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Intensive Small-Group Tutoring and Counseling Helps Struggling Students

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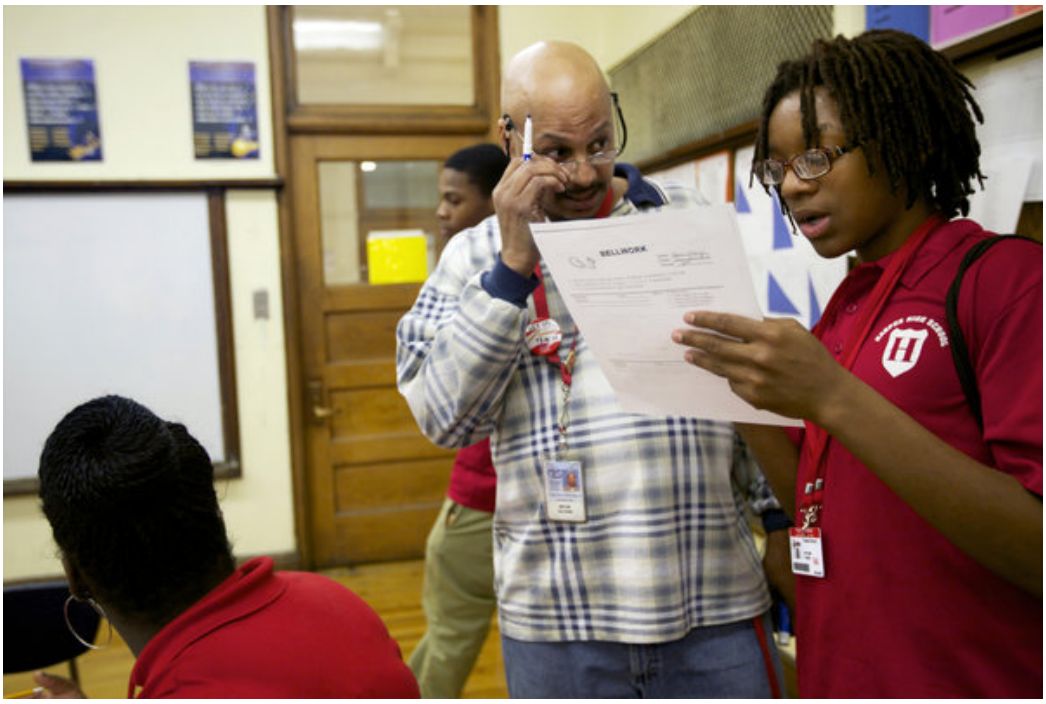
Tutors work with two students each in a program at William R. Harper High School, on Chicago's South Side, that has helped African-American students bridge gaps in math skills.

CHICAGO — By the time they reach eighth grade, according to federal tests, half of all African-American schoolboys have not mastered the most basic math skills that educators consider essential for their grade level.

A new paper being released Monday by the National Bureau of Economic Research suggests a promising approach for helping the most challenged students, who often arrive in high school several years behind their peers.

The study, which was conducted by a team led by Jens Ludwig, the co-director of the University of Chicago Urban Education Lab, provided a program of intense tutoring, in combination with group behavioral counseling, to a group of low-income ninth- and 10th-grade African-American youths with weak math skills, track records of absences or disciplinary problems. Those students

learned in an eight-month period the equivalent of what the average American high school student learns in math over three years of school, as measured by standardized test scores, over and above what a similar group of students who did not receive the tutoring or counseling did.



Bryan Olivier, a math teacher, with a student at William R. Harper High School.

The study was conducted in 2012-13 in a randomized trial comparing groups of male students at W. R. Harper High School, an impoverished neighborhood on Chicago's South Side, a site of frequent gang violence. Of the 106 teenagers in the study, all but one were eligible for free or reduced lunch and about one-quarter of them had received a diagnosis of a learning disability.

In addition to the test scores, far more of the students in the program met indicators of being on track to graduate from high school on time than their peers who were not given tutoring or counseling.

