ESTABLISHING ROOTS

Implementing Citywide High-Impact Tutoring in DC

DECEMBER 2022

CITYTUTOR DC   CITYBRIDGE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since its inception in early 2021, CityTutor DC (CTDC) has catalyzed tutoring for more than 6,200 students across Washington, DC. We have achieved these results by building a "connected forest." Much like how underground networks distribute nutrients and messages among seemingly solitary trees to help improve the health of a forest as a whole, CTDC acts as an intermediary in the highly decentralized DC education system, connecting seemingly solitary LEAs in service of continuous improvement, brokering tutoring partnerships, and advocating for programs designed for students most in need of support—all to help improve outcomes for all students in the District.

After a year of work, we have uncovered the following principles of the connected forest strategy:

COLLECTIVE STRENGTH: A solitary tree cannot support the same amount of life as an entire forest, just as a single tutoring provider will struggle to meet the needs of an entire city. We conclude that *a robust tutoring strategy requires a large coalition of partners with unique models coordinated around a common goal and set of standards.*

HOLISTIC SUPPORT: The trees in a healthy forest are supported throughout their life cycle by an underground network that responds to specific needs, resulting in the improved health of the entire ecosystem. Schools and providers need a similarly specialized and responsive support network in order to meet the needs of their students. We conclude that *a centralized network that provides multiple types of support across the entire implementation process leads to a significant increase in standards-aligned tutoring.*
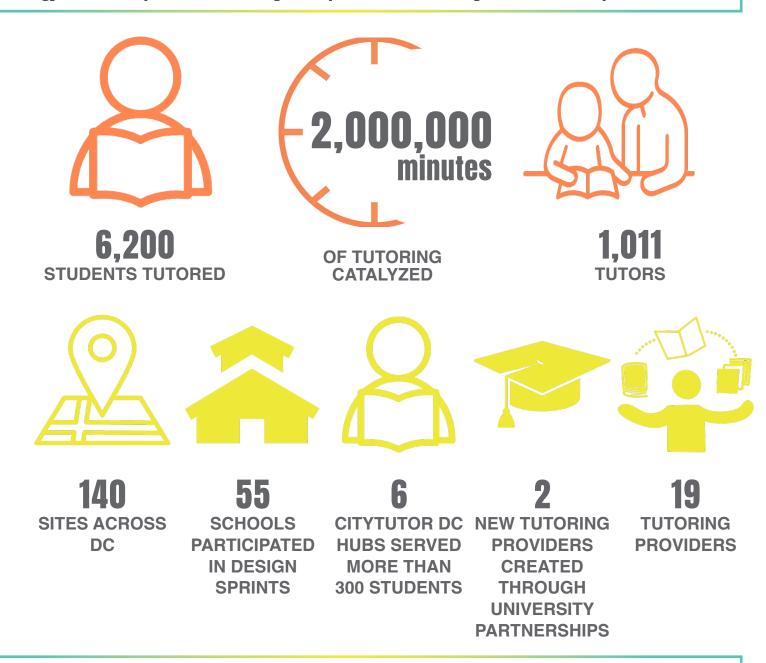
SHARED LEARNING: Trees use the underground network to constantly communicate about threats and to send nutrients to trees in need, resulting in a healthier forest as a whole. Schools and providers need a way to communicate and learn from one another to drive improvement. We conclude that *tutoring quality improves when partners have regularly structured opportunities to share information and collaboratively problem-solve*.

Recent replication efforts in Denver and by the New York City Department of Education validate these principles. We have also found emerging evidence that tutoring in DC is having its intended effects, with students experiencing more growth associated with more tutoring in ELA and increases in well-being across the city.

After a year of connecting, designing, supporting, and brokering, the CTDC initiative has demonstrated how to build a tutoring ecosystem that serves students furthest from opportunity and will last beyond the context of pandemic recovery.

