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Designing Tutoring for Equitable Instruction in Urban Schools

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Abstract: This manuscript reports a single-case design study that was conducted in an after-school program. Three kindergarten students attending an urban elementary school in the southeastern United States acquired foundational mathematics and reading skills after receiving instruction based on a conceptual explicit instruction approach for presenting short-duration lessons. Further, the students demonstrated skill maintenance and generalization two weeks following skill acquisition. As a result of the study's positive results, the intervention is now serving as the basis for the school's development of a schoolwide tutoring program for all students. Tutoring is explained within the context of a school's multi-tiered system of supports that is designed to track each student's school performance and match the school's system of interventions to each student's individualized needs. Additionally, the merits of tutoring and ways to differentiate it so that it is scalable and sustainable in urban schools, particularly those that are in high-poverty areas and are under-resourced, are discussed. Suggestions for additional research are presented.

Keyword : Tutoring; Explicit Instruction; Multi-Tiered Systems of Support; Urban Schools; Equity

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic required school personnel to address numerous challenges upon their students' return to in-person instruction. These included staffing shortages, high rates of student absenteeism, and diminished learning outcomes. Interrupted learning of grade-level content and learning loss were among the instructional issues that required immediate attention (Morse, 2024a). Data available in the United States documented the significant negative impact of the pandemic on students' learning. Their scores on the 2022-2023 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which is often referred to as the nation's report card on students' academic achievement, revealed a significant decline. Nine-year-olds showed the first-ever significant drop in mathematics scores and the greatest score decline in reading since 1990. Similarly, the average reading score for 13-year-olds was significantly lower than in 2020 (when scores were reported for a testing cycle completed before the pandemic's onset), while the decline in mathematics scores was the greatest ever (Walton, 2024). Declines were reported across nearly all student groups, such as those

who are Black, Hispanic, and White (Walton, 2024), with the largest losses occurring in urban and rural areas (Kennedy & Aceves, 2024).

Accordingly, schools had to design effective protocols to address these instructional issues. A strategy some schools adopted was to accelerate learning (Takabori, 2024). This strategy involves just-in-time instruction about prerequisite skills students may not have learned or have learned but not retained, and underlie the grade-level curriculum that is the focus of instruction. A second strategy that proved quite popular is tutoring. Mitchell et al. (2024) reported that 80% of school districts initiated pandemic-related tutoring, while Kepp (2022) reported that two-thirds of schools used federal COVID-19 relief funding to increase existing tutoring programs. Two outcomes of this tutoring renaissance were having to (a) figure out how to include it among a school's system of interventions and (b) configure effective tutoring protocols that were fit for various purposes, thereby ensuring equitable instruction across all students.

Multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) involving intensified instruction through tutoring

In the United States, many schools use a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) framework to monitor every student's performance (Bailey, 2018). While the framework can address each student's academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs (Lane et al., 2009), for the purposes of this paper, the framework is only described regarding how it is configured to address students' academic needs.

Within an MTSS framework, each student's academic achievement is characterized such that it can be matched to appropriate interventions. The interventions are described in terms of tiers, and a three-tier protocol is used most often.

Tier 1 services involve high-quality instruction that is presented to all students in their general education classroom. This instruction should prove effective with 80% of a school's students. The 20% who manifest academic achievement deficits after receiving only Tier 1 instruction are provided with Tier 2 intervention. It consists of supplementary, small group instruction that targets the students' deficient academic skills. Supplementary means a student continues to receive Tier 1 services while being provided Tier 2 services (Burman, 2023). The purpose of Tier 2 instruction is to remediate a student's skill deficits so that the Tier 2 services can be discontinued, with the student receiving only Tier 1 services while demonstrating adequate progress.

It is estimated that 5% of students will continue to demonstrate noteworthy academic achievement deficits despite receiving Tier 1 and Tier 2 services. Consequently, these students are provided Tier 3 services, which are the most intensive available at the school and are also supplementary. Moreover, they supplant the prior Tier 2 services. While any student demonstrating a significant, persistent academic achievement deficit can receive these services, quite often they comprise the specially designed instruction that is the special education for students with disabilities (Morse, 2024b).

