

## Partnerships with Higher Education

# Teach for America's Ignite in Greater Baton Rouge, Louisiana

by Liz Cohen

Jackson Elementary School in Louisiana's East Feliciana Parish District sits on a quiet street just outside the town of Jackson, population 4,130. Driving to the school on an overcast Tuesday morning in November 2023, I passed open fields, small homes, the Dixon Correctional Institution, and a Dollar General. "This is one of the poorest districts in maybe the poorest state in the country," Principal Megan Phillips told me. "Can you imagine that we are providing 2:1 tutoring?"

Since 2021, 250-student Jackson Elementary has been part of the Teach for America's (TFA) Ignite tutoring program. Launched by TFA during the pandemic, the Ignite Fellowship hires college students to provide high-dosage virtual tutoring in reading or math at no cost to participating schools.

Well before the pandemic, Phillips knew the promise tutoring held for her low-income students, and she knew TFA. In fact, she had moved to Jackson decades earlier as a TFA corps member and never left. But in a school where half the teachers are unlicensed, in a region experiencing an acute teacher shortage, where could she find tutors? So when Laura Vinsant, TFA's executive director for Greater Baton Rouge, asked Phillips in 2021 whether her school wanted to participate in the new program, Phillips jumped at the chance. Louisiana education officials had given Jackson F grades in 2017, 2018, and 2019.<sup>1</sup>

Today, students in grades 1 through 3 have daily sessions on reading fundamentals with their undergraduate tutors, who log in from around the country to work with the same two students, day after day, for ten weeks. So far, the work has paid substantial dividends. In spring 2023, Jackson Elementary saw a 56 percent increase in the number of students scoring proficient on their early literacy assessment.

### Quick Facts

## TFA's Ignite Tutoring, Greater Baton Rouge Region

- Number of students served: 152
- Number of schools with TFA's Ignite: 5
- Grades and content areas: Grade K-3 reading
- Source of tutors: College students delivering virtual tutoring
- When tutoring occurs: During the school day
- Frequency of tutoring: 4 days/week, 20-30 minutes each
- Cost: \$1,389/student per year for two 10-week sessions with a 1:3 student-tutor ratio

*This profile is drawn from [Learning Curve: Lessons from the Tutoring Revolution in Public Education](#), an analysis of how school districts are scaling and sustaining high-quality tutoring, published in January, 2024. © 2024 FutureEd. To read the full report, visit our website: [www.future-ed.org](http://www.future-ed.org)*

## Creating Conditions for High-quality Tutoring

When the pandemic struck, Katie Hooten was running TFA's program in the greater Phoenix area. As it became clear schools would need additional support to weather Covid's disruptions, she started asking Phoenix schools what they wanted. The idea of a tutoring program emerged from those conversations in 2020.

Hooten is now the national director of TFA's Ignite. As of the 2023-24 school year, over 1,500 undergraduates from more than 300 colleges and universities are tutoring 3,500 elementary and middle school students across 100 schools in 21 states.

With the program still in its infancy, the leadership team is pondering some key questions: How many fellows can they recruit, train, and support? How many schools can they reasonably work with? What makes a school a good fit for the Ignite program?

"I get asked all the time why Ignite doesn't have its own curriculum, and our response is always that school embeddedness matters so much," says Hooten. "We believe that to be effective, we need to be rooted in a school building and culture, so we use the school's curriculum and assessments to understand our progress."

Principal Phillips agrees with this explanation for Ignite's effectiveness. Jackson recently adopted a high-quality curriculum that Ignite has used to inform its tutoring material. "If we had to design something from scratch or rely on the tutors for lesson-planning input, it wouldn't work," she told me as we sat in the second-floor teacher's lounge. "We're using mCLASS [a literacy assessment and instructional system sold by education company Amplify] which is great and helps us determine student groupings. We also progress monitor using DIBELS [an assessment of early literacy skills] every ten days."

Ignite's respect for school curriculum choices doesn't mean the program eschews training. Each national cohort of tutoring fellows goes through 10 hours

of virtual learning prior to every 10-week tutoring block. The content of the national training changes each semester, so returning tutors can participate without it being repetitive. According to Principal Phillips, two Ignite trainers, Lauren May and Shauna Walters, have been critical to the program's success at Jackson. Both came to Louisiana as Teach for America corps members. May has now spent a decade in East Feliciana and Walters is in her sixth year. Both provide training, support, and oversight to the 24 Ignite fellows working with Jackson students in addition to playing their regular roles as master teacher and literacy specialist. TFA's Ignite pays trainers a stipend, just as it does tutors.

