

## Tutoring as a Catalyst for Instructional Innovation

# Ector County Independent School District, Odessa, Texas

by Liz Cohen

In spring 2021, Ector County Independent School District in the West Texas oil fields earmarked \$10 million of its \$93 million federal pandemic-response funds for tutoring, spread out over three years. Superintendent Scott Muri and Chief Academic Officer Lilia Nájñez had run a virtual tutoring pilot in the fall of 2019 that resulted in significant learning gains for their students, so they were willing to place a big bet on expanding virtual tutoring in the wake of the pandemic.

This school year, just over 2,000 students across 23 of Ector County's 45 schools are receiving high-dosage tutoring, about six percent of the district's student population. But the program has done more than help struggling students. It has also led participating schools to redesign their school days, creating schoolwide or grade-wide "intervention" blocks that deliver extra instruction to all students regardless of reading level. Advanced students get faster-paced or enriched instruction, while others work in small groups with a classroom educator or paraprofessional. Still others are tutored.

### Balancing District Expectations, School Autonomy

Muri and Nájñez's first step was to appoint an administrator to manage the tutoring initiative across the district, so it wouldn't fragment into a host of different school-based programs. They selected Carina Escajeda, an Ector County native who worked

as a counselor at Permian High School for seven years before taking the new position of high impact tutoring manager.

Together, the three administrators set expectations for participating schools. At every school, tutoring had to happen at least four days each week, for at least 30 minutes at a time, with the same tutor consistently working with the same student—the gold standard established by research for high-dosage tutoring implementation. The daily tutoring schedule had to be clearly defined at each school, detailing

#### Quick Facts

### Tutoring in Ector County ISD, Texas

- Number of students served: 2,000
- Schools participating: 21 elementary schools, 2 middle schools
- Grades and content areas: Elementary and middle school math and reading
- Source of tutors: External vendors delivering virtual tutoring
- When tutoring occurs: During the school day
- Frequency of tutoring: 4-5 days/week, 30-minute sessions

*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)*

which days tutors would cover reading, which days they'd cover math, and which students would receive tutoring on any given day.

But Superintendent Muri and his team didn't force the program on school leaders. Principals could opt in or opt out of the initiative, and those who opted in could choose between two vetted remote tutoring providers: Air Tutors, which has human tutors work one-on-one with students via video, or FEV Tutor, a chat-based model also using human tutors working with students one-on-one.

Principals were also free to decide how many students would participate and how to fit tutoring into their school schedules. Most schools wound up adopting similar approaches, given there are only so many ways to add a block of time for the majority of students in a classroom to participate in virtual tutoring, but allowing school leaders and grade-level leads to make the decisions themselves helped foster buy-in.

In another strategic move, Muri cut a deal with Air Tutors and FEV Tutor to pay them more if Ector students improved with tutoring and less if students did not improve or lost ground—an approach called outcomes-based contracting that is rarely used in education. With Muri's support, Nájnez had attended a conference on the concept at Harvard University back in 2020 and the tutoring initiative seemed a good place to try it out.

Ector County's results have been impressive: 50 percent of students who scored below grade-level on the previous year's Texas state assessment and received at least 20 hours of tutoring scored at grade-level or higher after one year.<sup>1</sup> And approximately 30 percent of students tutored in math scored in the 66th percentile or higher on the standardized Northwest Education Association's MAP exam after one year, reflecting more growth than would be expected in a school year.

Escajeda's jam-packed workday points to the importance of centralized leadership to a district-

wide tutoring program. When she's not in schools checking on how tutoring is going she reviews data, ensures students are rostered correctly for tutoring sessions, meets weekly with vendors, and reports to district leadership on the progress of the initiative. She troubleshoots technology issues, supports teachers embracing new roles as campus leads for tutoring, and validates student outcomes data that determine how much the vendors are paid. Escajeda is a major reason why tutoring looks and feels the same from school to school in Ector County ISD.