Frequent formative assessments are conducted within an MTSS, and the resulting data are analyzed to decide which services to provide. Thus, data-informed instruction is a driving force within an MTSS (Harlacher, 2023). Generally, two challenges schools face in implementing an MTSS are (a) scheduling its supplemental instruction (National Student Support Accelerator, 2023b, Rader, 2024) and (b) configuring it in ways that truly address each student's needs (Potter, 2023).

Scheduling supplemental instruction highlights the fact that time is a valuable instructional commodity. The amount of time available for schooling imposes a limit on

the instruction educators can provide and, therefore, must be carefully managed. Rosenberg et al. (2001) offered a paradigm to guide educators' thinking about time management. Within this paradigm, allotted time refers to the total time that is available for instruction, such as 180 seven-hour days comprising a school year. Allocated time is the time set aside each day to teach content within a subject matter area. An example would be a 90-minute block that is scheduled for language arts instruction. Engaged time comprises the time during a lesson when a student is attentive to instruction, while academic learning time is the amount of time a student participates in instruction that is at his instructional level. Hence, academic learning time is synonymous with the supplemental instruction presented in an MTSS framework.

Schools typically create a master, schoolwide schedule that establishes a 30-45 minute Tier 2/3 intervention block. Recently, teachers have reported that this does not afford them enough time to provide the supplemental instruction their students require. In response, Weingarten et al. (2019) presented guidance for identifying short periods of time (e.g., 3-10 minutes) during the school day when supplemental instruction could be presented (e.g., right before school, during transitions between lessons, or at lunch after a student has finished eating before the period ends) and explanations about how to configure this instruction, such as through an explicit instruction approach. This circumstance has resulted in a need to validate short-duration lessons that are fit for this purpose.

The process of creating individualized instruction is referred to as intensifying intervention. Intensification refers to the concept of adapting alterable instructional variables to make an intervention more individualized and based on a strong hypothesis for why it should prove to be more effective than previous interventions. Examples of these variables include providing a student with more opportunities to practice a skill he is learning to master, presenting immediate feedback after every practice opportunity as compared to summarizing his performance at the end of a lesson, and scheduling systematic practice for maintaining skills (Potter, 2023).

Tutoring is a type of supplemental instruction that is well-suited for intensification within an MTSS framework. For this paper's purposes, tutoring is defined as the provision of instruction by a person, referred to as a tutor, to one or a small group of students (i.e., tutees) to address an instructional need that cannot be met satisfactorily through the existing instruction presented in the tutee's school programming. Within an MTSS framework, the existing instruction refers to Tier 1 services.

It is important to note that tutoring is recognized by the United States federal government as an evidence-based practice (Fong, 2021; House, 2022) because relevant federal legislation, including the Every Student Succeeds Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, expects schools to prioritize these practices. Most often, tutoring involves remedial instruction intended to resolve the noteworthy academic achievement deficits of the students who receive it; typically, this involves 8% of a school's students (Salcito, 2024).

Extensive research has documented tutoring's effectiveness. According to Robinson and Loeb (2021), "Research consistently demonstrates that tutoring interventions have substantial positive effects on student learning" (p. 1). Specifically, over 150 randomized trial studies have documented the substantially positive effect on student learning from tutoring interventions (Loeb, 2022). Students have realized gains across content areas and grade levels (National Student Support Accelerator, 2023a),

with particularly noteworthy positive outcomes being reported for students in schools serving communities with low SES households (Devers & Hebert, 2023).

Yet, much more research is needed to fully understand it. Presently, more is known about the features of effective programs than the impact of each feature. Of particular interest is how it can be configured to result in positive outcomes while remaining feasible for large numbers of schools and students. This matter is discussed next.

High-impact tutoring

Features.

High-impact tutoring is an example of an effective tutoring program whose features have been identified.

a. Consistent tutors who build beneficial relationships with their tutees;
b. The provision of coaching to the tutors, as well as ongoing, proper oversight;
c. Tutoring sessions that are embedded in the school day;
d. At least three sessions per week of 30-50 minutes, which can be adjusted to be developmentally appropriate (i.e., shorter sessions for younger students);
e. Small group size (ideally one-on-one but no more than four students in a small group);
f. Data-informed instruction that includes formative assessments and identifying students' needs; and,
g. Use of high-quality instructional materials and curricula aligned with the tutees' general education classroom instruction (National Student Support Accelerator, 2023a; Robinson & Loeb, 2021)

Robinson & Loeb (2021) reported that high-impact tutoring consistently produces six months to over two years of learning gains following a single year of tutoring. Similar outcomes were realized from the high-impact tutoring that was conducted upon return to in-person schooling after the pandemic. In one large-scale study conducted during the 2022-2023 school year involving 98,000 students across 283 school districts, tutees who attended the most tutoring sessions and demonstrated the highest levels of participation improved their performance by 1.46 grade levels (Devers & Hebert, 2023).

