



WATERSHED  
ADVISORS

**SOLUTIONS THAT SCALE:**  
How Watershed is supporting  
leaders to address America's  
biggest education challenges

**MAKING HIGH-IMPACT  
TUTORING A STANDARD  
PART OF PUBLIC  
EDUCATION**



# THE CHALLENGE

High-impact tutoring is one of the most effective interventions to [accelerate student learning](#), but historically it's only been available to families with the means to hire a private tutor. For students from less privileged backgrounds, high-impact tutoring has often been frustratingly out of reach.

## What is high-impact tutoring?

The [National Student Support Accelerator at Stanford University](#) recognizes high-impact tutoring programs as those that either have directly demonstrated significant gains in student learning through state-of-the-art research studies or have characteristics proven to accelerate student learning. These characteristics include:

- ✔ Substantial time each week of required tutoring
- ✔ Sustained and strong relationships between students and their tutors
- ✔ Close monitoring of student knowledge and skills
- ✔ Alignment with school curriculum, and
- ✔ Oversight of tutors to assure quality interactions

When schools shuttered across the country in response to COVID-19, the impact on student learning was deep and broad: **US grade schoolers lost an average of half a year's learning in math, with some in high-poverty districts behind by a year or more, further exacerbating preexisting achievement gaps.** Only about one in three students met proficiency standards in reading. Almost all demographic groups were affected, but Black and Hispanic students lost the most ground. Years later, [results](#) from the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) show that the pandemic wiped

out two decades' worth of student gains in math and reading. If we don't do something, unfinished learning has the potential to set back an entire generation.

Not surprisingly, **many education leaders identified high-impact tutoring as one of the best ways to address this crisis.** And, as federal pandemic funding flooded into districts, it became financially viable to offer tutoring to a broader set of students, even at price points that would otherwise have been prohibitive for district budgets. Tutoring has emerged as one of education's most discussed pandemic-era topics, making headlines in national media and conferences, and quickly becoming a priority area for education nonprofits and philanthropies. And with good reason — tutoring can [double or triple student learning gains](#).

Students in Chicago Public Schools who received daily 45–50 minute, two-on-one math instruction in ninth and tenth grades, learned as much as an extra two and a half years of math in one academic year.

**Despite results like these, and a strong desire from many districts to offer tutoring as part of public education, high-impact tutoring is still out of reach for millions of students.**

Meanwhile, students' learning recovery needs are far from being fully addressed and pandemic dollars have already started drying up. Watershed set out to understand what barriers were standing in the way of embedding tutoring in more schools for more kids — and what we could do about it.

We studied the major barriers, including:

- **Instructional barriers**, including the intentional alignment of high-quality core instruction curricular materials to tutoring materials;
- **Talent barriers**, including recruiting, training, and retaining qualified and prepared tutors;
- **Financial barriers**, including paying for tutors and other individuals or providers who support tutoring programming; and
- **Operational barriers**, including scheduling for delivery during the school day, attendance, and operational logistics.

These barriers are real, complex, and significant. Common across all of them is the fact that states and school systems are stretched thin. Without more readily available solutions that address the instructional, talent, financial, and operational hurdles, they will continue to gravitate toward programs that show little to no evidence of actual effectiveness in advancing student outcomes.

In studying these barriers, we also determined that while state education agencies, school systems, nonprofit, and for-profit tutoring providers had all been working hard to offer tutoring services or supports, they had not come together **to build a collective understanding of what works, what doesn't, and what changes would need to happen systemwide to support high-impact tutoring at scale**. In practice, this meant that although many students were being tutored, the dosage or the attendance was often inconsistent. And, while organizations often believed they were delivering high-impact tutoring, many weren't meeting the qualifications required to deliver high-impact results.

**Absent a great deal of intentionality and collaboration across all invested partners, it was clear tutoring programs would continue to be limited by size or impact** — and would not achieve the impact we know is possible.

## THE SOLUTION

At Watershed, we saw the heightened focus on bringing tutoring into the American K-12 public education experience as **a once-in-a-generation opportunity to better serve all students**, particularly those who have been historically underserved. But for high-impact tutoring to be sustainable long term and become a standard offering in public schools, districts, states, and tutoring providers would have to work together.

**A single entity was needed that could focus on identifying and elevating systemic solutions.**

Expanding evidence-based, scalable models of high-impact tutoring amid the influx of federal stimulus funding and a rapidly changing market of providers would require addressing the collective action problem. No one organization had ever attempted to bring all of the actors in the sector (state education agencies, school systems, nonprofit and for-profit tutoring providers) together to lower costs, incentivize the growth of programs with a proven track record, simplify implementation at the school level, and align the substance of tutoring to the core instruction a student receives in school.

To take up the challenge, Watershed Advisors worked with **America Achieves** and the **Annenberg Institute** to help launch a new nonprofit to do exactly that: **Accelerate**.

**Accelerate is working nationally to scale effective tutoring from an idea to a standard feature of the American school day** by funding promising, innovative tutoring practices and models, supporting rigorous research and evaluation, and convening key actors in the tutoring sector to drive collective action. By bridging the gaps between researchers, providers, and school systems, Accelerate works to ensure the rapid, widespread adoption of proven tutoring models.



