K12 Tutoring

DA District Administration

Designing Tutoring as a Turnaround Lever

Introduction: Tutoring Alone Does Not Transform Systems

Districts across the country have invested heavily in tutoring as part of their school improvement strategies with federal relief funds, Title I resources, and local dollars. While these have expanded access to academic intervention at scale, many leaders report the same concern: substantial investment with limited academic movement.

The issue is not tutoring itself, but how systems design and govern tutoring. Tutoring does not change outcomes for students. Leadership decisions about tutoring do.

This paper explores how leaders can ensure tutoring strengthens—not fragments—their improvement strategy by designing it as a turnaround lever within a coherent instruction system.

The Problem: Why Tutoring Efforts Often Fail to Deliver ROI

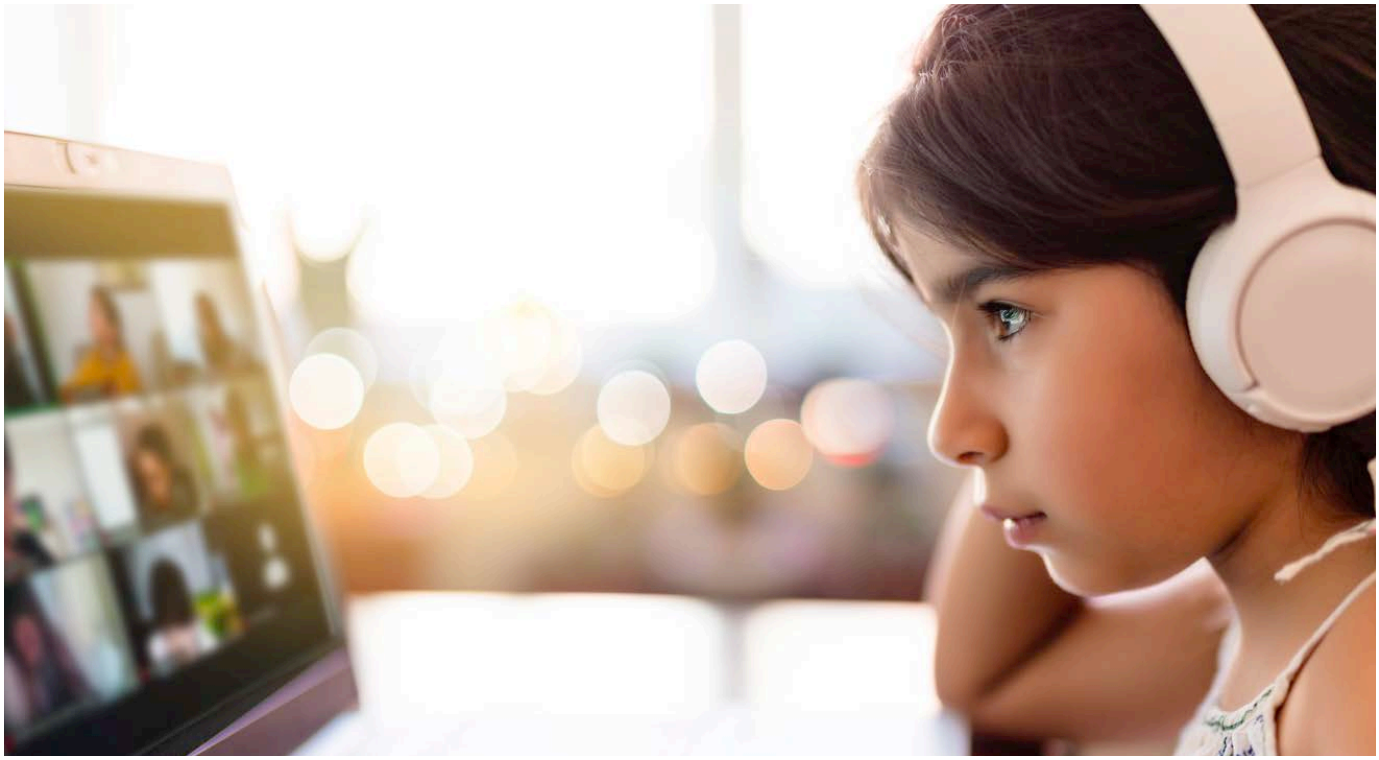
Across districts nationally, patterns emerge when tutoring does not yield the expected return on investment. Students are frequently placed into tutoring groups based on **schedule availability rather than diagnostic need or what specific skills they require**. In these cases, the intervention becomes convenient rather than strategic.