Supportive school leadership is just as essential to success. "I've talked to trainers in other schools where it can be really stressful if you don't have a principal like Ms. Phillips who asks how she can help you," said Walters. Teachers at Jackson are also closely involved in how the student tutoring groups are set up. "This way, teachers feel like this is something that's assisting them versus something that's happening to them," Walters explained.

Long before the pandemic, technology and internet access were serious issues for the East Feliciana district. ESSER funds allowed Jackson leadership to purchase a Chromebook for each student and to set up individual Wi-Fi access points in each classroom. These resources, combined with tutoring through the Ignite program, finally began to change students' learning trajectories at Jackson.

Hooten and her team also point to the importance of a coherent state instructional climate to successful tutoring. "There is something powerful about the alignment around third-grade reading, the alignment of funds and resources in Louisiana that feels different than some other states," Hooten told me. About 150 Ignite fellows will tutor in the Greater Baton Rouge region across six schools during the 2023-24 school year, with another 50 fellows tutoring in two New Orleans schools.

## Embedding Tutoring in the School Day

Principal Phillips and trainer Lauren May shifted the school schedule to maximize Ignite’s impact at Jackson. After deciding it would be efficient to have all the tutoring happen at the same time of day for all grade levels and classes, they created an “Ignite block,” a dedicated period during which all classrooms participate in interventions. For the first eight weeks of school, before Ignite launches in October, teachers use the block for a variety of interventions and small group work. The intervention block is dedicated to tutoring for the next ten weeks.

When I visited the school in November 2023, two third-grade boys were seated in the library taking turns reading a short text titled, “The Runaway Hamster.” At the next table, a third-grade girl named Cadence with neatly French-braided hair was cutting out sentences with a pair of scissors from a text about going on a picnic. Her tutor, Hanna, smiled through a Zoom-like window on a school Chromebook, seated in what looked like a dorm room. Hanna asked Cadence to read through the sentences and find the one that read, “off we went to the park.” Slowly sounding out each sentence to herself, Cadence eventually held up the right one with a smile. Many students, especially in the first and second grades, use small whiteboards or transparent sheets to write words with dry-erase markers. “Just because the tutoring is virtual doesn’t mean there’s not a tactile experience for students,” said May.

Importantly for Jackson Elementary, where 85 percent of students are Black or Latino, Ignite tutors come from diverse backgrounds. Fifty-seven percent of all Ignite tutors identify as people of color, and almost half identify as coming from a low-income background and/or were the first in their family to attend college. Notably, 43 percent of Ignite tutors who were college seniors applied to the 2023 Teach for America teacher corps and were both more likely to be accepted and more likely to accept the position than the average applicant.<sup>2</sup>

TFA’s ultimate plan is for tutors to be paid via federal work-study, the program that provides part-time jobs to about 600,000 college students with demonstrated financial need at over 3,000 institutions of higher education.<sup>3</sup> Accessing work-study funds has been more challenging than TFA’s Ignite anticipated, with the organization currently hoping to have one university paying tutors this way by spring 2024. If other ongoing efforts with individual institutions manage to unlock work-study funding nationwide, it would throw open the doors for tens of thousands of college students to tutor in our nation’s schools.

Tutoring at Jackson is not only designed for struggling students. One of the stronger readers in his third-grade class, Matthen Johnson works daily with another high-performing student, Dakota, and their tutor, Dylan Wilson, a junior at Harvard University. Lauren May explains that she purposefully placed the two boys with a male tutor. There are few male teachers in East Feliciana Parish, and May hoped that in addition to providing the boys with “challenge work,” they would benefit from a male role model. Matthen told me with pride that on a recent assessment he was able to read 156 words in the time allotted, beating Dakota’s 138.

The learning gaps and academic challenges facing Jackson’s 250 students didn’t start with Covid, but federal funding made available for tutoring and other steps in response to the pandemic created the conditions for a shift in student outcomes. While the 2023 school performance score assigned to Jackson by the Louisiana Department of Education was only a D, their progress grade was a B.<sup>4</sup>

Crucially for a district as poor as East Feliciana, Ignite is currently offered to schools at a highly reduced cost. How much an individual school pays varies on local context; in Louisiana, schools use funding available through the Louisiana Department of Education’s Real-time Early Access to Literacy (REAL) program. In schools outside Louisiana, some use federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds supplemented by philanthropic

funds raised by TFA. Until Ignite fellows can be paid with work-study dollars, Teach for America must continue fundraising.

