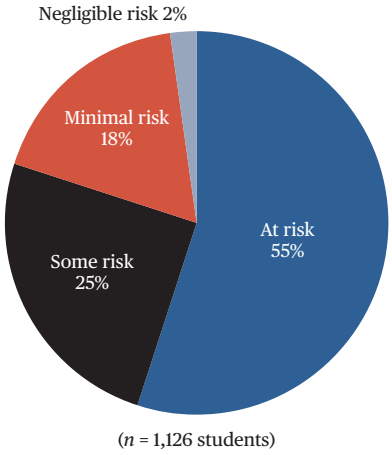
During interviews, one school leader described the school's focus on students in grade 3 as reflecting new legislation in Tennessee that calls for retaining students if they are not proficient in English language arts by the end of grade 3. In other schools, however, interviewees reported focusing on students in grade 1 and 2 because they believed that the Amplify Reading program and curriculum were better suited to younger students.

A majority of Project On-Track students who participated in a full year of tutoring had scored in the at risk or some risk for reading difficulties category on their baseline Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills assessment

Over half (55 percent) of students who participated in a full year of Project On-Track scored in the at risk for reading difficulties category on their baseline DIBELS (figure 7). Another 25 percent of students scored in the some risk category, and 18 percent scored in the minimal risk category.[2]

2. As described in box 1, schools had latitude in determining which students to serve. Participating schools did not routinely administer the DIBELS outside of Project On-Track tutoring, so the study team was not able to gather data on how participating students compared with the school population at large on DIBELS risk categories.

Figure 7. More than half of students who participated in a full year of Project On-Track tutoring scored in the at risk for reading difficulties category on their baseline Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills assessment, 2022/23



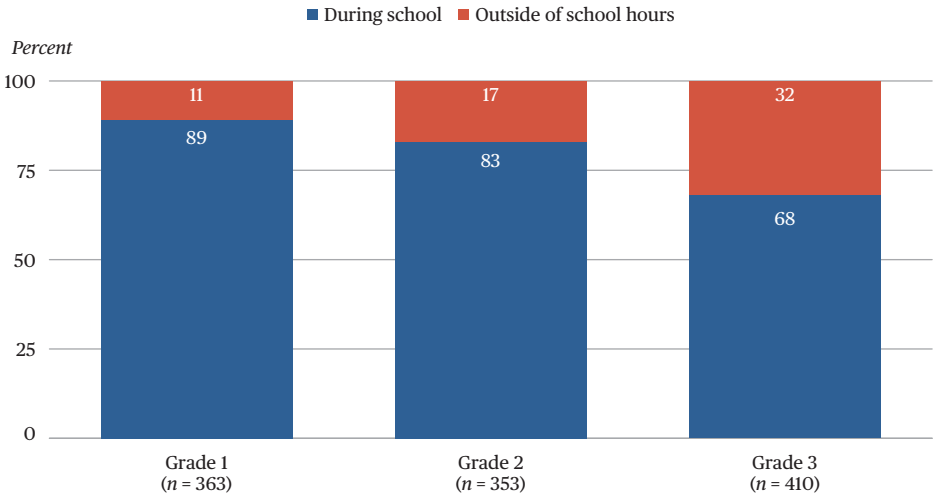
Source: Analysis of data provided by Project On-Track staff.

Schools that participated in interviews described different strategies and criteria for selecting students for Project On-Track. Some schools offered Project On-Track tutoring to their lowest performing students as a supplement to other Tier 2 and Tier 3 services for which these students were eligible through their school's RTI or multi-tiered system of supports. Other schools chose to focus tutoring on struggling readers who were not eligible for special education, Tier 2, or Tier 3 services. One school leader described their focus on "bubble kids that kind of fall through the cracks.... It's not that they have any academic disabilities; it's that they just had some loss of learning gaps over the years, and they are the ones that need that tutoring." A site coordinator at another school similarly described their decision to offer tutoring to "those kids [who might] fall through the cracks.... If you are at the bottom of Tier 1, we don't want you falling into Tier 2.... Moving them forward is why we wanted to [serve those students]." These strategies may not be representative of all schools that offer Project On-Track.