Another common issue is **the absence of entry and exit criteria**. This happens when students are placed into tutoring without clearly defined goals tied to measurable skill gaps or formal evaluation cycles to determine whether acceleration has occurred. This creates a perpetual loop of intervention rather than a targeted acceleration strategy.

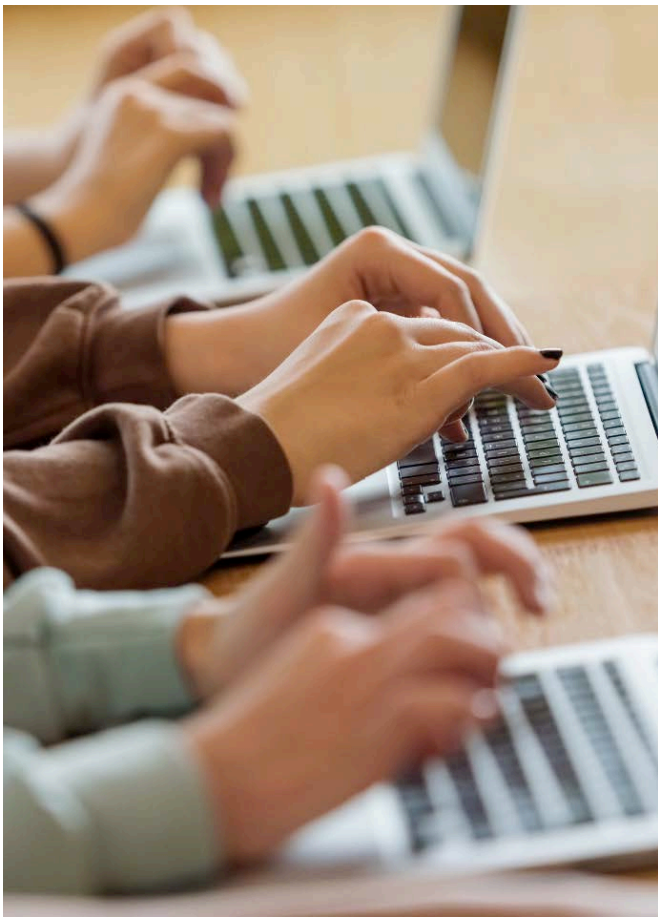
Misalignment with core instruction also undermines effectiveness. During a two-hour ELA block, a third-grade student encounters specific instructional routines, content, and pedagogical approaches. When tutoring operates outside that framework, it creates fragmentation rather than reinforcing learning. Leaders often lack the time or structures to examine the tutoring experience through the eyes of the student, yet that coherence is essential for results.

The lack of **accountability structures** further influences impact. Many districts designate a point person for tutoring, but that role does not always carry ownership for engagement, attendance, growth, and measurable outcomes. Additionally, tutoring programs are sometimes **evaluated by hours delivered rather than academic movement**. Participation rates are reported, but proficiency gains are not.

In these environments, tutoring becomes a well-funded activity without measurable transformation. One principle remains clear: **tutoring cannot replace strong Tier 1 instruction.**



The MTSS Backbone: Where Tutoring Belongs



A strong Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) provides the structural backbone for effective tutoring. It normally reflects the following distribution:

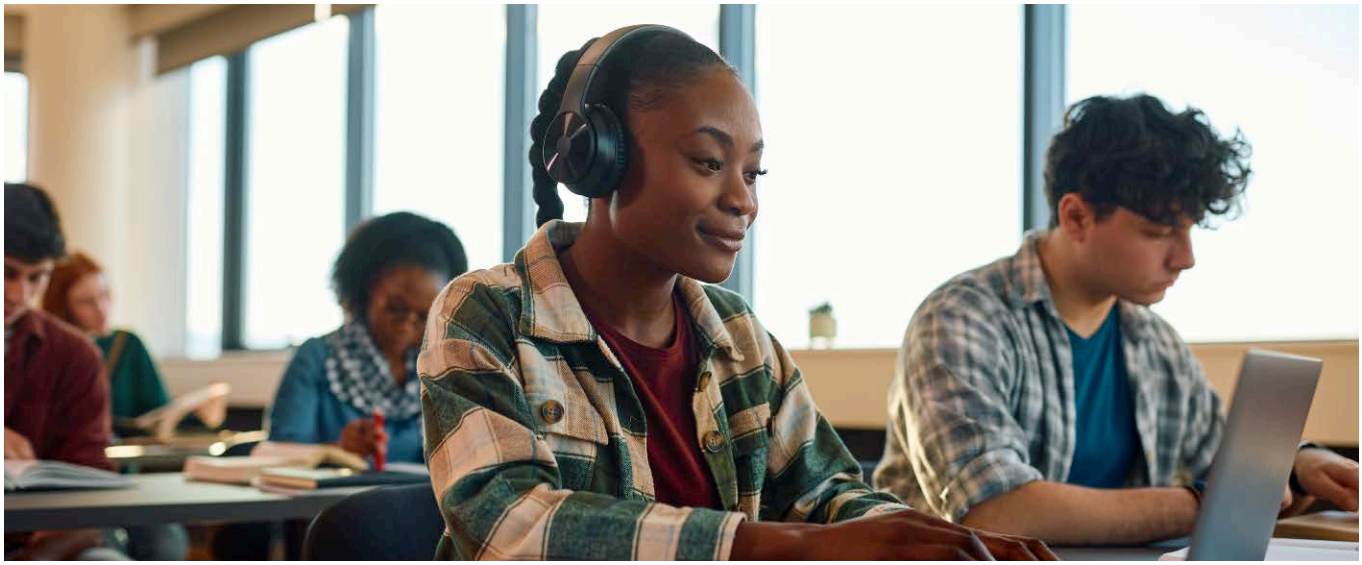
- **Tier 1 (Core Instruction): 75–85% of students**
- **Tier 2 (Targeted Support): 10–15% of students**
- **Tier 3 (Intensive Intervention): 3–5% of students**

When districts see significantly higher percentages of students in Tier 2 and Tier 3, the issue is rarely intervention capacity alone. Instead, it signals weaknesses in Tier 1 instruction, such as curriculum misalignment, weak formative assessment practices, or overreliance on intervention as a rescue strategy. This results in what leaders describe as an inverted or top-heavy pyramid, a model that is unsustainable and perpetuates a cycle of constant intervention without systemic improvement.

Effective tutoring must:

- **Operate inside MTSS** rather than adjacent to it. This means tutoring should operate within the same diagnostic and progress monitoring cycles used across MTSS.
- **Align with diagnostic data.** This requires grounding student placement in assessment data that identifies specific skill gaps rather than general performance categories like “bubble students” or “lowest 25 percent.” Not all students near proficiency share the same instructional needs. Effective grouping requires examining what those students have in common at the skill level and organizing tutoring accordingly.
- **Include progress monitoring**. While leaders are highly encouraged to avoid over-testing, short-cycle review processes are essential. Many systems refresh diagnostic and interim assessment data every six to eight weeks, adjusting tutoring groups based on demonstrated growth or persistent gaps. In some contexts, progress monitoring may occur every two to three weeks, depending on the tools used. Without these cycles, tutoring becomes static and disconnected from student growth trajectories.
- **Have clear exit criteria.** Students should transition out of tutoring once mastery of the targeted skill is demonstrated. Without defined exit thresholds, intervention becomes permanent rather than purposeful.

- **Communicate directly with classroom teachers.** Effective tutoring models ensure that information flows both to families and back to classroom teachers. Sharing session summaries, learning targets, and performance updates allows teachers to remain the "sole source of knowledge" about the student's instructional journey and can align classroom instruction accordingly. Without this loop, tutoring becomes a silo rather than an extension of the instructional day.
- **Be reviewed for academic impact every six to eight weeks.** Growth relative to peers, movement across proficiency bands, subgroup impact, and alignment to accountability metrics should guide decisions. Hours delivered are insufficient indicators of success. The impact must define value.