A much smaller study of one school district reported similar results. A west Texas school district reported that its performance rating increased twofold from the 2021-2022 to 2022-2023 school years due, notably, to its high-impact tutoring initiative (Nanez et al., 2023).

Despite its documented success, many students do not have access to this tutoring and, therefore, do not have an opportunity to benefit from it. DeMio (2024) reported that available data indicate about 11% of the students in the United States receive high-impact tutoring. Furthermore, there exists a discrepancy across schools regarding the worth of their tutoring. DeMio reported that matters including challenges to providing adequate professional development for tutors and overall staffing shortages have resulted in students receiving qualitatively different types of tutoring.

One way to begin an exploration of ways to increase the number of students receiving high-quality tutoring is to distinguish between a tutoring approach's effectiveness (i.e., whether its impact is very effective, meaning high, or somewhat effective, meaning low) and the resources involved with its implementation (i.e., whether a large amount of resources are involved, meaning a high dosage, or a relatively small amount of resources, meaning a low dosage). Ways to employ effective

tutoring that meets a unique need and is less costly and less resource-intensive have been explored. An emerging, effective, low-dosage approach is short-burst tutoring.

Short-burst tutoring.

Short-burst tutoring involves a limited dosage yet produces impressive results for its intended purpose. A short-burst tutoring session comprises a one-on-one instructional format conducted in the general education classroom with a typical instructor-led, 5-10 minute scripted lesson. However, the lesson's length and the number of lessons per week are determined on a case-by-case basis via an examination of formative assessment data. Simultaneously, the tutees independently complete related computer-assisted instructional activities. Every aspect of this type of tutoring focuses on grade-level skills (e.g., basic phonics skills) that students must master so that they will not fall behind to the extent that they need more intensive remedial instruction.

The academic gains students have realized from short-burst tutoring and the per-pupil cost are two appealing features of this intervention. Sparks (2024) reported on one study of kindergarten students who received short-burst reading tutoring. The students scored on average 11 percentile points higher on their district's reading test than those who only received general education classroom instruction. The students who continued with this tutoring in first grade were 16 percent less likely to be identified as at-risk readers by the middle of the school year, and 96 percent read at least on grade level by the end of the school year compared to 76 percent of the untutored students. The short-burst program's per pupil cost was reported to be $350-$450 annually. Conversely, the high-impact programs described previously can cost anywhere from $1,000 to $4,000 per pupil.

Mindful of the need to develop impactful tutoring that is designed such that there is a reasonable expectation a school could make it available to any student through its MTSS framework, a study of a conceptual explicit instruction approach for teaching short-duration lessons was undertaken. The approach's design and the length of each lesson addressed matters raised by Weingarten et al. (2019).

Methodology

A pilot study was conducted to determine the effectiveness of a conceptual explicit instruction approach for short-duration lessons to teach academic skills (i.e., tutoring sessions involving 5-10 minute lessons). The investigation aimed to resolve a hypothesis about the effectiveness of a developmentally appropriate, evidence-based explicit instruction procedure for teaching basic mathematics and reading skills. The study also sought to socially validate the procedure. These lessons could meet the need expressed by teachers to increase the amount of intensive instruction of their students (Weingarten et al., 2019) and add to the findings about the short-burst tutoring reported above.

One reason for the conceptual approach's structure is the considerable research supporting the presentation of explicit instruction to students demonstrating academic achievement deficits, to include students with and without disabilities (Archer & Hughes, 2011). A second reason is that most schools do not have access to the computer-assisted instruction and sophisticated data-analysis system involved in the short-burst tutoring approach (Barshay 2023). Third, Safran (2024) suggested that a valid way to start a school's tutoring program is to pilot test it with a small group of students and use what is learned to scale up tutoring over time.