Schools that provided tutoring during school were more likely to serve students in lower grades and students with lower Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) scores than students in higher grades and students with higher DIBELS scores

Over 80 percent of students in grade 1 and 2 who participated in Project On-Track received tutoring for a full year during school compared with 68 percent of students in grade 3 (figure 8). Students who scored in the at risk or some risk categories on their beginning-of-year DIBELS assessment were also more likely to receive tutoring for a full year during school than students who scored in the minimal risk or negligible risk categories. Over three-fourths of students who scored in those categories (84 percent scoring at risk and 79 percent scoring some risk) received tutoring for a full year during school compared with about two-thirds of students who scored in the minimal risk or negligible risk categories (67 percent; figure 9).

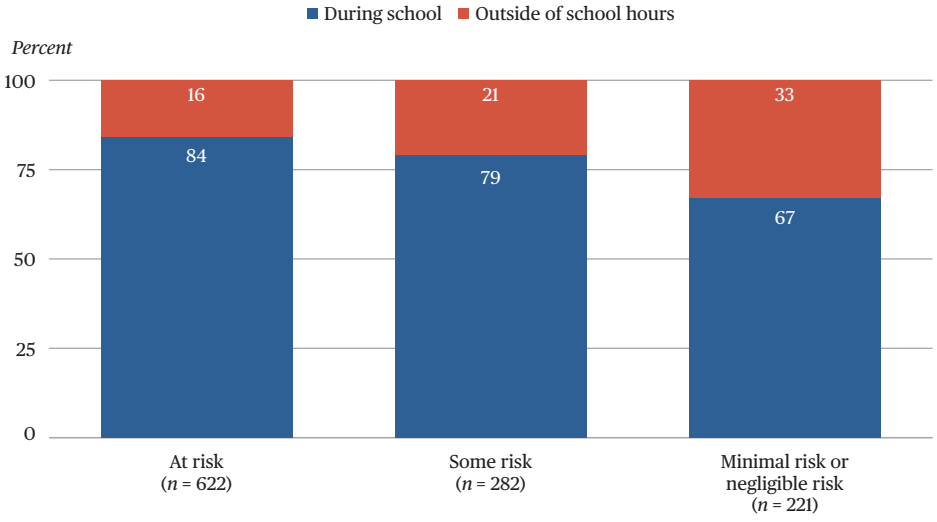
Figure 8. Students in grade 1 and 2 were more likely than students in grade 3 to participate in a full year of Project On-Track tutoring at schools that offered tutoring during school, 2022/23



Note: Chi-square tests of independence conducted to examine associations between implementation features and student grade level found a significant association between timing of tutoring and student grade level ($\chi^2(2) = 52.10$, $p < .01$).

Source: Analysis of data provided by Project On-Track staff.

Figure 9. Students with lower Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) scores at the beginning of the year were more likely than students with higher DIBELS scores to participate in a full year of Project On-Track tutoring at schools that offered tutoring during school, 2022/23



Note: Chi-square tests of independence conducted to examine associations between implementation features and students' beginning-of-year reading skill level found a significant association between timing of tutoring and beginning-of-year reading skill level ($\chi^2(2) = 27.26$, $p < .01$).

Source: Analysis of data provided by Project On-Track staff.

Schools that offered tutoring more than twice a week were more likely to serve students in lower grades than students in higher grades

Of students in grade 3 who participated in a full year of Project On-Track, 59 percent attended schools that offered tutoring more than twice a week, compared with 65 percent of students in grade 2 and 71 percent of students in grade 1 (figure 10). This is consistent with the previous finding that schools offering tutoring outside of school hours were more likely to serve students in grade 3 and more likely to offer tutoring only twice a week.

Schools that used only teachers, administrators, or paraprofessionals as Project On-Track tutors were more likely to serve students who started the year with higher Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) scores than students who started with lower DIBELS scores