Accelerate is funding over 60 grantees and studying their successes and challenges. They are collecting precise evidence on both program implementation and program effectiveness, including: How many minutes of tutoring are students getting? What percent of students are receiving the intended dosage? How can we determine the right balance of in-person and virtual support? How do different tutoring methods impact student outcomes?

The evidence base for high-impact tutoring is rich, but hard evidence on current programs' implementation and effectiveness is extremely limited. Accelerate's insights will help inform the field on how to make widespread access to tutoring a reality for the students who need it the most.

Other nonprofits and research institutes also focus on tutoring, but **no other organization works at the nexus of research, policy, and practice like Accelerate does.**



## Spotlight on Accelerate's 2022-2023 Grantees

### **Accelerate's grantee Deans for Impact (DFI) is innovating to address talent barriers to tutoring.**

DFI is convening educator preparation programs that are mobilizing teacher-candidates to serve as tutors in high-need schools, establishing the Aspiring Teachers as Tutors Network, and developing a policy framework for strengthening the tutor-to-teacher effectiveness of tutor-training modules to prepare aspiring teachers to serve as tutors, initially focusing on math in grades K-8. Against the backdrop of challenges with tutor supply in the 2021-2022 school year and declining interest in the teaching profession, DFI seeks to increase the number of future teachers serving as tutors – both as a means of sustainably scaling tutoring to more K-12 students and as a strategy for strengthening pathways into teaching.

*"How do we make high-quality tutoring something that doesn't just exist in the context of COVID relief efforts ... but something that is a standard part of how we support students and communities? Our model is simultaneously a way to meet the very real needs of students and families [and] an opportunity to strengthen the way we prepare future teachers," said Patrick Steck, policy advisor at Deans for Impact.*



# THE IMPACT

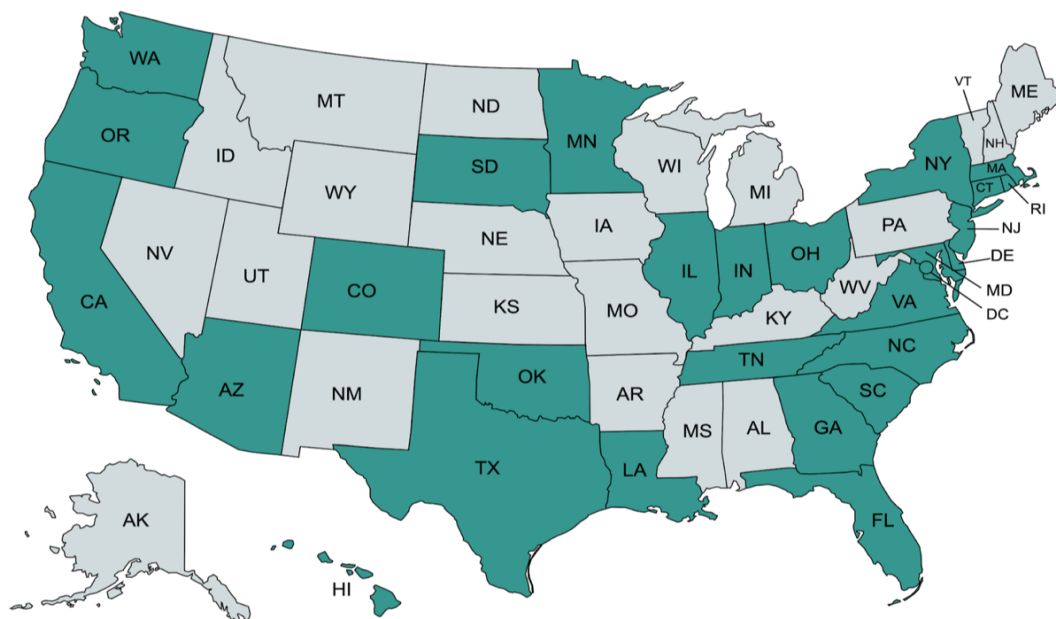
Accelerate began as an initiative incubated at America Achieves. During that time, Accelerate funded regional partnerships in conjunction with school systems, research partners, and non-profit organizations all focused on high-impact tutoring. Since launching as an independent non-profit organization, Accelerate continues to support regional tutoring initiatives to further the evidence base for effective tutoring practices and models. Scaling and sustaining high-impact tutoring will ultimately require efforts not only at the regional level, but at the state and district levels as well. To catalyze this work, Accelerate has recently added opportunities for state agencies to become partners in the solution.

Since launching, Accelerate has:

- Supported organizations that collectively serve **more than 178,000 students and work with more than 30,000 tutors;**
- **Issued 63 grants** to different organizations (state education agencies, school systems, non-profit charter management organizations, tutoring providers,

and other non-profit organizations playing a supporting role in the tutoring sector) **totaling more than \$16 million across 28 different states.** These grantees are working with research partners to study key questions about tutoring model effectiveness, implementation, and scalability;

- **Partnered closely with five states** to develop systems and structures that enable the adoption of in-school tutoring and advance statewide policies and regulations that allow this tutoring to scale;
- **Convened 82 tutoring-focused organizations** together through a Community of Practice to share lessons learned, elevate key insights across the sector, and build a broader movement in support of tutoring; and
- Partnered with the University of Chicago Education Lab to conduct a gold standard, **large-scale randomized controlled trial in four large school systems** to study sustainable high-impact tutoring.



