

How to embed small-group tuition in schools

A guide for school leaders

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This guide accompanies Grattan Institute's 2023 report,
[Tackling under-achievement: Why Australia should embed high-quality small-group tuition in schools](#).

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Small-group tuition – educators working with just a few students at a time in short, highly focused sessions – is among the most effective learning interventions available. Delivered well, it can add an extra four months of learning on average over a year, helping many struggling students catch-up.¹

This quick guide gives school leaders a snapshot of the best evidence on how to deliver high-quality small-group tuition. There's a list of useful school resources in section 4.

This guide complements our new Grattan Institute report, [*Tackling under-achievement: Why Australia should embed high-quality small-group tuition in schools.*](#)

Table of contents

SECTION 1

Small-group tuition:
your questions answered 4

SECTION 2

Small-group tuition should be part of
a 'response to intervention' model 6

SECTION 3

Cost-effectiveness considerations 7

SECTION 4

Useful guides on small-group tuition 8

Bibliography 9

¹ [Evidence for Learning \(2021a\).](#)



SECTION 1

Small-group tuition: your questions answered

This section summarises evidence from a recent systematic review by Nickow et al (2020) and an evidence summary by Evidence for Learning (2021a), unless cited otherwise.

What subjects should be covered and at what grade level?

Small-group tuition is effective for both literacy and numeracy, and both primary and secondary.²

Which students should be selected?

Students who have fallen behind grade-level standards should be considered. Only students who will benefit from short-term small-group tuition should be selected.³

What qualifications should tutors have?

Teachers get the best results as tutors. Provided they have effective training, others such as teaching assistants, or university students and graduates in the education field, also get good results under certain conditions (see section 3). Volunteers, and parents tutoring their own children, are less effective but can still have some impact.

What training do tutors need?

Tutors need appropriate training and ongoing support. Tutors who are not teachers may require additional support, for example structured learning materials and programs.⁴

What is the right group size?

Typically, small-group tuition is done with groups of two to five students at a time. Groups of three tend to provide value for money while ensuring quality.⁵ Groups of more than six tend to be less effective.⁶

What should the instruction entail?

Evidence-based literacy and numeracy approaches are key. The instructional material should be targeted to the needs of the students in the group. Monitoring student progress with frequent informal assessments will help tutors to tailor instruction.⁷

² For literacy, tutoring has stronger results among early primary students. Tutoring is also effective at secondary, but there are fewer studies.

³ Haan (2021).

⁴ Evidence for Learning (2021b).

⁵ National Tutoring Programme (2020) and Education Endowment Fund (2022).

⁶ Education Endowment Fund (2022).

⁷ See Robinson et al (2021) and Education Endowment Fund (2022).



When in the school day should small-group tuition sessions be scheduled?

Tutoring should supplement, not replace, whole-class instruction. Tutoring sessions should be scheduled to avoid conflicts with core subjects, or with the same subject in which tutoring is provided.⁸ Rotating sessions wherever possible can help.⁹

Should small-group tuition be conducted only during the school day?

Evidence shows tutoring has better results when it is conducted during the school day, because it is easier to ensure students attend.

Can small-group tuition be done online?

There is emerging evidence that online tutoring and tutoring using computer-assisted technologies can also be effective.

How frequent should tutoring sessions be?

To get the best results, students should get up to one hour of tutoring at least three times a week. Primary school students may benefit from more frequent but shorter sessions, such as 20-minute sessions five times a week.

How long should a small-group tuition program go for?

At least 10 weeks, with some programs extending for 20 weeks. Generally, if students do not respond to small-group tuition within 10 to 20 weeks, they should be re-assessed to determine what support is likely to be best for them.

How much does the tutor-student relationship matter?

Ensure tutors take time to build relationships with students and understand their needs – it is key to the success of tutoring.¹⁰

⁸ See [National Tutoring Programme \(2020\)](#). Two effective tutoring programs reviewed by [Nickow et al \(2020\)](#) had a policy that the tutoring sessions should not conflict with the subject of the tutoring.

⁹ [National Tutoring Programme \(2020\)](#).