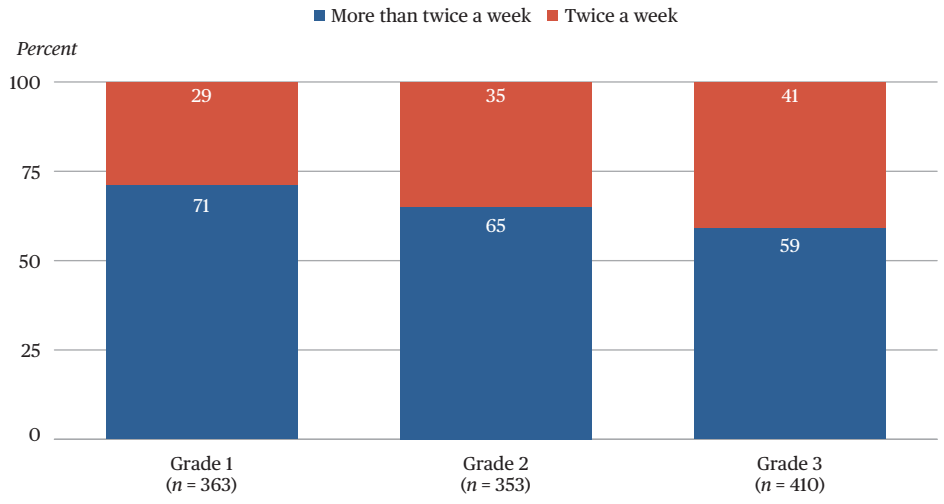
About half of full-year Project On-Track students who scored in the at risk for reading difficulties category on the beginning-of-year DIBELS were at schools where all tutors were teachers, administrators, or paraprofessionals compared with 75 percent of students who scored in the some risk category and 82 percent of students who scored in the minimal risk or negligible risk categories (figure 11).

Overall, slightly fewer than half of students who scored in the at risk category at the start of the school year moved to a lower risk category by the end of the school year

Of students who started the year scoring in the at risk category on the DIBELS, 42 percent moved to a lower risk category by the end of the year. About half of the students who moved to a lower risk category by the end of the year moved to the some risk category (22 percent), and 20 percent moved to minimal risk (16 percent) or to negligible risk (4 percent; figure 12).

When interpreting these findings, it is important to keep in mind that Project On-Track schools discontinued tutoring for individual students before the end of the school year when educators, in their professional judgment and informed by ongoing assessment data, determined that those students had made enough progress to be considered no longer at risk for reading difficulties. Project On-Track schools did not conduct end-of-year

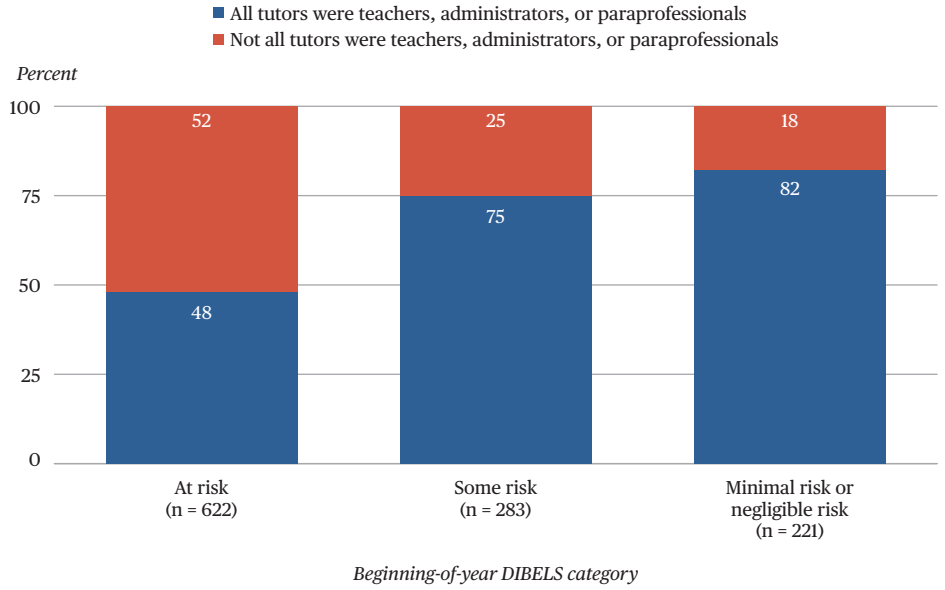
Figure 10. Students in grade 3 were less likely than students in lower grades to participate in a full year of Project On-Track tutoring at schools that offered tutoring more than twice a week, 2022/23



Note: Chi-square tests of independence conducted to examine associations between implementation features and student grade level found a significant association between frequency of tutoring and student grade level ($\chi^2(2) = 12.40$, $p < .01$).

Source: Analysis of data provided by Project On-Track staff.

