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Tutoring

# SCHOLAR'S CHOICE

Not just for struggling students anymore, more students than ever are turning to tutoring. Here's why.

BY BONNIE SCHIEDEL

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**W**ITHOUT EXTRA HELP OR SUPPORT, May Wang's children earn a steady A-average. While most would be complacent or even ecstatic with that level of achievement, the two Vancouver teens' education is still punctuated by weekly tutoring. Kathy, 16, a Grade 11 student, and her brother, Kevin, 14, and in eighth grade, have both had tutors for about 90 minutes a week since they were in Grade 6. Without tutors, their marks are in the 80s, but one-on-one work boosts their grades into the 90s, explains their mom. "Education is important to us and I have high expectations for marks," says Wang. "They are both in the public system, which I believe in, but the reality is that their classes are really big, and since they are both considered gifted kids, sometimes they're not challenged." The family speaks Mandarin at home and Kevin is in French immersion, so he works on his English skills with his tutor from a local company called School is Easy. For Kathy, it depends on the semester—right now it's English class; last semester it was chemistry. "After




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Grade 10, I asked Kathy if she wanted to continue with a tutor,” says Wang, “and she said, yes, definitely.”

Eighteen-year-old Olivier Raymond of Ottawa and his family decided to hire a private math tutor—a supply teacher

with a background in university math, recommended by a family friend—when he ran into trouble in Grade 11 math last year. It paid off: at the midterm, his grade was just below passing, but by the end of the semester, his final grade was in the 70s. ►



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“The tutoring was for math,” says Raymond, “but it also helped with understanding logical steps to solve a problem, which I used later in physics, calculus and data management classes too.”

These two stories represent the two faces of tutoring today: it’s used both for students who are struggling and those who want to get ahead in a subject. “We’ve seen a massive explosion in the growth of private tutoring since the mid to late ’90s, which is when the franchises came on the scene,” says Paul Bennett,

an educational consultant with Schoolhouse Consulting in Halifax. “It’s not just about remediation anymore. We’re seeing a ‘shadow education’ system that has grown up outside of the schools, and it’s the fastest-growing field in education today. There is this expectation for education to be like Netflix: available on-demand and all the time, not just during the school hours.”

### COMPETITIVE EDGE

Why the shift? Bennett points to a combination of factors:

awareness that we are living in a competitive global world (Asian students up to Grade 11 do 16 to 18 hours of weekly homework, while their Canadian counterparts typically do three to five hours, he says); the introduction of provincial testing programs; widely available school rankings; more parents with a university education than ever before; and perhaps a cynicism about report cards, which may rely more on jargon than a clear assessment of abilities. The most recent data, from a 2006 survey by the ►

Canadian Council on Learning, found that one-third of Canadian parents of kids age five to 24 have hired a tutor, and he notes that number is almost certainly much higher today in upwardly mobile communities.

Breanne Morissette, co-owner of Little House Tutoring and Learning Centre in Vancouver, has witnessed this shift in her 15 years as a tutor and administrator. “The teens we see are mostly wanting to get a leg up on a subject; to prepare and feel confident,” she says. “There is a lot of competition in Vancouver and expectations are high at private schools.”

She adds that her teen clients are mostly in Grades 7 to 9, getting ready for high school math and language arts. Math and reading and writing skills are by far the most in-demand subjects, likely, as Bennett explains, because they are the skills that are measured by testing. Prices vary by company, city and the tutor’s level of education, but expect to pay about \$15-25 an hour for a self-employed tutor and \$40 and up via a tutoring company. A number of tutoring companies and education centres also offer courses for tests like the LSATs, SATs and ACTs as well as college prep courses that focus on time management, study and organization skills. Says Bennett, “It’s all part of a much larger shift to a more competitive environment.” ■

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