The 6 Requirements of High-Impact Tutoring

Research around high-dosage tutoring is robust. But dosage alone is insufficient. Effective tutoring systems include several critical components.

1. High-Dosage Tutoring

In practice, dosage generally means sessions lasting 30 to 45 minutes that are delivered two to three times per week. This frequency is widely considered the "sweet spot," though some schools implement four sessions weekly. Less can sometimes be more, but consistency and sustained exposure are essential.

2. Skill-Targeted Grouping

Students grouped solely because they are below grade level will not necessarily benefit from uniform instruction. For example, all so-called "bubble students"—those just below the proficiency cutoff—are not the same. Nor are all students in the lowest 25 percent. While these categories may be useful for accountability reporting, they do not reveal the specific skill gaps driving a student's performance.

Leaders must examine diagnostic data to identify the precise competencies requiring reinforcement. When students are grouped based on shared skill deficits rather than generalized performance bands, tutoring becomes targeted, coherent, and far more likely to accelerate achievement.

3. Intentionally Designed Instructional Alignment

In addition to ensuring tutoring complements Tier 1 instruction, leaders should examine the tutoring experience from the perspective of the student. If classroom pedagogy emphasizes certain routines, vocabulary, or curricular sequences, tutoring should reinforce—not contradict—those approaches. Alignment strengthens coherence and reduces cognitive fragmentation.

Leaders should ask:

- What is the student experiencing in core instruction?
- How does tutoring reinforce or extend that learning?
- Are pedagogy, routines, and learning targets aligned?

If students experience a disconnect between classroom and tutoring, gains will be limited.

4. Relationship Continuity

Regardless of the tutoring model used, consistent adult-student interaction strengthens understanding of student needs and builds trust. Research consistently underscores the power of stable adult relationships in accelerating learning, and tutoring can contribute to that relational anchor.

5. Disciplined Outcome Monitoring

Reviewing data at the enterprise level—often through robust dashboards or structured data cycles—ensures that tutoring is evaluated with the same rigor as any core instructional strategy.

Impact, not participation, must define success. With that in mind, districts must track the following data regularly:

- Measurable academic impact instead of attendance or hours delivered
- Student growth relative to peers
- Movement across proficiency bands
- Subgroup performance trends
- Alignment to state accountability metrics

When districts consistently monitor outcomes and adjust implementation based on evidence, tutoring shifts from a compliance activity to a performance-driven lever for acceleration.

6. Data Responsive Grouping

Groups should evolve as students demonstrate progress. Leaders must therefore revisit data every six to eight weeks and adjust accordingly. Static models reduce effectiveness; adaptive models drive acceleration.

Academic Priority: Designing with Purpose

Tutoring initiatives should be anchored in clearly defined academic priorities rather than broad performance labels. For example, a district may prioritize ensuring students read at grade level by the end of third grade.

Another may focus on targeted skill development within identified low-performing schools, tailoring small-group intervention to precise diagnostic gaps. Others may emphasize developmental math skills in response to national declines in mathematics performance.