¹⁰ [Education Endowment Fund \(2022\)](#). For an example of guidance on cultural responsiveness relevant to tutor-student relationships in Australia, see [Narragunnawali](#) resources.

SECTION 2

Small-group tuition should be part of a ‘response to intervention’ model

High-quality catch-up tuition should be part of a school-wide ‘response to intervention’ model, not just a series of stand-alone programs.¹¹

Under a ‘response to intervention’ model, all students first receive high-quality universal classroom instruction, with targeted additional teaching doses for students who need it.¹²

Under this model there is a strong focus on preventing learning gaps emerging in the first instance. If a large or growing number of students are identified as needing additional, small-group tuition, school leaders should investigate whether improvements are needed to raise the quality of whole-class instruction.

Whole-class instruction should include universal screening of all students with high-quality assessment tools, to identify learning gaps early.

Three tiers of support

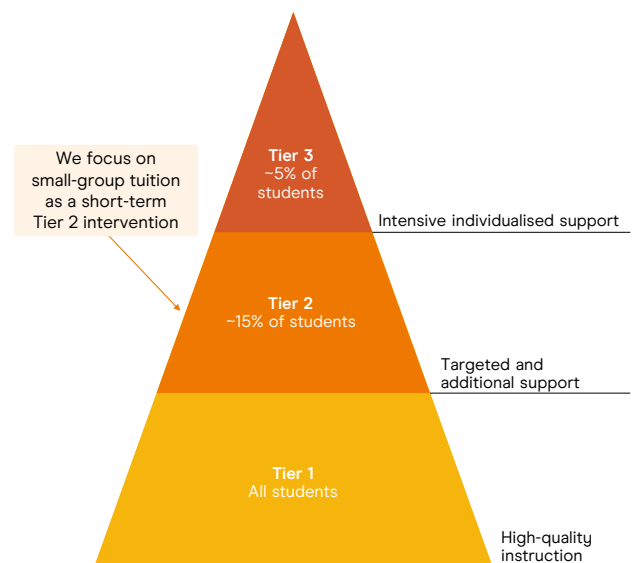
A ‘response to intervention’ model typically has three tiers (see Figure 1). Tier 1 involves high-quality universal instruction to meet the needs of most students. Tier 2 involves targeted additional support, often in small groups, for students at risk. And Tier 3 involves even more intensive support, often one-on-one, for students who show minimal response to Tier 2.

A feature of ‘response to intervention’ models is that teachers, both in the general classroom setting and the intervention setting, continually monitor their students to determine whether they need more or less additional help, moving between the three tiers. Small-group tuition is often used as a short-term intervention (Tier 2) to help students return to whole-class instruction (Tier 1).

Of course, small-group tuition can serve other purposes beyond providing a short-term extra learning boost. For example, it can help students who have acute learning needs or disabilities (in Tier 3), or help re-engage students who often miss school. In those

cases, it may involve specialist, ongoing and one-on-one tutoring.

Figure 1: Three tiers of support in a ‘response to intervention’ model



Source: Bruin and Stocker (2021)

Underpinned by evidence-based literacy and numeracy approaches

The quality of small-group tuition will only be as good as the quality of the instruction provided in the sessions. Evidence-based literacy and numeracy approaches within small-group tuition are essential. Examples include teaching reading using synthetic phonics, and effective oral language interventions.¹³

‘Structured programs’ in literacy and numeracy – where effective strategies and techniques are sequenced carefully and packaged up with relevant content, materials, and training – can be useful for small-group tuition.

¹¹ A ‘response to intervention’ model is a sub-component of a broader ‘Multi-Tiered System of Support’ (MTSS). MTSS is a more comprehensive framework which includes both academic support (the response to intervention model) as well as behaviour supports.

¹² Hempenstall (2012); Fletcher and Vaughn (2009); National Center on Response to Intervention (2010); Fuchs and Fuchs (2017); and Haan (2021).

¹³ For example, see Evidence for Learning (2021) on [phonics](#) and [oral language](#); and

SECTION 3

Cost-effectiveness considerations

There are several ways that schools can maximise the cost-effectiveness of small-group tuition. School leaders should weigh up four factors when deciding how to deliver small-group tuition.

Type of tutor?