"So many people now are convinced that results like this aren't possible at all for disadvantaged teens," Professor Ludwig said. "More and more people are of the view that you've got to reach poor kids by age 6, or it's too late and the effects of entrenched poverty are already too profound."

The problem, he said, was that it was nearly impossible for a teacher in a class of 25 or 30 students to tailor lessons to individual needs, particularly with those who struggle to understand concepts they should have learned years earlier.

"A lot of education reforms that we have in high school are to get the ninth-grade teacher to teach algebra better," Professor Ludwig said. "But for the kid who doesn't get math, saying it louder is not going to help."

The cost of providing tutoring and counseling was about $4,400 per student.
Previous researchers who have examined the benefits of small-group tutoring have said its cost would be prohibitive on a large scale.

But tutoring could be more cost-effective than efforts to shrink class sizes across the board.

“If we’re going to instead take the most disadvantaged students who are the furthest behind and do this targeted one hour a day, that seems extremely sensible” said Matthew M. Chingos, a fellow at the Brookings Institution’s Brown Center on Education Policy. Mr. Chingos was not involved in the study.

The challenge that teachers face was apparent on a morning in December in Nusirat Olaniran’s sophomore geometry class at Harlan Community Academy, one of the 12 high schools where Professor Ludwig and his research partners have expanded their study to see if they will achieve similar results.

As Ms. Olaniran reviewed a recent quiz, one boy repeatedly demanded permission to go to the bathroom. Another boy and a girl gleefully fenced with pencils at the front of the room. By the time the bell rang, Ms. Olaniran had managed only a few moments with a pair of students who had gotten three-quarters of the test questions wrong.

The contrast was striking with another classroom at the school, where tutors sat across from pairs of ninth- and 10th-grade boys, their heads quietly bent over white erasable boards. Some reviewed basic multiplication while others plotted lines on graph paper. If a student got stuck or appeared restless, the tutors quickly redirected them.

“They absolutely do way more work just because there is a body in front of them,” said Devon James, one of the tutors.

The researchers modeled the tutoring on a program developed by Match Education, a Boston-based nonprofit group that provides tutoring for about 2,200 students. The group hires recent college graduates or retirees willing to work for an average salary of $17,000 a year full-time for 11 months. Generally, the tutors are not credentialed teachers.

“There is a huge supply of people who want to do something before they go down the career path of law or medicine or business,” said Alan Safran, the president of Match Tutors, a unit of Match Education. Because tutors do not have to manage large classes or develop curriculum, he said, people not qualified as teachers could still make effective tutors.

“These are really supplements to the normal things that schools are doing,” said Lawrence F. Katz, a Harvard economist who was not involved in the study. “They are concrete and seem to be things that can be replicated in different settings. It’s not the magic of ‘we don’t know how to make a better teacher, but some teachers are better than others.’ ”

Mayor Rahm Emanuel of Chicago has said that if the program continues to generate results, he hopes to extend the tutoring and counseling to more schools. “When you close the achievement gap that significantly you have to pay attention,” he said.

For the study, the behavioral counseling was provided by Youth Guidance, a Chicago-based group, under a program called Becoming a Man, or B.A.M.

At a session in December at Harper High School, Tim Jackson, a 36-year-old counselor, sat with a dozen ninth and 10th graders and invited them to share their aspirations for the coming week.

Several said they wanted to raise their grades. Mr. Jackson said he often urged his students to use the emotional coping skills he suggests to calm themselves during classes.

The academic tutoring also gives students a level of adult attention that overburdened teachers struggle to provide. On a recent visit to Harlan, one tutor had brought homemade chocolate chip cookies for a student's birthday, and Mr. James joked with a student about staking extra math problems on the results of a one-on-one basketball match.

Roland Fryer, a Harvard economist and a co-author of the Chicago study who conducted research of a similar program in Houston in 2011 that achieved consistent results, said such simple gestures of social and emotional support could be as important as the academic training.

"The hard truth is that a lot of kids in the schools that we tutor in don't have a lot of positive and stable adult role models," Professor Fryer said.