States where Accelerate grantees are operating as part of the 2022-2023 Call to Effective Action.

# OUR ROLE

Watershed Advisors spent a year designing and executing an initial high-impact tutoring pilot grant program to eight geographic partners during the 2021-2022 school year: Chicago, IL; Dallas, TX; Denver, CO; Guilford County, NC; Nashville, TN; New York City, NY; Providence, RI; and Washington, DC. In the first year, we quickly realized that if high-impact tutoring was going to become a standard public school offering, there needed to be one organization dedicated to making that a reality.

## Spotlight on Accelerate's 2022-2023 Grantees

**Accelerate grantee Zearn is tackling instructional barriers to tutoring.** Their online math tutoring program is fueling the Tennessee Department of Education's high-impact, high-dosage tutoring program called Accelerating Learning and Literacy (ALL) Corps, a nationally recognized tutoring model endorsed by the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University. More than half of Tennessee elementary and middle school students (85,000+ students) who engaged in the TN ALL Corps have accelerated their math learning. Accelerate's grant to Zearn is enabling research on how to best support districts and states in designing and implementing their own tutoring programs.

*"To ensure all kids can catch up and move forward in math, we must implement extra learning time at scale. Moreover, this extra time must be coherently connected to what students are learning in core math time. It also must address any confusion on specific topics being taught. Absent this alignment, we are wasting students' extra learning time."*

— Shalinee Sharma, CEO, Zearn

**Our job was to help make the case for this focused organization — to convince partners and funders that starting a new organization was the right investment, and demonstrate how it could help overcome the barriers on the ground.**

To bring Accelerate to life, Watershed Advisors convened leaders from across the broader education sector, including philanthropists, researchers, nonprofit leaders, policy advisors, state education agency leaders, school system leaders, nonprofit leaders, and other practitioners. Accelerate is now a stand-alone nonprofit organization with grantees in 28 states. We continue to support its work as a key strategic and project management partner.

# OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH AND SCALE

This work is just beginning in earnest, but, in less than a year, Accelerate has made major strides in making effective high-impact tutoring available to hundreds of thousands of students. **With more than 200 letters of intent submitted for Accelerate's first Call to Effective Action in 2022 by providers, state education agencies, districts, non-profits, and other actors in the sector, the demand clearly exists for Accelerate's services and opportunities.**

Accelerate is developing the evidence, tools, and opportunities necessary to enable high-impact tutoring at greater scale. But there is still more work to do to make it a standard part of the school day available for every student who could benefit from it.

**To grow high-impact tutoring and scale further, Accelerate is working to:**

- **Identify and remove barriers to reaching more students**, such as continuing to identify, support, and study new innovations in tutoring (like AI-enabled or virtual-enabled high-impact tutoring);
- **Support the development of tools that will help the sector better understand the current state of tutoring**, such as by understanding basic financial information (like average program costs and per-student costs);
- **Improve the marketplace by providing guidance to states on how to launch and expand high-impact tutoring programs**, inclusive of the regulatory and non-regulatory actions needed at the state level to enable large-scale change. Establishing vetted vendor lists and streamlining ways districts access federal, state and local funding for tutoring will allow states to develop a more informed and regulated marketplace. Through this work, districts can be more informed consumers, purchasing tutoring products and services that have proven efficacy; and
- **Build momentum by working to lift up stories that demonstrate impact** so more leaders understand why and how to expand tutoring for students.

*"Today only a tiny fraction of American students are getting high-impact tutoring, even though we know it works. We can change that. We can make tutoring a standard feature of the American school day by increasing the number of proven models and making them easier for schools to implement. But only if we're clear-eyed about how far we have to go, what obstacles stand in our way, and what it will take to remove them."*

— Kevin Huffman, CEO of Accelerate

**Spotlight on Accelerate's 2022-2023 Grantees**

**Accelerate grantee Ignite! Reading is working to lower operational barriers to tutoring.**

Their virtual tutoring program is being piloted in six states and is designed to strengthen foundational literacy skills, beginning with first-grade students. Ignite! Reading's model is innovative, yet simple: The organization works with school districts to embed 15 minutes of daily tutoring into the school day, with a user-friendly virtual platform to provide each student 1:1 tutoring in foundational reading skills with a trained reading tutor. The tutoring program is partnering with more than 20 schools across six states, serving over a thousand students in the 2022-2023 school year. Ignite! Reading works with a diverse set of schools, including traditional and charter, urban and rural, and schools from large and small districts.

***"If the system isn't ready to serve all children, then let's bring in a safety net that is going to make sure that they learn what they need to learn while we give the system time to catch up."***

— Jessica Reid Sliwerski, CEO, Ignite! Reading

## THANK YOU

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All Photos by Allison Shelley for [EDUimages](#)