The explicit instruction approach served as the independent variable and comprised four components: content, design of instruction, delivery of instruction, and practice. Select elements from each component were addressed in identifying the content to teach and the lesson's design.

The considerations involved with selecting the content that was taught (which served as the dependent variable) included the frequency with which it is addressed within the school's curriculum, the match between the targeted content and the subject matter area's scope and sequence, and the visual dissimilarity among the items. Additionally, the number of items taught at one time was minimized to reduce the demand placed on each participant's working memory.

The lesson's design involved an opening, body, and closing. At the lesson's outset, the teacher confirmed the student was paying attention and then stated the target skill the student was to learn. The teacher then conducted a formative assessment, which served as a review of the previous lesson and a mastery measurement for the student's acquisition of the target skill.

In the body of the lesson, the teacher modeled the target skill while explaining her thinking using clear, concise, precise, and consistent language. After modeling each skill twice, the teacher led the student in guided practice using the simultaneous prompting procedure. It consisted of presenting a controlling prompt followed by the student's correct performance of the skill. Periodically, the teacher presented a check for understanding by asking the student to perform the skill independently. The teacher assessed the student's response to decide whether to have them engage in independent practice at the end of the lesson.

Twice within the body of the lesson, the teacher presented retrieval practice to ensure skill maintenance. This practice component involved both the skills that had been acquired during the study and related skills the student had mastered previously.

The closing consisted of a review of the lesson's activities, a preview of the subsequent lesson, and independent practice of the target skill (when appropriate).

Altogether, four research questions guided the investigation:

1. Would an instructional strategy hypothesized to be developmentally appropriate prove effective in teaching kindergarten students basic mathematics and reading skills (i.e., naming numerals, decoding vowel-consonant and consonant-vowel-consonant words, and reading high-frequency irregular words)? The instructional strategy involved an evidence-based, explicit instruction approach that accounted for a developmentally appropriate dosage (i.e., a 5 to 10-minute lesson presented 4 days per week).
2. Would the participants maintain the academic skills they acquired for at least 2 weeks following the intervention?
3. Would the participants demonstrate generalization by performing the academic skills across different materials and settings?
4. What social validity rating did school staff assign to the instructional strategy and the study's outcomes?

The participants were enrolled in an urban elementary school in the southeastern United States that is attended by 466 pre-kindergarten through sixth-grade students. The student body comprises a majority-minority student population residing in low-SES households. Altogether, the lead investigator solicited involvement from over half a dozen schools across two school districts. The school that participated in the investigation was the only one to grant permission for the study and complete the requisite paperwork.

Three kindergarten students, African-American females aged 5, who the school identified as needing Tier 2 services in mathematics or reading within the school's MTSS framework, participated. The explicit instruction approach was presented during lessons involving the students during their after-school program. School personnel provided data to establish potential learning targets. Informed, written parent consent and child assent for participation in the investigation were obtained as part of the investigators' university's institutional review board approval process. Further, participation in the research study was voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time; in the event of a withdrawal, the study would continue with all remaining participants.

The lead investigator and three undergraduate students who attended a local university and were enrolled in its undergraduate research experiential program presented the lessons. Over 60% of the lessons were presented by the students.

Instrument

A criterion-referenced assessment was created for each academic skill; each skill was assessed twice during daily probes using the assessment. The probes were conducted at the beginning of each lesson, and the resulting data answered the first research question.

Likewise, the criterion-referenced assessment was repeated two weeks following each student's acquisition of their targeted academic skills to determine the participants' skill maintenance. Also, during this two-week period, the academic skills were presented with new materials in a new location during a criterion-referenced assessment to assess the participants' skill generalization. The maintenance and generalization assessments answered the second and third research questions.

The fourth research question involved a social validity questionnaire. Each of the questionnaire's items comprised a 5-point Likert scale that the participants marked to indicate their "level of agreement" with statements about the value of the investigation's aspects. The participants who completed the questionnaire were the school's principal, the teachers overseeing the after-school program, and one of the school's counselors.