Escajeda's work demands painstaking attention to detail, especially with the district's high school tutoring program, which follows a completely different model from that of K-8. At Permian High School, 40 students have tutors to help them pass Texas high school exit exams. Due to the complexity of high school schedules, Escajeda works with each student individually to determine when the student can meet with a virtual tutor, what elective class the student can miss, and how the student will make up the work from the missed class. As in school districts nationwide, the vast majority of tutoring in Ector County occurs in elementary and middle schools. Because elementary and middle school students are usually assigned to just one or no more than a handful of classrooms, scheduling is significantly simpler in schools serving these grades.

### **Live-video Tutoring at Johnson Elementary**

When tutoring launched in Ector County, Zenovia Crier, principal of Lyndon B. Johnson Elementary, jumped at the opportunity to make it part of her school-improvement strategy. She had moved to Odessa, the county seat of Ector County, from Houston in 2021 to lead what was then a failing school. Tutoring became central to her turn-around work and today 125 out of 514 Johnson students, about half of the students in grades three through five, are tutored by Air Tutors. Air Tutors employs more than 800 tutors, all of whom have a bachelor's degree, 60 percent of whom have an

advanced degree, and 70 percent of whom have over 10 years' teaching experience. Most are between the ages of 30 and 55.<sup>2</sup>

When I visited Johnson last fall, I found 20 third-graders spread out across the school's cafeteria, each with a laptop, some with headphones. It was 2:30 p.m., an hour I expected elementary school students to be antsy, ready to be done with the school day. Yet these students were quiet and focused. They received tutoring in groups of three, but because the tutor was virtual, students didn't have to sit near their groupmates.

Bailee, whose Halloween hair bow was nearly the size of her head, considered a prompt to write a sentence with the word "rip" in it. She slowly typed, "I rip my paper."

At the other end of the room, Aiden, wearing jeans and a blue zip-up jacket, yawned while raising his hand. His tutor showed the group a picture of a bar chart and asked what it was. "I don't know the name, but it's how you might count different things, like he has four apples and she has five bananas," Aiden said. "Maybe it's a maph?" The tutor, a young woman, congratulated him on the great description and asked if the word he was looking for was "graph."

In Kayla Shirley's fourth-grade classroom, students were engaged in one of three activities during the school's daily "Knights of the Round Table" intervention block—named for the school's mascot, the Knights. Seven students worked independently on math enrichment while Shirley sat at a table with five students, leading small-group instruction. The remaining students were logged into their tutoring sessions.

David typed  $5 + 5 = 12$  and then asked the tutor to check his submission. He remained completely focused on his tutoring session, even while students on either side of him were working independently on other material at different levels of difficulty. One of them was Antonella, who tackled a word problem that

involved drawing an array of a garden with four rows of flowers, seven flowers in each row.

Shirley's classroom is far from atypical. On the contrary, it offers a good snapshot of almost every Ector County ISD classroom where tutoring takes place. "Whole-group instruction is still the core of what we do, but tutoring supports that core in a truly individual way," said Robert Whatley, Johnson's assistant principal.

### Chat-based Tutoring at Bowie Middle School

On the other side of Odessa, Bowie Middle School Principal Amy Russell has selected Ector County's other tutoring vendor, chat-based FEV.

In Monica Olivas' sixth-grade classroom, large poster sheets display colorful lists of which students participate in tutoring on which day of the week. On this day, 11 students were logged into tutoring sessions, while 14 other students worked on assignments or used online enrichment programs. Texas House Bill 1416 requires that students who test below grade level on the state assessment must receive 30 hours of supplemental instruction over the course of the school year, though schools may include other students in these supplemental offerings. The state provides no resources for the instruction it mandates; local school districts must organize and pay for it. The students below grade level, sometimes referred to as "1416 students," are at the front of the line for tutoring, but Ector County ISD also encourages schools to use the NWEA MAP test, given in the first month of school, to determine which other students should receive tutoring if funds are available.

Teachers play a central role in determining the content of tutoring sessions in Ector County, a clear break from much of the tutoring done by commercial tutoring companies that has typically been disconnected from classroom instruction.

In some Ector County schools, grade-level lead teachers decide whether to focus on NWEA MAP scores or STAAR (the Texas state assessment) scores. Each teacher can choose whether to share specific content and standards with the vendor for tutors to cover, and about a quarter of them, including Olivas, do so. All tutors are given information about Texas state standards to help them work with students towards grade-level proficiency. One result of Olivas' providing tutors with specific course content is that while her students get personalized help from their own tutor, they're all working on the same topics.