First, school leaders can consider using teaching assistants or university students and graduates in the education field, rather than qualified teachers. This can substantially reduce salary costs, with only small reductions in the quality of teaching and learning.¹⁴

But to ensure high-quality small-group instruction, such tutors will need appropriate training and may need structured literacy or numeracy programs.¹⁵

The tutors should be overseen by a teacher with good literacy and numeracy intervention training, who should also help monitor the progress of the students.

Size of group?

Second, school leaders should consider the most cost-effective group size for small-group tuition. The size of the group has a big impact on the cost. For example, a group of four students will cost about 25 per cent less per student than a group of three.¹⁶

Best evidence to date suggests groups of three provide value for money while ensuring quality, but researchers are still exploring this issue. Some evidence suggests grouping students based on their skill level may be most effective.¹⁷

Amount of tutoring?

Third, school leaders should consider the most cost-effective tutoring dosage. More time in tutoring sessions costs more.

The evidence suggests that three sessions per week of up to an hour each delivers good results. Doing more than this isn't necessarily always better – the evidence is still emerging on this issue, and some evidence suggests running sessions four-to-five times a week does not lead to additional learning gains.¹⁸

Small-group tuition should run for at least 10 weeks, but if students do not respond within 10 to 20 weeks, they should be re-assessed to determine what support is likely to be best for them.

Use of technology?

Fourth, school leaders should consider delivering small-group tuition using technology in various ways.

Online tutoring, or a blended model of online and in-person tuition, can have positive results, although evidence is still emerging.¹⁹ Online delivery can offer benefits such as better matching tutors to students by overcoming geographical barriers. This would help to get better results for a similar cost.

High-quality digital materials and assessments can improve the quality of small-group instruction, as well as potentially reduce costs by reducing the amount of time tutors need to prepare for sessions.

Computer-assisted 'intelligent tutoring' programs can provide personalised learning paths for students.²⁰ This may be a cost-effective option, given that it enables tutors to take on higher caseloads.²¹ But evidence is still emerging, and there is little information on which computer-assisted programs are effective.²²

14 Nickow et al (2020).

15 Evidence for Learning (2021a); Evidence for Learning (2021b); Sharples et al (2018); and Robinson et al (2021).

16 Evidence for Learning (2021a).

17 Robinson and Loeb (2021), p. 20.

18 Poverty Action Lab (n.d.), page 8.

19 Robinson and Loeb (2021). Other recent evaluations include the Smith Family Learning Pilot reports (2021 and 2022), the Education Endowment Foundation [online tuition pilot \(2021c\)](#), as well as a [Spanish Randomised Controlled Trial \(2022\)](#) and an [Italian randomised study](#).

20 For a rigorous study showing the benefits of intelligent tutoring, see [Mostow et al \(2002\)](#).

21 For example, a study by [Chambers et al \(2011\)](#) involves groups of six students using computer-assisted technology.

22 For example, a systematic review by Paul and Clarke (2016) finds no evidence of effectiveness of computer-aided instruction for secondary students in reading.

SECTION 4

Useful guides on small-group tuition



These guides from the UK, the US, Victoria, and NSW provide further useful advice on how best to run small-group tuition programs in schools.

International guides:

- [*Making a difference with effective tutoring*](#), Education Endowment Foundation (2022). This UK guide provides evidence-based practical advice for school leaders.
- [*Best Tutoring Practice. Briefing for Schools*](#), National Tutoring Programme (2020). This UK guide helps public schools make the most of the National Tutoring Programme.
- [*Accelerating student learning with high-dosage tutoring*](#), Robinson C.D., Kraft, M.A., Loeb, S., and Schueler, B.E. (2021). This US guide summarises the evidence for effective tutoring.

Australian state government guidelines for COVID catch-up initiatives:

- [*Tutor Learning Initiative*](#), The Victorian Government (2022). This outlines how schools can implement Victoria's COVID tuition program, including different practice approaches.
- [*COVID intensive learning support program*](#), The NSW Government (2022). This outlines the evidence for small-group tuition, and how it should best be delivered.

For a summary of findings from the evaluations of the Victorian and NSW COVID-19 catch-up tuition initiatives, see Chapter 2 of our main [*report*](#).

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