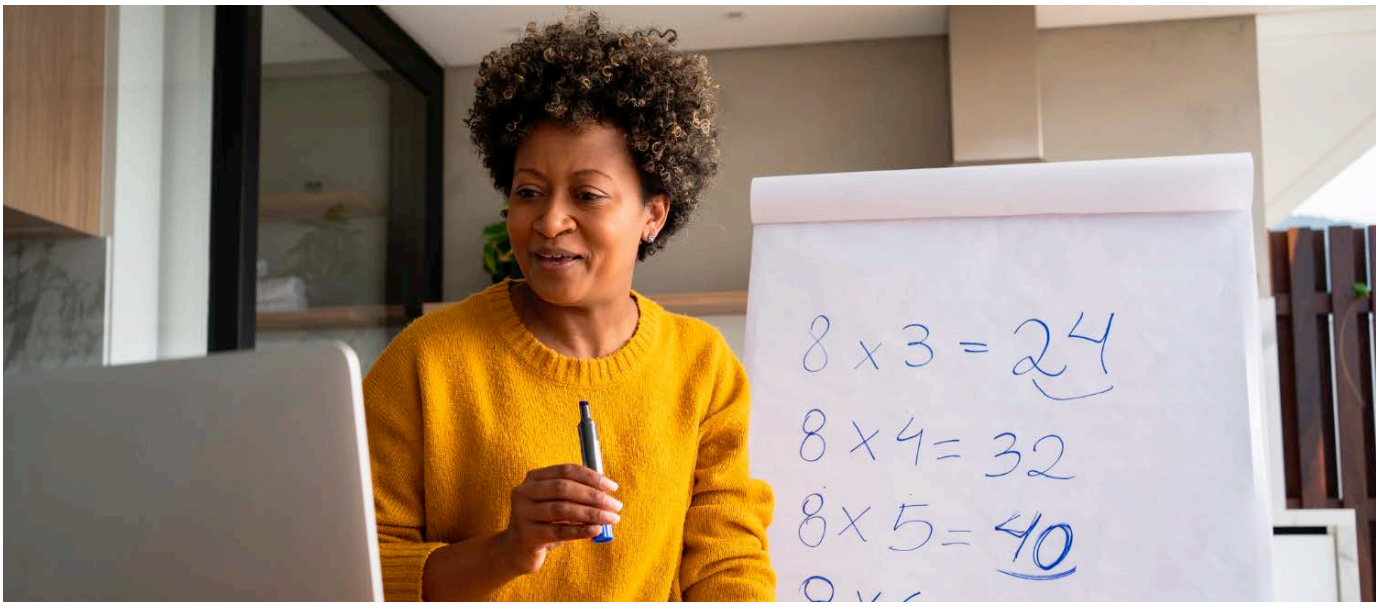
Clarity of purpose sharpens execution. When tutoring aligns to a defined academic objective, grouping, monitoring, and accountability structures become more precise.

The Leadership Imperative: Ownership Drives Results

Every tutoring system reflects leadership choices. Leaders determine whether tutoring is embedded within school improvement plans or layered on top of them. They decide who owns accountability for outcomes, and they establish whether data cycles exist and whether exit criteria are enforced.

When teachers provide tutoring, accountability must mirror that applied to external vendors. Supplemental compensation can support teacher participation, but outcome review cycles must remain rigorous. Regular data analysis meetings, performance discussions, and progress tracking ensure tutoring maintains quality and focus.

Transformation requires coherence. All components—Tier 1 instruction, Tier 2 intervention, progress monitoring, and leadership review—must operate in concert. When every “oar is in the water,” rowing in the same direction, tutoring strengthens the entire instructional system rather than functioning as an isolated effort.



Final Thought

Tutoring is not a panacea. It is not a substitute for strong core instruction. It cannot compensate for systemic instructional gaps.

But when tutoring is designed intentionally inside MTSS, aligned to diagnostic precision, delivered consistently, and monitored for impact, it becomes a powerful lever for accelerating student growth.

Districts seeking meaningful return on investment must therefore move beyond participation metrics and ask a more critical question: **Are students moving—and what leadership decisions made that possible?**

When leadership decisions align structure, data, accountability, and instructional coherence, tutoring becomes not merely support, but a driver of sustainable transformation.

To learn more, watch our webinar.

Watch On-Demand

This white paper is based upon the Ed Talk "Designing Tutoring as a Turnaround Lever: Leadership Decisions That Change Outcomes" with Chief Performance Officer Marie Izquierdo

Chief Performance Officer of K12. Marie Izquierdo brings 30+ years of district leadership experience, including nearly a decade as Chief Academic Officer of Miami-Dade County Public Schools, the nation's third-largest school system.

The Ed Talk and this white paper were produced by District Administration and sponsored by K12 Tutoring.

About K12 Tutoring

K12 Tutoring provides high-quality, flexible, and convenient online tutoring services designed to support every student's academic journey. With state-certified tutors, personalized learning plans, and a broad range of subject offerings, K12 Tutoring helps students excel—whether they're seeking advanced instruction or extra academic support. K12 Tutoring is a portfolio brand of Stride, Inc., a leader in online education. Learn more at **tutoring.k12.com**.

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