CITYTUTOR DC'S FIRST YEAR

CityTutor DC is a coalition of 50+ schools, community-based organizations, civic partners, and other stakeholders committed to dramatically expanding access to high-impact tutoring–a standards-based, research-backed strategy shown to help accelerate learning and impact student well-being–in our nation's capital.

6,200
STUDENTS TUTORED

2,000,000 minutes
OF TUTORING CATALYZED

1,011
TUTORS

140
SITES ACROSS DC

55
SCHOOLS PARTICIPATED IN DESIGN SPRINTS

6
CITYTUTOR DC HUBS SERVED MORE THAN 300 STUDENTS

2
NEW TUTORING PROVIDERS CREATED THROUGH UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS

19
TUTORING PROVIDERS

High-impact tutoring (HIT) is a research-based practice of supplementing classroom instruction in a one-on-one or small group setting where a trained tutor and student meet frequently and consistently, typically with a focus on math or ELA.

INTRODUCTION: THE CONNECTED FOREST

CityTutor DC (CTDC) emerged as a complex solution to a complex problem: in a heavily decentralized system, with 69 autonomous Local Education Authorities (LEAs) across the city, how might we meet the academic and social-emotional needs of students learning in a system whose inherent inequities were exacerbated by the pandemic?

To understand how CTDC answers this problem, it becomes useful to turn to another complex system as a metaphor—a forest. The central problem concerning a forest is: in a heavily decentralized system, with hundreds of autonomous trees, how can the forest as a whole thrive? Nature's answer is a "connected forest": a subterranean, self-sustaining system made up of friendly fungi connecting the roots of every tree, allowing seemingly solitary trees to communicate about environmental threats and distribute nutrients to trees most in need. While the distinct parts of this network are specialized and complex themselves, its overall impact is the improved health of all trees in the forest.

Similarly, while the distinct aspects of the CTDC strategy are themselves specialized and complex—the guided design work, grant-making, and data collection—the sum of that work turns DC into a connected forest. The seemingly solitary trees of LEAs and tutoring providers learn from one another and support is focused on those furthest from opportunity. By building a coalition, CTDC cultivates an ecosystem that is self-sustaining and improves outcomes for the city as a whole.

COALITION BUILDING

We define our coalition as an alliance of stakeholders bound by standards for high-impact tutoring (HIT), taking collective action to accelerate students furthest from opportunity. Through the lens of the connected forest, we can reconceptualize the four-part approach outlined in *A Citywide Approach to Acceleration*[1] as a strategy to build a lasting, effective coalition:

- **Building and strengthening HIT networks** to coordinate providers and leaders around research-backed standards for HIT *and building a coalition of standards-backed practitioners.*
- **Building school capacity for equitable tutoring design** to support school leaders in reimagining and redesigning their school schedules to equitably implement tutoring *and building a coalition of equity-focused designers.*
- **Supporting out-of-school tutoring and learning** to reach students within their own communities and ensure that tutoring is accessible to students most in need *and building a coalition of community organizations.*
- **Strengthening the tutor force** to dramatically increase the number of tutors in the District *and building a coalition of improvement-focused tutoring providers.*

At the root of this strategy is a belief that empowered people are the drivers of change, that a coalition of empowered people can impact systems, and that impact is most far-reaching when multiple coalitions are connected and supported by a strong intermediary with a citywide vision—this is the connected forest.

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1   For an in-depth explanation of the CTDC strategy, HIT standards, and stakeholder groups, see A Citywide Approach to Acceleration: Early Lessons from CityTutor DC.

Photo courtesy of Reading Partners.

PRINCIPLES OF THE CONNECTED FOREST

COLLECTIVE STRENGTH

We have found that a coalition approach—building trust through relationships, brokering connections across partners, and supporting citywide implementation and improvement—is a key driver of success. To understand why, we can look to two lessons from the connected forest.