A multiple-probe, single-case design was used to answer the first three research questions. For each participant, the multiple probe design involved at least three demonstrations of the effect of the instructional strategy (i.e., an explicit instruction approach) on every mathematics and reading skill taught. A minimum of 5 baseline data points established a stable or contra-therapeutic trend, followed by an intervention phase with a change in the data's level and therapeutic trend to skill mastery. The procedure for independent and dependent variable reliability checks was designed such that data collection was to occur across all conditions, a minimum of 20% of all sessions, with a criterion for agreement of 90% or more.

Result and Discussion

Results

The instructional strategy proved effective across all academic skills and participants. Visual analysis of the line graphs indicates experimental control was established as stable or contra-therapeutic data trends during all baseline phases were followed by changes in level and therapeutic trends to skill mastery only when the intervention was applied. Each student demonstrated maintenance and generalization of their skills during the respective assessments.

The school's staff confirmed the investigation's social validity. On a 1-5 Likert scale, the staff assigned a rating of 5 (highly satisfied) to all three aspects of the

investigation: the topics it addressed, the instructional strategy used during the tutoring sessions, and all the results.

Discussion

This investigation serves as an initial validation of a conceptual explicit instruction approach for presenting a type of tutoring that is to be conducted within a specified timeframe (i.e., 1-10 minutes). While this is an important first step, a limitation of this study is that it only involved three participants learning three basic academic skills. Therefore, the external validity of the results is extremely limited.

Yet, the external validity of the study is somewhat validated by the positive results reported from the studies of short-burst lessons. Also, it is important to note that related research that has been conducted by the lead investigator but is not reported in detail here has produced similar results across older students (grades 1, 2, 10, 11, and 12) and different academic content, including facts and information (e.g., identifying currencies), skills and strategies (e.g., executing multi-step algorithms to solve addition and subtraction basic facts), and vocabulary and concepts (e.g., defining finance vocabulary). Thus, preliminary data indicate the conceptual framework is one way to present cost-effective, time-limited tutoring within an MTSS.

Future research should investigate the relative importance of the elements comprising this study's explicit instruction approach. Opportunities to respond and active student responses followed with immediate, behavior-specific feedback have been identified as robust, efficient instructional elements that warrant attention. Another efficiency variable meriting attention is the provision of intentional, incidental information, such as instructive feedback.

Researchers should also consider measuring the impact of generic features that comprise every type of tutoring. Robinson and Loeb (2021) have remarked that more is known about effective tutoring programs compared to the features comprising them. Some of these features are identified next, along with a discussion of their relevance as explained by Robinson and Loeb.

a. Non-academic benefits. Researchers understandably focus on tutoring's impact on students' academic achievement. However, based on reported anecdotal data, there is reason to believe it may result in positive residual benefits, including increases in students' school attendance and decreases in displays of inappropriate behavior.
b. Professional development specific to tutoring. Salcito (2024) reported his experiences about having to train general education classroom teachers about the nuances of tutoring. Additionally, once tutors develop foundational skills for their work, ongoing professional development has been shown to result in more effective tutoring.
c. Tutor stability. Current data indicate that having a consistent tutor has a relatively larger positive effect on the tutee's academic achievement. Yet, a variable worth investigating is whether two or more tutors who receive ongoing, high-quality professional development and alternate across sessions working with a student can produce the same positive outcomes as a single tutor.
d. Impact on stakeholder support. There is a higher probability that financial and other support for a school's tutoring program will be available if many stakeholders are involved (e.g., parents, local businesses who will employ the tutees, and taxpaying citizens who do not have children enrolled in the school district but seek evidence that they are funding effective educational services). Tutoring has typically been provided to 8% of a school's students who have

demonstrated a need for remedial instruction (Salcito, 2024). Consequently, few stakeholders outside of a school (e.g., the students' parents) have had a vested interest in tutoring. A matter worth investigating is the impact on various stakeholders outside of the school if tutoring is made available to a wider swath of students, or even all students. Mitchell et al. (2024) reported that there is an expectation for all students to be included in their school district's tutoring program due to how tutoring was used to address instructional issues resulting from the pandemic.

