

Boom times for local tutors

By Lynn Thompson

Times Snohomish County Bureau

Agnes Cabullos tried to help her daughter Alexa, 15, with math homework, but both ended up frustrated.

"She doesn't get it, I'm not a teacher, we're both in tears," she said.

Cabullos enrolled Alexa in a Kumon learning center near their Shoreline home to boost Alexa's skills and get her ready for the Washington Assessment of Student Learning in the spring. Cabullos' two younger children, Carlos, 8, and Isabella, 7, also get help with math at the center — Isabella because she's working ahead of her second-grade class, Carlos because he's struggling to keep up.

The family is part of what industry analysts and local educators say is an explosion in private tutoring. High-stakes testing has highlighted learning gaps and prompted some families to seek outside help. Others want support for students in a difficult subject. Still others seek an edge for their children on high-school grades and college entrance exams.

But the increasing use of private tutors also raises questions of fairness. Poor families are less likely to be able to afford private tutoring. Federal funds available to tutor students in some failing schools are infrequently used.

And while many public schools have added support classes in the WASL-tested subjects of math, reading and writing, as well as after-school study sessions and student-to-student tutoring, educators say these measures don't give students the individualized help offered by private tutors.

Before you hire a tutor

Experienced local tutors recommend parents ask the following questions before they commit to a service or an individual instructor.

What kind of experience and education do your tutors have?

Do you have tutors available now in the subjects my child needs?

Am I obligated to pay for unused classes if things don't work out?

What is the cost per hour? Is there an enrollment fee?

Will my child be tutored one on one or work with other students?

Do you have references from current or past clients whom I can contact?

Do you do criminal-background checks on your tutors?

Source: The Learning Curve

"It's terribly unfair," said Mercer Island parent David Myerson. "We know that the children of people who don't make much money do worse in school. They also can't hire tutoring."

Parents willing to invest

Nationally, tutoring is a \$2.2 billion industry serving 1.9 million students, said Adam Newman, managing vice president of Eduventures, a Boston research and consulting firm to the education industry. He estimated that about 4 percent of the nation's 50 million students receive private tutoring and about 15 percent of middle- and high-school students.

"Testing has put more pressure on students at all levels. Add to that the hyper-competitive environment to get into top colleges, and you have more parents willing to invest," Newman said.

There are plenty of signs that the local tutoring market is booming. A 2004 survey in the Mercer Island School District found that 63 percent of high-school students either were being tutored or had been tutored.

Tony Beals, director of operations for Kumon learning centers in the Northwest, said Kumon is opening 10 new centers this year in the five-state region, seven of them in Washington. Math is the reason about two-thirds of the students seek help, but the percentage in reading has grown by 70 percent since 2002, he said.

"We're turning people away," said Kristen O'Malley, a former teacher who now runs The Learning Curve in Issaquah. "Everyone I know is turning people away."

At Basic Skills, a tutoring center near the University of Washington, owner Susan Klastorin says she has trouble returning all of the phone calls to her business. A former special-education teacher, Klastorin said her business has grown the past 15 years from just herself to five employees.

Help sought at test time

When she opened her business, she worked primarily with young students with reading disorders. Now she sees more high-school students and students seeking help at test time, whether it's a test to get into private secondary schools or the WASL or SAT exams.

She said the growth in tutoring seems to parallel the rise in specialty services for children, from professional soccer coaches and voice lessons to college-prep tests.

"Forty years ago, no one took SAT prep tests. Now, it's common," she said.

Independent private tutors charge between \$25 and \$60 per hour, depending on their experience and credentials. Small tutoring businesses run about \$45-\$50 an hour. Larger local tutoring businesses typically charge \$65 to \$85 an hour, while national chains such as Kumon or Sylvan charge between \$20 and \$45 an hour. Costs also vary depending on whether the tutoring is one on one or with small groups of students.

But observers say there are no state licensing requirements for tutors and little oversight of the business.

"There are a lot of tutors out there who are not teachers, who have no business license, nothing," said Kim Hefty, a former math-department chairwoman at Skyline High School who now runs her own tutoring business. "Parents are so desperate for help they don't check to see if someone is legitimate."

Some tutoring businesses offer for-credit classes, with the cost ranging from \$2,400 to \$4,000. On Mercer Island, about 90 students leave the high school each week to take a class at nearby Privett Academy, a nonprofit school. About 90 percent of the academy's students are taking math, and the classes of no more than five students are in such high demand that they run from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. five days a week, said director Carol Meyer.

"Public schools can't compete with our class size. They can't offer individual instruction. It's unrealistic to expect a teacher with 30 students in a class to be able to do that," she said.

At the other end of the spectrum, Debra Sullivan, education director for the Urban League, said the tutoring services offered to poor families under the federal No Child Left Behind act are so difficult to obtain that few students have used them.

Statewide, 21,500 students were eligible for free tutoring but only 252 took advantage of it during the 2005-06 school year, according to the state Office of Public Instruction.

Families at schools that have been on a federal watch list for three years must first know that they're eligible for free tutoring and then must apply. A required goal statement requires five different signatures, including the school district's and the provider's. And any provider must be on a federally approved list.

The use of tutors may skew what happens in the classroom. Tutors say teachers may not know students are struggling and seeking outside help. Tests and homework may suggest that there's continued progress, and teachers assume that they're doing a good job.

Alexa Cabullos, the sophomore getting help at Kumon, said her teacher rushes through material and only reviews it right before a test. She said it's hard to get her questions answered because so many other students have questions, too.

Alexa sees how improving her math skills may help her reach overall goals.

"When I'm older, I really want to go into medicine. I want to get better at math so I can study medicine. Someday, I want to help other people," she said.

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