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

A solitary tree, no matter how healthy, cannot house the number of animals an entire forest can, as it will inevitably hit a ceiling—its roots cannot draw an infinite amount of resources and its branches will not grow infinitely wider. Many trees working together lessens the load on any single tree and allows the forest to support more life.
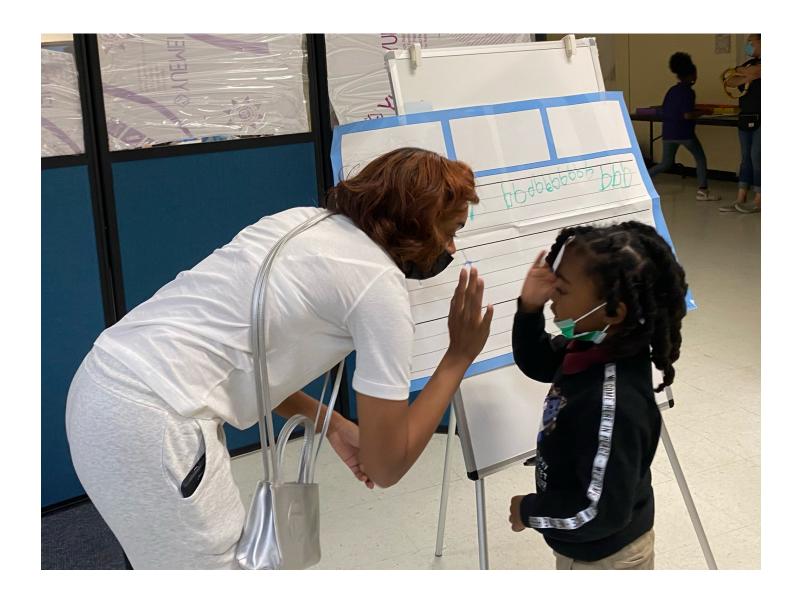
A tutoring model that relies on a single provider, even an exceptionally effective one, will also inevitably hit a ceiling. It would be very difficult for a single provider to indefinitely expand their capacity, their focus, their funding, and their tutor force to meet the vast and diverse needs of students. A model that instead looks to support many providers can widen the impact on students while lessening the load on any single provider

STRENGTH IN DIVERSITY

The healthiest forests are made up of multiple species of trees. This biodiversity makes the forest resilient to challenges. A disease that only affects pines will not cause an entire forest ecosystem to collapse if there are other species of trees that are immune.

Diversity in tutoring models—tutoring that happens virtually, in-school, or at community-based centers—makes our strategy resilient to challenges. If a certain provider is struggling to expand their tutoring force or make school partnerships, the initiative as a whole does not collapse; Students have other options available to them.

The coalition approach is the synthesis of these two lessons: the needs of students are too numerous and varied for any one provider or model to support, so we must look to build a coalition that is diverse and wide-reaching. We must build a connected forest. And just as the trees in a forest are unified in their goal of maintaining the overall health of their ecosystem, our coalition is bound by a clear vision for student acceleration and a commitment to standards-aligned tutoring. The success we have seen using this principle leads us to conclude that **a robust tutoring strategy requires a large coalition of partners with unique models coordinated around a common goal and set of standards.**

PRINCIPLES IN ACTION:
GARY COMMUNITY VENTURES IN DENVER, CO

In 2021, Denver Public Schools faced the same problem of interrupted learning that every district in the country was grappling with and chose to pursue high-impact tutoring as their solution. Denver implemented a direct service model through Gary Community Ventures (GCV), an organization focused on expanding opportunity for Colorado kids and families that hired, trained, and deployed tutors across the city. The decision was not unique to Denver; Many districts across the nation chose to pursue a direct service model. The Public School Department in Providence, Rhode Island, for example, selected Saga Education, an existing third-party tutoring provider, to expand their tutoring significantly to all 9th grade students.

Gary Community Ventures had an ambitious goal of reaching 5,000 students with HIT. After a year of tremendous effort, GCV had reached a fraction of that goal through their direct service model. Reviewing their data, they knew that they had to pivot their strategy.