e. Teacher matriculation. The impact on the career choices of tutors who were not certified teachers while tutoring is worthy of investigation. Properly supported tutors may be inclined to consider a teaching career even though they had not done so previously. This possibility raises questions about intentionally designing tutoring experiences to recruit future teachers.
f. Loose or tight curriculum coupling. Results from available research indicate that tutees are more likely to demonstrate academic achievement gains when the curriculum they are taught in tutoring closely aligns with the curriculum taught in their general education classroom. This result is relevant to some, but not all, of the types of tutoring described below. Consequently, research needs to establish when there must be a close, or tight, alignment between the content taught during tutoring and in a tutee's general education classroom versus when valid, reliable mechanisms for assessing relevant, valued outcomes resulting from tutoring is a more appropriate approach for purposes other than improving a student's general education classroom performance. These outcomes might involve not only the acquisition of content taught but also a lessening of the negative stigma associated with tutoring when it only involves remedial instruction.

An unexpected, but welcome, secondary outcome of the research study reported herein is that the school where it was conducted is pursuing a schoolwide tutoring program with this study's conceptual explicit instruction approach at its core. This outcome lends credence to Safran's (2024) guidance concerning the merits of beginning a tutoring endeavor with only a few students and subsequently creating a larger tutoring program based on lessons learned from the initial endeavor.

While the school's development of its plan is ongoing, presently it consists of tutoring that will be conducted during the school day as well as outside of school time, in the school's popular and well-attended after-school program. Various instructors will include preservice teachers from a local university, high school students in the same school district, and peers from within the elementary school. The peers will be members of a newly created ambassadors program for students with an expressed interest in becoming teachers.

A particular focus of the program is how the school can design their tutoring so that it is equitable, meaning configured to address varying needs across students. While tutoring has traditionally been a conduit for presenting remedial instruction, based on how it was defined here, it could be configured to address differing student needs.

a. Remedial instruction. Tutoring as remedial instruction intends to eliminate a significant, persistent academic achievement gap.
b. Just-in-time instruction. This type of tutoring is provided to students who request additional instruction about the topic that is being addressed in their general education classroom. It can be understood as a type of "homework help" that involves systematic tutoring.

c. Accelerated learning. Tutoring that is designed to accelerate learning focuses on re-teaching prerequisite skills that underly new content that is about to be taught in the general education classroom. This type of tutoring would precede just-in-time tutoring.
d. Enrichment. Some tutors may serve as an expert mentor for students who have mastered grade-level content and are engaged in advanced studies about it or a different topic at an advanced level. This arrangement might be similar to that between a doctoral candidate and her mentoring professor.
e. Auxiliary curriculum content. Mindful of how tutoring is defined and the importance of making it available to all students, it is appropriate to provide tutoring on auxiliary content that is important to certain students' development but cannot be addressed in their core curriculum for various reasons. For example, the planning team for a student manifesting a significant intellectual disability will always be able to identify more critical content the student would benefit from learning than there is time available to teach it in the core curriculum considering the student's learning characteristics (e.g., the student learns at a slower rate and less overall content). An example might be safety skills instruction, which encompasses numerous topics and is central to the student's overall health and well-being but is not addressed during lessons involving traditional subject matter areas in reading, mathematics, science, and social studies.

Configuring tutoring to meet every student's unique needs addresses concerns raised about its role in promoting equality and equity (Barshay, 2023; Loeb, 2022). Equality is addressed when schools ensure that every student can access tutoring. Arranging tutoring to address students' varying needs results in equity (Archer, 2018).

This study's approach reflects how tutoring can be addressed holistically as one part of school reform, a term used to refer to activities involved with changing existing school practices (Stewart et al., 2005). School reform seeks to focus on ineffective and insufficient practices instead of overhauling existing practices wholesale. Hence, an indeterminate number of schools in the United States must consider tutoring's role in their ongoing efforts to provide their students with the best education possible. This investigation demonstrates one way of doing so.

Conclution

Tutoring is an evidence-based practice that aligns with the multi-tiered system of supports that are employed in many United States schools to address each student's unique needs. However, the quality of tutoring and its availability vary considerably, leaving some students at risk for not receiving effective tutoring services. At-risk students include those attending urban schools that are under-resourced and located in communities comprising predominantly low-income households. Ongoing research, such as the study reported here, is needed to identify effective, differentiated tutoring models that hold promise for making tutoring available to all students. When this outcome is realized, schools will have a mechanism for ensuring that equality and equity are realized by all students.

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