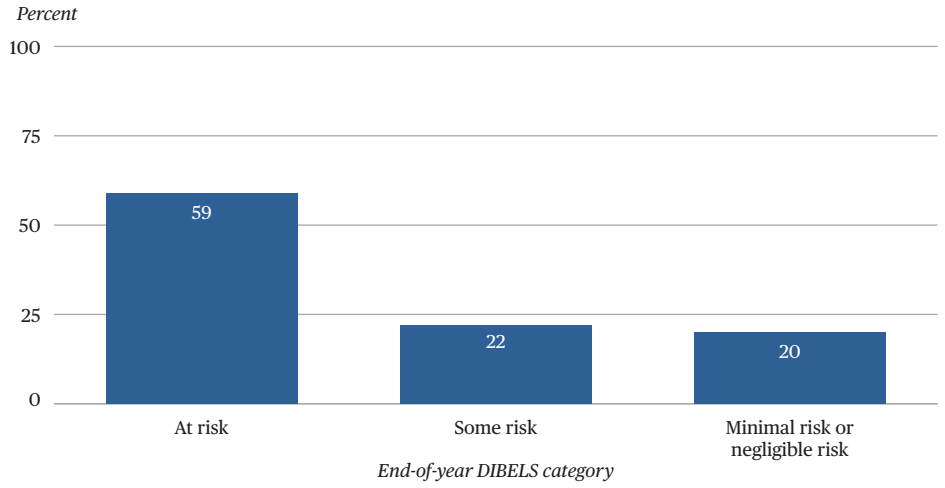
Figure 11. Students who scored in the at risk category on the beginning-of-year Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) assessment were less likely than students who scored in the some risk or minimal or negligible risk categories to participate in a full year of Project On-Track tutoring at schools where all tutors were teachers, administrators, or paraprofessionals, 2022/23



Note: Chi-square tests of independence conducted to examine associations between implementation features and students' beginning-of-year reading skill level found a significant association between tutor qualifications and beginning-of-year reading skill level ($\chi^2(2) = 109.70$, $p < .01$).

Source: Analysis of data provided by Project On-Track staff.

Figure 12. Forty-two percent of students who scored in the at risk category on the beginning-of-year Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) moved to the some risk or minimal or negligible risk categories after a full year of Project On-Track tutoring, 2022/23



Note: $n = 622$ students who started the year scoring in the at risk category on the DIBELS assessment. Percentages do not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Source: Analysis of data provided by Project On-Track staff.

DIBELS assessments for these students, so they were not included in the study.[3] This analysis focused only on students who started the year scoring in the highest risk category and who were presumably least likely to make enough progress to exit the program. It is possible, however, that some students who started the year at risk for reading difficulties made enough progress to exit the program before the end of the school year, and therefore the study results may underestimate the amount of progress that Project On-Track students made.

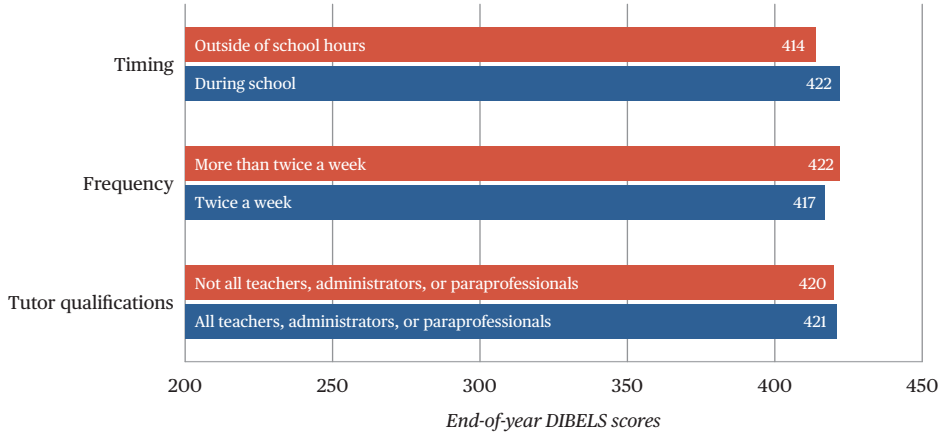
For students who started the year in the at risk for reading difficulties category, progress in literacy skills over the course of the school year was not associated with student grade level or the rurality of schools

For students who started the school year in the at risk for reading difficulties category, the amount of progress made in their DIBELS scores during the school year was not significantly associated with a student's grade or school rurality (see table C.5 in appendix C for full results). Among these students, the amount of progress was similar for students in grade 1, 2, and 3 and similar for students in rural and nonrural schools.