Gary Community Ventures, along with CTDC, was a part of a national Community of Practice made up of six organizations and districts implementing HIT. Members of the community, which was convened and run by TNTP, were able to problem solve and share promising practices with one another. Using the lessons shared within the community, GCV decided on how they would adjust their strategy: adopt a CTDC-inspired coalition-based approach.

"CityTutor has been really intentional in aligning everyone in their coalition to the evidence base," said Elise Henson, GCV's Senior Manager of Programs and Partnerships. "We will consider that alignment as a model as we pivot from a focus on direct service provision to do more coalition-building and grant-making."

Gary Community Ventures realized that, although Denver's education ecosystem hadn't necessitated a coalition approach in the way DC's did, a coalition approach would be the most effective model, distributing money and effort in a way that could expand impact farther than a direct service model. Others are incorporating this lesson as well. Recently, TNTP recommended CTDC's coalition approach to HIT to the New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE). CTDC "inspir[ed] the impetus behind much of our recommendation," Megan Lucas, Seasonal Director at TNTP NYC, wrote. "[CTDC] is one of the places that we learned the most from." The NYC DOE has since adopted the recommendation.

We can use the examples of GCV and others as a basic counterfactual: what would have happened if CTDC had tried something other than the coalition approach? Pivots and replication efforts around the country are clear evidence that the coalition approach is not only useful in decentralized systems like DC, but in other contexts where organizations are trying to expand and distribute their impact. A single tree cannot support all the life that a dense, diverse forest can. A model that uses numerous providers and models, however, benefits from its collective strength.

HOLISTIC SUPPORT

The data is clear: due to CTDC's efforts, the amount of HIT standards-aligned tutoring happening across the District increased dramatically. Existing tutoring providers expanded, school staff began standards-aligned tutoring, and two completely new tutoring organizations formed. This citywide tutoring force collectively tutored 6,200 students for a cumulative 2,000,000 minutes since May 2021. This success can be understood again through the lens of the connected forest.

FROM SEED TO SEQUOIA

Throughout the life cycle of a tree in a forest—from a sprouting seed to a towering tree—an underground network of friendly fungi is hard at work supporting its health. Young saplings unable to photosynthesize under the shade of mature trees are delivered nutrients directly to their roots. Mature trees stay safe when they receive messages about environmental conditions and potential threats. Ancient dying trees release the nutrients they no longer need to the rest of the forest. At any given moment, the underground network is performing all these functions, meeting the needs of each tree at its own stage of growth. When seen at the macro-level, this suite of support is essential to the health of the entire forest.

CityTutor DC acts as the support network for DC, one that brokers relationships, increases capacity, and guides improvement for partners across the city throughout their implementation processes. Guided design work early on in the implementation process increased school capacity for identifying students at the margins and embedding HIT into their schedules. By brokering relationships between schools and providers, CTDC increased access to high-impact tutoring beyond what was possible for any school or provider on their own. CTDC-led Communities of Practice support providers and schools in their ongoing implementation efforts. From a brainstorm on paper to a fully working tutoring program, these activities have resulted in the dramatic increase in standards-aligned high-impact tutoring. Our success leads us to conclude that **a centralized network that provides multiple types of support across the entire implementation process leads to a significant increase in standards-aligned tutoring.**

PRINCIPLES IN ACTION:
CENTER CITY PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL

Center City Public Charter Schools educate approximately 1,380 Pre-Kindergarten through 8th grade students across six campuses in DC. While each school has different needs and populations, the LEA and school leaders determined that HIT is a crucial strategy to recover from the pandemic and achieve its mission to empower students for lifelong success by building strong character, promoting academic excellence, and generating public service throughout Washington, DC.

In the spring of 2021, Center City leaders from three campuses participated in CTDC's Design Sprints. With coaching from CTDC facilitators, they developed a strategy to fit HIT into the school day, an important aspect of the HIT standards. When the Sprint concluded, Center City found that the implementation plans the three leaders developed were robust enough to scale to all six campuses in their network.

