

# The Star-Ledger

Sunday, October 29, 2006

## U.S. students turn to India for tutors

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It's pitch-dark and a chilly rain is tapping at the windows as Samuel Gozo sits down at the computer for an 8 p.m. chemistry lesson in his cozy Rahway home.

More than 7,000 miles away in Agra, India, the sun is rising as Gozo's tutor, Anil Kumar Mathur, does the same.

Moments later, Mathur's voice echoes from a speaker in Gozo's room.

"Hello Sam, how are you?"

Sam, a 15-year-old sophomore at Rahway High School, is one of thousands of U.S. students turning to online tutors overseas, driven by a desire for affordable, quality instruction and concerns about test scores and a competitive college admissions market.

The demand has been met by an emerging industry of offshore e-tutoring firms that have used technology and an abundance of highly educated, low-wage workers in Asia to compete directly with traditional tutoring companies.

It's just the latest trend in a rapidly evolving global marketplace that has already seen the outsourcing of accounting functions, laboratory science, airline ticketing and many other knowledge-based services to India, the Philippines, Israel and elsewhere.

"Normally you would think something like tutoring should be very local, but with the Internet and technology, things like this can be done at a fraction of the cost of doing it in the United States," said Rakesh Sambharya, a professor of management and international business at the Rutgers Business School in Camden.

Whether e-tutors from different time zones can be as effective as face-to-face tutors is still being debated by educators, and the trend has sparked controversy.

Last week, New York City education officials suspended a contract with a Texas-based company, Socratic Learning Inc., for failing to disclose it was using tutors based in India who were not subjected to the city's fingerprint and background checks. The company claims the tutors had FBI background checks, and that the city's system requires Social Security numbers, which the Indian tutors don't have.

But those who use or sell the online services say they can be as effective, more convenient and less costly than traditional tutors.

For the Gozos, the price offered by the India-based firm was a deciding factor -- \$100 per month for unlimited sessions. Sam takes one-hour sessions about a dozen times a month -- less than \$10 a lesson and much less than the \$25 or more per hour charged by American online tutoring services like e-tutor.com or the \$100-an-hour fee that face-to-face instructors can charge.

"Where I work, the parents send their kids to summer classes, which can cost an arm and a leg," said Gabrielle Gozo, who works in the fashion industry. "I can't afford an arm and a leg."

"There is very little personalized education available in America, because it is too expensive and the education system is not ahead on technology", that offers 24-hour tutoring in subjects ranging from geometry to grammar.

"It's a growing area," said Judy Alu, New Jersey's federal tutoring coordinator. She said tutoring services with an online component make up more than half of the 160 companies approved by the state for students in about 300 struggling schools.

India is especially fertile ground for tutors because of the country's advanced education system in math and sciences, the prevalence of English and a lower wage scale, experts say.

"The average income per person in India is about \$650 a year," said Robert Kennedy, director of the William Davidson Institute and a professor of business and administration at the University of Michigan. "In India you can hire well-educated people with master's and Ph.D.s for \$400 or \$500 a month."

Many Indian tutors are trained to speak with an American accent and are exposed to U.S. teaching methods and culture.

Last week in Rahway, Sam's tutor Mathur, a 54-year-old former teacher and business owner with a master's degree in chemistry, kept the teenager's attention for the entire hour, writing formulas on a whiteboard, asking questions and offering friendly encouragement.

"It's a new experience, because you don't have the student in front of you," Mathur said. "You have to make it as interactive as you can. If you don't, they can walk away, and you won't know it."

Sam said that when he first started using the service, he struggled with his instructor's accent, but he quickly adapted and it never kept him from understanding the lessons. "Chemistry class has become a lot clearer and easier to me," he said.

Critics say the potential for misunderstanding is one reason to be wary of online tutoring.

"The best tutoring is when you're working with someone one-on-one or in a group, where a tutor can recognize whether a student is understanding something," said Lynn Giese, interim president of the National Tutoring Association based in Columbus, Ohio.

"With the Internet, you don't get that physical connection," said Giese, who represents about 5,000 tutors and educators in the industry, many of whom earn between \$20 to \$25 hourly. Kaplan, one of the most popular tutoring companies in the United States, charges \$2,799 for 20 hours of one-on-one academic instruction in a student's home.

"The strength of that environment comes when the tutor is able to build a rapport with the student and they can gauge the student's motivation and understanding based on nonverbal cues," said Annette Riffle, general manager of the Kaplan Premier Private Tutoring division.

"If you want a personal touch, your parents have to take you to a tutoring center," said Philip, a native of India who now lives in Princeton. "This is better for the parent and student; there's no running back and forth, no transportation costs."

Sanya Bhambhani, an eighth-grader at Voorhees Middle School, takes tutoring classes in math and SAT preparation with Growing Stars. Both of her tutors have postdoctoral degrees.

"I'm getting straight A's in math, and I have to thank my tutor for that," Sanya said.

Sanya's father, Raju Bhambhani, said he looked up Growing Stars after reading about the service in "The World is Flat," Thomas L. Friedman's best-selling book about trends in the global marketplace.

At the time, Bhambhani was driving his daughter to a tutor more than an hour away from home for \$75-an-hour lessons.

"This is a huge difference for us," the father said. "The private tutor we found on our own was a very good teacher, but the distance killed us, and the price killed us."

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