



October 16, 2006

More students needing extra help turn to overseas tutors

By Kellie Patrick, The Philadelphia Inquirer

PHILADELPHIA ? It's 8 p.m., and Sneha Abraham is ready for her geometry lesson. She turns on the computer in her brother's bedroom, and soon receives an e-mail hello from a tutor in India.

Abraham ? a junior at East High School in West Chester, Pa., who hopes tutoring will boost her score on the coming SAT ? is one of a growing number of U.S. students whose tutors live and teach outside this country.

There is a strong demand for tutors in the United States, propelled in part by high-achieving students shooting for admission into competitive colleges and by others who qualify for publicly funded tutoring because they attend a failing school under No Child Left Behind. Some online, offshore companies already provide NCLB tutoring; others say they will apply to states soon.

Can students learn this way? Critics say in-person tutoring is best and warn that no one monitors what these companies offer.

But those who use or sell online tutoring say it can be as effective and at less cost.

"It has helped a lot," Abraham said. "Sometimes, the teacher will go over stuff we hadn't gone over in class yet, and so I get it two times. It's not that I enjoy it ? I don't really like doing math ? but I understand it."

Similar to the call centers used by credit-card companies, U.S. students are linked by the Internet with overseas tutors who often hold advanced degrees, but will work for much less than most American tutors.

Offshore, online tutoring is just the beginning of what Don Knezek, chief executive officer of the nonprofit International Society for Technology in Education, calls "the globalization of education."

A bargain alternative

Right now, much of the appeal of overseas tutors ? both for employing companies and hiring parents ? is their cost.

"In India, in the tutoring biz, you get the same quality of skill for less than half-price," Knezek said.

Growing Stars Director of Enrollment Wayne Burckhardt said families pay a set-up fee of \$150, then \$25 per hour of tutoring. There are extra fees, ranging from \$75 to \$125, so tutors can have the same textbook. And there are package deals that bring down the hourly rate, he said.

Kaplan, one of the best-known tutoring companies in the United States, charges \$1,999 for 20 hours of one-on-one academic instruction in the student's home ? about \$100 per hour. Kaplan does not have online tutoring. It does have an online, self-guided SAT prep program for \$399.

Technology versus tradition

Critics, however, say online tutoring is not as effective as the in-person kind.

"I still believe tutoring is a kind of process where you need to be in front of the person you're tutoring," said Lynn Giese, interim president of the National Tutoring Association and coordinator of peer tutoring at Columbus State Community College.

Knezek, of the International Society for Technology in Education, takes a buyer-beware approach since he knows of no outside monitors. Online tutoring is "an industry in its infancy," he said. "I think you'll find the quality and effectiveness uneven."

Basappa, the online tutor, wrote in an e-mail that his biggest challenge is "you have to understand the individual only by the way he speaks."

But proponents say many young people have no trouble, because they are used to communicating electronically.

Abraham, who has been with Growing Stars since the end of last school year, had been tutored in math by a college professor who charged \$45 per half-hour to go to her home on Saturdays. She was initially skeptical of the online option.

"At first, it was kind of weird to talk to someone I couldn't see and probably wouldn't ever see," she said. But she's at ease talking on the phone and through instant messages ? she recommends against online tutoring for anyone who is not.

At Abraham's recent session, her tutor, whom she knows as Rekha, mapped equations on a graph. Abraham could see the problems her teacher was typing immediately, via software that linked their screens into a virtual whiteboard.

Rekha asked Abraham to show her work, say her answers out loud and then write them down. She also had to explain the "why" behind her answers.

"It's really hard to fake understanding something when she is asking you to do problems and talking to you ? she can hear your voice," Abraham said.

24hourstutor's advantage

- ✓ 24X7 tutor's availability
- ✓ One one-on-one session with the tutor
- ✓ Begins with the assessment test to judge student's strengths & weaknesses.
- ✓ Mentor facility to monitor the student's performance
- ✓ Huge database of world's top ranked teachers.
- ✓ Regular tests