Teachers and principals attribute some of Ector County's tutoring success to participation points and incentives that at least one vendor, FEV Tutor, gives students. Tutors can award points to students for effort, persistence, or achievement, and those points can result in small prizes, such as pencils or a pair of FEV-branded headphones, or simply public pride when a teacher displays the list of students by points acquired. At Bowie Middle School, a sixth-grader named Jade's tutor types, "Go ahead and give it a try," to which Jade quickly types back, "done its 43." The tutor immediately responds, "Plus 1 point for effort. Now let me explain."

In Erick Salgado's fifth-grade class at Blackshear Elementary, the student ranked first that day for working hardest had scored lowest on state standardized tests, not an uncommon occurrence in Ector. By contrast, students needing the most help are often the least engaged in traditional classrooms, where they're reluctant to speak up in larger settings. Beyond awarding points, the tutors also give students an "exit ticket," two or three questions that allow them to demonstrate whether they've mastered the material covered in the tutoring session that day. Teachers and tutors review the results to plan for future sessions or additional in-class support.

## Tough Fiscal Tradeoffs

While tutoring has been successfully incorporated into teachers' and students' daily school routines and many students are seeing significant growth as a result, the Ector County tutoring program's future is dependent on new funding sources.

Like thousands of other school districts, Ector County invested a significant portion of its one-time ESSER funding in tutoring, just as the federal government encouraged local educators to do. By the end of the 2023-24 school year, Ector County is projected to have only \$700.00 remaining of its initial \$10 million tutoring investment.

Yet the district is committed to sustaining the program. Says Superintendent Muri, "ESSER funds enabled us to explore areas of student support and acceleration that we have never been able to do before due to funding." Or as Principal Crier of Johnson Elementary so forcefully puts it, "We can't go backwards now that we know this is a solution to catch all kids up." Hers is a widely shared sentiment in Ector County.

Finding the money to continue tutoring in Ector and elsewhere once the federal pandemic-recovery funds expire isn't going to be easy, however.

The district is waiting anxiously to see if the Texas state legislature will increase school funding to schools this year (what would be the first expansion of state aid since 2019) or at least attach some funding to existing state legislation (H.B. 1416) mandating interventions for struggling students. In the meantime, Muri plans to use a "strategic abandonment tool" to transfer funds to tutoring from other programs that, "while good, may not be producing great results."

At the federal level, funding in Titles I, II, III, and IV of the Every Student Succeeds Act can be used for tutoring.<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, if school districts can connect tutoring with Response to Intervention (RTI), a program designed for early identification of struggling students or students with disabilities,

districts could support tutoring through Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.<sup>4</sup>

Ultimately, saving the new tutoring systems in Ector County and beyond—and the achievement gains these programs have delivered—will require schools and districts to make tough choices around how they spend Title I funding from the Every Student Succeeds Act, the primary source of ongoing federal school aid. “Campuses are going to have to use some of their Title I funding for high-impact virtual tutoring,” Lilia Náñez, the Ector County chief academic officer, told me. “It’s a dilemma. When I was a campus principal at a Title I school, I always funded people with Title I funds—a reading coach, a reading specialist, or an instructional coach. So, schools will have to choose: ‘Do I not fund a person so I can fund high-impact virtual tutoring?’”

That tension between hiring a community member as school staff and contracting with high-dosage tutoring providers able to give more students more support may go a long ways toward defining the trajectory of tutoring in Ector County and nationally in the years ahead.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Data from the 2022-2023 school year.
- 2 Air Tutors demographic information provided by the company.
- 3 National Student Support Accelerator, “Funding for High-impact Tutoring” (November 2023), <https://studentsupportaccelerator.org/sites/default/files/Funding%20for%20High-Impact%20Tutoring.pdf>.
- 4 L. Cohen, “A Long-term Strategy for Funding High-quality Tutoring,” FutureEd, Georgetown University (September 7, 2023), <https://www.future-ed.org/a-long-term-strategy-for-funding-high-quality-tutoring/>.