Hooten knows that unlocking work-study funds is necessary for sustainability: “Accessing federal work-study will be critical to increase access to high-dosage tutoring, especially as ESSER funds wind down.” While TFA continues to work on getting costs down, the model currently runs about \$1,400 per student for a full year, which falls within the typical range of \$1,000 to \$2,000 per student that FutureEd has found in its research on tutoring programs nationally.<sup>5</sup>

## Relationships and Rigor

Like Lauren May and Shauna Walters at Jackson Elementary, Laura Vance is key to the literacy tutoring underway at the K-8 Kenilworth Science and Technology Academy. Ten miles southeast of downtown Baton Rouge, Kenilworth has been a public school since 1973. After struggling with academic outcomes, Kenilworth was made a public charter school in 2009 and has been on an upward trajectory ever since. Says Principal Hazel Regis on first hearing about the Ignite program: “I knew we wanted it, but I didn’t know who or how we would do it. And then Ms. Vance immediately said she would run it.”

The first big decision facing Regis and Vance was which students should participate in Ignite. “Do we go for third-graders, who have to take a statewide standardized test, and who pretty soon will have to face the [Louisiana] retention law [requiring third-grade students to pass a reading test in order to continue to fourth grade]?<sup>6</sup> Or do we go for younger students, and try to set the stage for better outcomes by third grade?” Regis wondered. Ultimately, they decided to focus tutoring on first grade.

What sets the Kenilworth approach apart from many others is the decision to offer tutoring to students with reading scores in the middle of the pack, as

opposed to those with the lowest test scores. “We rearranged our schedule so that the kids who are struggling stay in the classroom to work with the teacher while our highest-achieving kids do center-based work in the same room,” Vance explained as we watched 14 first-graders practice early reading skills in their tutoring sessions. Two classrooms down the hall, a smaller group of students was working on literacy with the first-grade classroom teacher.

Just six weeks into implementation of Ignite, Kenilworth’s second- and third-grade teachers were already clamoring for their students to receive tutoring. They had seen the enthusiasm with which first-grade students embraced the program and how it freed up time for teachers to provide small-group interventions with struggling students. And, crucially, they had heard how often participating students told Principal Regis or Ms. Vance that the chance to see their tutor was the only reason they came to school that day. In the words of Jamal, a Kenilworth first-grader who looks forward to his tutoring through Ignite: “I love school, and I love to read. And with my tutor I get to read more.”

At both Jackson and Kenilworth, staff believe that part of Ignite’s success is simply due to the fact that students get more time dedicated to reading, and each student gets significantly more time reading with an adult than would be possible in a classroom of 25 students.

“But we also think about where our students are coming from and what they’re exposed to,” explained Regis. “This isn’t just a tutoring program—it’s more than that. They are engaging with young adults from different places and thinking, ‘Oh, there is a state named California. Oh, I could go there one day.’”

Says Morgan Chambers, a sophomore at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, and a tutor at Kenilworth: “It has gone a lot better than I thought it would, and a lot more quickly than I thought. My kids are so excited to learn, though sometimes they

come in with heavy things. One of my students lost her father recently. I didn't think these kinds of things would come up in tutoring sessions or come up so often. Sometimes it's hard to navigate those heavy situations, but tutoring really is the best 30 minutes of my day."

## ENDNOTES

1. The official 2017 grade was a D; under revised scoring launched in 2018, the score would have been an F.
2. Data provided by Teach for America.
3. Community College Research Center, "Participation in Federal Work-study," Teachers College, Columbia University (July 2021), <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/participation-federal-work-study.html>.
4. Louisiana Department of Education, "2023 District Performance Scores," <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/resources/library/performance-scores>.
5. Tutoring cost range comes from conversations with school and districts leaders as well as vendors, representing at least ten different programs.
6. In 2023, Louisiana's state legislature passed a bill requiring third-grade students to pass a reading test in order to continue to fourth grade; the bill goes into effect for third-grade students in the 2024-25 school year; H.B. 12, 2023 Regular Session (Louisiana, 2023).