
New York Times

A Lucrative Brand of Tutoring Grows Unchecked

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Propelled by the No Child Left Behind law, the federally financed tutoring industry has doubled in size in each of the last two years, with the potential to become a \$2 billion-a-year enterprise, market analysts say.

Tutors are paid as much as \$1,997 per child, and companies eager to get a piece of the lucrative business have offered parents computers and gift certificates as inducements to sign up, provided tutors that in some cases are still in high school, and at times made promises they cannot deliver.

This new brand of tutoring is offered to parents by private companies and other groups at no charge if their children attend a failing school. But it is virtually without regulation or oversight, causing concern among school districts, elected officials and some industry executives. Some in Congress are calling for regulations or quality standards to ensure that tutors are qualified and that the companies provide services that meet students' needs.

"The potential here is unbelievable, and it's not being regulated by the states or the Education Department," said Patty Sullivan, the director of the Center on Education Policy, a Washington-based research group that released a study in late March examining the tutoring programs. "We're pouring a lot of money into it, and we're not sure it works. To the extent that it is going to grow, we've got to get a handle on it."

Critics are particularly concerned about aggressive marketing tactics, like the offers of computers, gift certificates and basketball tickets, though they acknowledge that such practices do not violate the law.

Students are not required to enroll in a tutoring program. The option is merely offered at poor schools that have been deemed "failing" for two years in a row. But because families can choose from a list of state-approved providers, some tutoring groups have reacted by engaging in aggressive solicitations.

School officials in Clark County, Nev., the district that includes Las Vegas, had to call security to remove tutoring providers from a school where they were soliciting families too aggressively, the Center on Education Policy found in its report. The parents, many of whom did not speak English, said they felt that they were being pressured to sign things against their will, according to the official who called the school police.

In New York City, where more than 81,700 students are being tutored, complaints about inappropriate incentives led officials to start an inquiry into all the providers about six months ago. It is expected to be completed by the summer.

The law's silence on such issues is not an oversight.

"We want as little regulation as possible so the market can be as vibrant as possible," Michael Petrilli, an official with the federal Education Department, told tutoring company officials at a recent business meeting organized by the education industry.

In fact, hundreds of new companies and community groups have been established to take advantage of the law, joining more established names in test preparation and tutoring like the Princeton Review, Kaplan and the Huntington Learning Center. Across the country, there are more than 1,800 "supplemental educational services providers," as they are called in the law.

Experts say these groups will earn as much as \$200 million this school year, with about 30 percent of that going to the big national companies. And the revenue is only expected to grow, as more schools are labeled as failing under national law and more parents take advantage of tutoring programs. Only about 11 percent of eligible students are now being tutored.

Experts point to the potential for fraud as a major issue. But so far, most of the problems reported appear to reflect poor management. In March, for instance, the Chicago school system asked Platform Learning Inc., the nation's largest federally financed tutoring company, to leave seven of its schools because of numerous lapses - including repeated absences by tutors - leaving hundreds of struggling students without extra help just before the Illinois Standard Achievement Test.