For students who started the year in the at risk for reading difficulties category, none of the three implementation features examined was associated with progress on their Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills scores during the school year

For students who started the year in the at risk for reading difficulties category, none of the three implementation features was significantly associated with progress in DIBELS scores after school and student characteristics were adjusted for.[7] Among these students, progress in literacy scores was similar for students who participated in tutoring during school and those who participated outside of school hours, for students in schools that offered tutoring more than the required minimum of two times a week and for students in schools that offered tutoring two times a week, and for students in schools where all tutors were teachers, administrators, or paraprofessionals and for students in schools in which at least some tutors were not teachers, administrators, or paraprofessionals (figure 13).

Figure 13. There was no significant difference in end-of-year student literacy scores on the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) based on the timing of tutoring, frequency of tutoring, or tutor qualifications, 2022/23



Note: The sample included 622 students in 54 schools. Adjusted means were calculated from two-level multiple regression models that accounted for the nesting of students within schools. All models controlled for school-level characteristics (size, rurality, prior school performance) and student-level characteristics (grade, beginning-of-year DIBELS score). See tables C9–C11 for complete model results.

Source: Analysis of data provided by Project On-Track staff.

3. It is possible that students did not have end-of-year DIBELS scores for other reasons, such as moving to a different school, absence when the assessment was administered, or withdrawal from Project On-Track for another reason.

Implications

This study points to several implications for Project On-Track staff and education leaders at the school, district, and state levels.

Using a high-quality, highly structured tutoring program may allow for more flexibility in other dimensions of implementation

Although previous research suggests that tutoring offered during school is more effective than afterschool tutoring (Nickow et al., 2024), this study does not provide evidence that variation in when tutoring was offered results in differences in student progress in literacy during the school year for the most at-risk students. The previous research includes a meta-analysis of multiple impact studies that assessed effectiveness, whereas this study is merely descriptive. However, the authors of the meta-analysis acknowledge that their study did not examine differences in the structure or quality of tutoring interventions, which also could be related to program effectiveness (Nickow et al., 2024). It is possible, therefore, that the findings in the current study could be explained by the highly prescribed and evidence-based content of Project On-Track tutoring lessons (see box 1), which ensures consistency in the quality of tutoring that students receive, regardless of some school-level choices around program implementation.

Relatedly, school and district leaders interested in offering tutoring may want to stay flexible when planning implementation. Interviewees at multiple Project On-Track schools and districts described changing their initial implementation plans in response to a variety of challenges. For example, some schools planned to offer tutoring after school but switched to tutoring during school to address challenges with student attendance, hiring qualified tutors, or transportation. This study did not find a difference in literacy scores for students who received a full year of tutoring in schools that continued to offer tutoring after school compared with students who received a full year of tutoring in schools that offered tutoring during school. This finding suggests that school and district leaders are able to identify or adjust implementation approaches in ways that best fit their own context. To further promote educational equity, individual schools could consider implementing Project On-Track in multiple ways (for example, offering tutoring both during school and outside of school hours) to better meet the needs of individual students.

Consider preservice teachers as promising tutor candidates

This study found no significant difference in student literacy scores based on tutor qualifications. These findings do not align with previous research, which has found that tutoring delivered by teachers, teaching assistants, and paraprofessionals was more effective than tutoring delivered by nonprofessional tutors such as parents and volunteers (Nickow et al., 2024). However, this study measured tutor qualifications differently from previous research. The study was only able to examine tutoring at the school level in relation to student literacy scores, and many schools used a mix of tutor types (see figure C2 in appendix C). In addition, this study did not include a control group of schools without a tutoring program, so it did not measure effectiveness per se.

Some schools struggled to recruit teachers or paraprofessionals to serve as tutors and instead hired a small number of college students in teacher preparation programs (see figure 4 and the Evergreen Elementary School[4] case study in appendix B for more detail). These tutors might not have had the same instructional skills as teachers or paraprofessionals, but their background and training could still make them effective tutors. Hiring preservice teachers could be particularly advantageous in a highly structured program like Project On-Track and in communities that have difficulty hiring more professionally qualified tutors. One interviewee from

4. School names are pseudonyms.

a rural district described how working with preservice teachers could have the additional benefit of strengthening the teacher pipeline in the region. She explained, "We are getting [the tutors] we need, but we are also watching these students work with our kids, and they are getting all that valuable training and experience, and we are getting the opportunity to say, 'Come see me when you get that degree.' It is a win-win for everybody." As interest in tutoring expands across the country, education leaders at the school, district, and state levels could explore partnerships with teacher preparation programs as another possible source for tutors.

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