Key to their initial plan was a reliance on a tutor force made up of a combination of school-based staff and external providers. Vetting a third-party tutoring provider can be time-consuming, but CTDC had already conducted an extensive review and compiled a list of HIT standards-aligned providers, allowing Center City to confidently choose two providers that would work well with their implementation plan.

As Center City continued to implement in-school tutoring, they struggled to effectively embed the third-party tutors into their school schedules. School leaders took advantage of CTDC Communities of Practice to connect with other leaders across the city and learn from their experiences in implementation and navigating their own obstacles. What they learned enabled them to confidently pivot and double down on school-based staff as tutors, rather than the combination tutor force they had initially imagined. As a result, across their network, 563 students have received HIT in elementary ELA and middle school math.

By experimenting with different HIT delivery models during the 2021-2022 school year, Center City generated new relationships among the CTDC coalition that resulted in bright spots in student achievement. On a panel following DC Policy Center's report on HIT, Russ Williams, President and CEO of Center City, stated that the CTDC team had been "invaluable in terms of propping up the tutoring space" and being quick-acting, critical thought partners. As Center City evaluates and continues to expand the tutoring options they offer, they have the connections they need to nurture student growth.

SHARED LEARNING

CityTutor DC was initially created as a response to the urgent need for student acceleration in the wake of the pandemic. This urgency guided our strategy to catalyze as much tutoring as possible with a focus on continuous improvement rather than waiting to perfect each tutoring model before launching. This strategy has given us the opportunity to foster ongoing relationships with our partners after they have launched in the form of data-driven Communities of Practice. These are highly tailored, CTDC-guided sessions focused on sharing data between partners so that they can learn from one another and implement changes to their models to improve tutoring.

HEALTHY FORESTS ARE LOUD

Trees use the underground network to send messages about their environment. When trees receive messages about a potential threat, they alter their chemistry to defend themselves and use the network to send nutrients to weakened trees. Healthy forests are "loud" because trees are constantly communicating vital information, protecting the health of the entire forest.

The DC tutoring forest is loud as well: Communities of Practice are where schools and providers have data-driven conversations about their work, signaling barriers to success that others should avoid and best practices that their peers can adopt or adapt. The rapidly growing number of students receiving HIT confirms that **tutoring quality improves when partners have regular structured opportunities to share information and collaboratively problem-solve.**

Photo courtesy of Reading Partners

PRINCIPLES IN ACTION:
GWU MATH MATTERS

CityTutor DC discovered early that math tutors were in particularly short supply despite the vast need for extra math support in DC. During the 2021-2022 school year, George Washington University (GWU) and CTDC partnered to bring high-impact math tutoring to 93 DC middle school students at Eliot-Hine Middle School, Stuart-Hobson Middle School, and Sousa Middle School with GWU students as trained tutors.

CityTutor DC supported The George Washington University's Honey W. Nashman Center for Civic Engagement and Public Service to launch GWU Math Matters—a program that recruits, trains, and manages tutors specializing in middle school math. Professors worked with school leaders to create tutoring lesson plans that would complement classroom learning.

The model built through collaborative partnerships between GWU Math Matters, CTDC, and middle school leaders was successful. Initial data points to GWU Math Matters as an effective program, with students demonstrating clear growth—an achievement that has been difficult to attain for many programs across the city. The early success has enabled the program to expand from 20 to 80 tutors this academic year.

Trends in the District align with reports of students struggling with math across the nation. There is an acute need for insights that can lead to student academic growth. The GWU Math Matters team participates in CTDC Communities of Practice, allowing them to share what they have learned from their own work with other practitioners, and helping to improve math tutoring across the city. Without such a structure for communication and collaboration, the insights and expertise that the GWU Math Matters team has would be difficult to access and spread. Sharing knowledge—and having the structures to do so—is an essential aspect in improving student success everywhere.

