

Tutoring: Can students afford not to have a tutor?



Research has shown that a growing number of parents are hiring private tutors in an attempt to ensure their children get off to a flying start in life. JO EARP looks at a changing learning landscape.

PRIVATE tutoring is big business in Australia — according to early results of a new survey, parents who subscribe to an online scheme or hire face-to-face help are spending an average of \$50 per week, and some are forking out an incredible \$10,000 plus each year.

The Australian Tutoring Association survey also found the average age at which children are first exposed to tuition is 10, and it highlighted a surprising spike in usage as students hit Year 4 and 5.

So, why are an increasing number of parents turning to tutors to supplement their child's learning in the classroom?

Louise Watson is a professor of educational policy at the University of Canberra and says private tutoring is now a worldwide phenomenon.

"It's interesting in what it says about the public education system and the way we assess students and there's certainly some evidence that countries which have a lot of high stakes testing points, either for entrance to universities or entrance to selective high schools, tend to have high rates of private tutoring."

Watson points out the situation in Australia is a little more complex, as parents can buy subsidised private schooling, but there are several factors as to why private tutors are becoming more popular.

"There's an increasing awareness of the importance of educational attainment, which is fuelled by economic reality as well as the government's increased publicity around testing and publication of test results," Watson explains.

“The evidence in New South Wales is that parents definitely spend money on private tutoring to get their children through exams for selective public schools.

“And, where there are those high stakes tests and you get a clear benefit from them, there’s evidence that middle class parents will allocate resources to get their kids across the line. It’s an economic decision, really.”

She adds parents are also increasingly aware that educational attainment has more of an impact on lifelong earnings than it did in decades gone by, and families also have higher levels of disposable income to spend in this area.

Watson’s study of Australian Bureau of Statistics data found private tutoring and spending additional resources on education is predominantly an activity of the middle and upper classes. So, is tutoring helping to skew high stakes testing results and muddy the waters between the input of teachers and additional hired help?

Well, Watson says this inequity is more likely to play out in the rankings for tertiary entrance at the end of Year 12 than in the NAPLAN results that have thrust individual schools into the spotlight. “Given that expenditure on private tutoring is linked to socio-economic status, and income, then the schools that might be doing well as a result of private tutoring or other factors associated with high SES populations are compared with similar schools catering to students from similar backgrounds.”

Meanwhile, universities are increasingly linking up with schools in low SES areas to help provide tutoring to at risk students, and those who are in danger of falling behind national benchmarks.

Schools are also signing students up to online tutoring projects like Mathletics and the one-to-one targeted learning model continues to be used by teachers and support staff.

“There are a range of intervention programs, such as reading recovery, which have been proven to work by withdrawing the child and giving them one-on-one tutoring,” Watson says.

“There are also numeracy programs that use that model, it just gives the child a bit of extra tuition and a chance to catch up. So it’s a well-established pedagogical approach.

“The fact that universities are offering to help schools with this sort of provision is just one of the benefits of the government’s policy initiative to make universities more responsible for attracting a more diverse student population through activities with kids from low SES communities.”

In the US state of South Dakota the Irene-Wakonda school district has taken tutoring one step further. The district is the latest to adopt a four day week, tagging an extra 30 minutes onto the daily timetable, in a bid to save money. Every Friday students can either stay at home or take advantage of tutoring sessions run by teachers at school.

So, should tutoring be left up to schools to organise and do teachers make the best tutors?

Mohan Dhall teaches business studies, legal studies and economics at Presbyterian Ladies’ College, Sydney, and is also chief executive officer of the Australian Tutoring Association (ATA).

“The best mentors do not have to be teachers, the best mentors are the ones who can communicate and inspire and know their subject matter well, use a variety of techniques and so on. So it should not be assumed that teachers make the best tutors, although they do have an advantage.”

Dhall runs a centre employing 45 tutors and says it's important that they work together with teachers and parents. "[In our National Tuition Survey] we asked lots of questions about why parents hire tutors and generally speaking they're saying 'It gives my child confidence', 'It supports the individual needs' and 'It supplements schoolwork'.

"So, it's not about an indictment of schools. Schools are doing a great job. We would never say schools are failing, that's not true. What we do say is that parents are saying 'We value education and we're prepared to invest more in it. We want to take control of our outcomes.'"

The ATA's survey found the hourly rate for a tutor can vary wildly, from \$20 to \$120, depending on experience and location. However, Dhall points out the mark of a good tutor is someone who seeks to make themselves redundant by helping students become independent.

"You can't create a market if there's no demand; parents are telling us that they want it. Then, it's the mainstream sector that has to say 'What are we doing about it and how do we engage?'"

And if you think that means high schools, think again. Dhall says interim findings of the first 600 survey responses to the ATA survey showed a spike in tutoring interest around Year 4 and 5.

"There are primary schools that offer gifted classes [at that age] and I suspect that's one reason [for the spike], because there are tests to get into those classes. There are also NAPLAN tests in Year 5 ... and in Year 6 the private school entry tests run by ACER down in Victoria, so there's also a spike for preparation in those as well."

There is another spike in Year 10 and 11 as parents look to get their children ready for university, and it doesn't make any difference if they've already spent \$20,000 a year on private schooling. "I've tutored kids who are in private schools who have tutors for every single subject and they are doing it for two reasons: One, yes other kids are getting tutored, rank is important ... for a university place; Two, it's an investment in a scholarship at university."

Dhall says, given more and more parents in Australia are willing to make the investment, it's time schools and tutors started working together.