EMERGING INSIGHTS

Our data partners, EmpowerK12, have been instrumental in understanding student progress across the city. Thanks to the number of data sharing agreements they procured and their analysis of student achievement and well-being data, we uncovered three emerging insights—early lessons that will require more data to fully understand, but are worth sharing here.

MORE TUTORING MINUTES LED TO MORE GROWTH IN ELA...

Across the city, there was a clear association between minutes of tutoring and growth in ELA as measured by the DIBELS assessment and the NWEA MAP test.[2] In almost every group, the students who received 900 minutes or more (the "most tutored" students) grew more than the students who received 1-449 minutes (the "least tutored" students):
- 87% of the "most tutored" students had average or above average growth on the DIBELS assessment, compared with 78% of the "least tutored" students.
- 47% of the "most tutored" students had above average growth on the MAP test, compared with 38% of the "least tutored" students.

...BUT IT'S LESS CLEAR FOR MATH.

Mirroring the nationwide struggles with math, we saw varied results from math tutoring, with students who started in the bottom quartile (based on MAP and iReady assessments) growing more in association with more tutoring minutes, but mixed results for students in all other groups. It is important to note that math tutoring in the CTDC coalition did not start in full until February 2022 due to the Omicron variant, resulting in limited data.

BEYOND COUNTING MINUTES

While the above insights are framed around total minutes of tutoring, we know that session length represents just one of the seven standards for HIT. Like much of the other elements of our strategy, our data collection plan has been built with improvement in mind. Starting with a focus on session length and total tutoring minutes allowed us to build the muscle of data collection and provide partners with a clear anchor for improvement: extending session length is one of the more logistically simple improvements a program can make. As we continue to monitor progress and measure impact, however, we need to adopt more holistic methods of evaluating tutoring, ones that take all the HIT standards into account.

We have already begun to enhance our data collection strategy in the form of standards-based observations. Data from observations, paired with data from the existing data streams, have provided some early evidence that strength in other standards can be indicators of student success. Bright spots around the city, for example, show that a strong curriculum—another of the HIT standards—can play just as important a role as session length in student growth. As we continue to expand our data collection and analysis strategy, we know that a holistic approach to evaluation will be the path forward to improvement and quality.

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2   Data sharing agreements and timely submissions allowed for a subset of tutored students to be matched with their individual interim assessment growth goals and results. 905 tutored students had DIBELS data. 777 students had MAP and iReady data.

STUDENT WELL-BEING HAS INCREASED

Increased student well-being is a long-term outcome for our strategy. According to multiple measures, student well-being across the city has increased. Notably, an independent survey administered by EmpowerK12 found that student well-being increased from Fall 2021 to Spring 2022, with 63% of surveyed students reporting that they felt happy most days or every day, and 73% of students receiving HIT reporting that tutoring has been mostly or very helpful.

CityTutor-specific data suggests that relationships between students and their tutors were positive, with 94% of K-4 students reporting that they got along well with their tutor, and 98% of caregivers reporting that they believe their child has a positive relationship with their tutor. Strong student-tutor relationships are not only part of the HIT standards, research suggests that they can also have a positive impact on student well-being.

THE WORK CONTINUES

CityTutor DC's mission has always looked beyond pandemic recovery. HIT has been shown to be an effective tool in helping close the opportunity gap experienced by marginalized students. As we work to improve tutoring and expand access even further, we frame our strategy decisions around longevity: how might we ensure that these programs last?

Old-growth forests can be centuries old. They, too, rely on that same underground network that all forests need. With the right structures and support, we hope that LEAs, providers, and the students they serve will thrive long into the future.

ABOUT CITYTUTOR DC

CityTutor DC (CTDC) is a coalition-driven initiative to address the pandemic's impact on student achievement and well-being by dramatically expanding access to high-impact tutoring (HIT) in our nation's capital.

ABOUT CITYBRIDGE

CityBridge Education incubates the people, ideas, and conversations needed for equity-driven innovation in DC's public schools.