

Consumers Digest

JULY/AUGUST 2004

Report Card:

Learning Centers for Children

As school budgets shrink and class sizes grow, many parents are turning to learning centers to make sure their children master the basic skills or even gain a competitive edge in the classroom.

By Anne Cassidy

At only 7 years old, Michael Tran is already climbing mountains. He's not exactly scaling Everest or K2, but his accomplishment is no less significant to his family, friends or to himself. In an effort to improve his reading skills, Michael has been participating in twice-a-week tutoring sessions at Score Educational Center in Herndon, Va. Now, with only one computerized lesson left to complete, he is on the verge of meeting a major learning goal and moving his gold marker to the peak of "Score Mountain."

Michael will not be alone when he reaches the summit. Tutoring is an increasingly popular option for families, with an estimated 5 million K-12 students receiving supplemental education services every year in the United States. With no statistically significant improvement in standardized test scores in math, science or English over the past 30 years in the U.S., even parents of top students are looking to give their kids an academic edge.



"The tutoring marketplace has been [growing] for the last ten years," says Steven Pines, executive director of the Education Industry Association. "Tutoring was once viewed as only remedial, but now it's for enrichment, too."

Stricter school standards and increased college competition are seen as the driving forces behind the \$4 billion for-profit education industry that is changing the way we think about how students learn. Leading learning-center chains, such as Score, Sylvan, Huntington and Kumon are helping "A" students as well as "F" students and every student in between.

As Michael Tran's and others' parents have learned, however, the commercial tutoring market varies widely in terms of philosophy, tutor qualifica-

tion and student-to-instructor ratio. Finding the right match for your child takes homework.

The ABCs of Learning Centers. Not all learning centers are created equal, and each approaches its mission differently. At Score, for instance, incentives for students and convenience for parents comprise major points of that center's philosophy.

"We want to be convenient, the same as a grocery store," says Beth Hollenberg, senior vice president of Score. "We encourage parents to make us part of their weekly routine."

When Michael Tran completes his final lesson, he receives a high-five from his instructor—and a prize token. Michael's achievement is announced to the 15 other students at the center, who stop their own work to shout and clap for Michael as Kool & the Gang's "Celebration" is played.

The scene is much different at Huntington, the nation's oldest supplemental-education chain. For starters, parents and students will hear no loud music there.

"We keep the sound at a library low," says Todd Sain, owner of three Huntington Centers in Virginia. "We're very old-fashioned and teacher-centered. We don't give tokens. We like to think of Huntington as the mom-and-pop of commercial learning centers."

And, in fact, it is. New Jersey-based Huntington is still run by Dr. Raymond Huntington, a professional educator who founded the center with his wife, Eileen, a teacher.

"We started our business 27 years





ago and it's fundamentally stayed the same since," Dr. Huntington explains. "One teacher works with up to four students. The teacher goes over the concept and examples with a student and then the student works on his own. The teacher keeps cycling through the four students in that fashion, giving them an opportunity to work independently."

If Huntington is mom-and-pop, Sylvan may be the rich uncle of learning centers, with over 1,000 outlets. It offers pupils a combination of old-school study with a modern-era reward system. Like Huntington, Sylvan uses *mastery learning*, where students tackle progressively challenging tasks to master core subject areas, including reading, writing, math and study skills. Unlike most other regional and national learning centers, however, Sylvan's curriculum is consistent at every center.

"The reading program in Portland, Maine, is the same as the one in Portland, Oregon," says Richard Bavaria, Sylvan's vice president of education. "It's the closest thing to a national curriculum. Underlying everything we do is a highly motivating program. We award students with tokens for good work. They can save these tokens and cash them in for prizes."

Students can earn high-school credit through Sylvan, and some Sylvan centers are even located inside schools.

The other major player in the tutoring arena is Kumon. Conceived more than 50 years ago in Japan, when math teacher Toru Kumon began writing math problems for his son, it has grown to serve three-and-a-half million students in 43 countries that share the

20 minutes every day at home and check in with instructors twice a week. The instructors assess student progress on both accuracy and speed and then distribute new materials. If students need extra help, teachers will work with them. Kumon centers typically have a higher student-to-teacher ratio than the other three national centers with more of a study-hall atmosphere to develop the discipline of daily work.

At \$80 to \$110 per month per subject (including testing and two 30- to 40-min. visits per week), Kumon is less costly than other programs.

For the other learning centers, services range in price from \$20 to \$50 per hour, and students are expected to attend two sessions per week. Additional enrollment fees typically range from \$125 to \$200. Needless to say, cost can be considerable for a stay of several months to a year, but customers can obtain low-interest loans through Sallie Mae, a major provider of student financial aid. Some centers will also offer price breaks for prepayment or sibling discounts.

The Tutors. There are over 100,000 part-time and full-time tutors nationwide, and most, but not all, are required by their employer to be state-certified to teach.

"We look for

same curriculum. Targeted at mostly elementary- and middle-school-aged students, Kumon is tailored to students looking for enrichment as well as remediation and is known for being rigorous.

Kumon students work on materials 15 to

folks who can make a positive connection with children," Score regional director Jon Chapman says. "Score [instructors] are bright and highly qualified and have excelled at their own academic careers. But they don't have to be certified in education."

Many certified teachers turn to learning centers, however, for extra income, flexible schedules and/or a sense of accomplishment they often find missing from traditional classrooms.

"Teaching in school, you spend so much time on discipline and trying to keep the class under control that you don't get to do much teaching," says Pat Minnig, a certified teacher who has taught at almost every grade level from K-8 and now is a math and verbal tutor for Huntington. "You get to see more results working closely with kids. You actually see things click in their brains. It's like cartoons where the bulb lights up; the kids' eyes open wide."

"I'd say 90 percent of Sylvan tutors are part-timers," Bavaria says. "Many are teachers in the community who love to teach but don't love to do lesson plans or grade papers."

While tutors are not discouraged from using their own methods and tricks to help pupils learn, it is the center that ultimately controls the curriculum. As a rule, the curriculum at these centers consists more of mastering the basics than learning specifics. Centers are not the place to find, say, a fluent Italian-speaker who will help your student learn to roll his or her r's or a physics teacher to discuss the finer points of drawing vector diagrams.



Independent Thinking. If you do need a specialized tutor, or would rather select a tutor directly, rather than allowing a center to pick one for you, there are many local, independent tutors and tutoring services available. As a matter of fact, most tutoring is done not by tutoring chains but by individual teachers who pick up business by word of mouth or through agencies.

“Everybody knows the brand-name players... but there are as many as 15,000 independent tutoring companies,” Pines says. “They are not chains, they are not corporately owned. They are often made up of a teacher who has become a ‘tutoring company’ that has expanded to hire other teachers. Often they will work on a more individualized basis [and] go into homes and customize services in a way that a franchised organization cannot.”

Independent tutors come without the markup factor. When you use a chain, you’re paying for the overhead, the national curriculum, even the flyers that arrive in your mailbox. For the same amount of money you pay a center for a one-to-three ratio, you could hire a tutor who works one-on-one with your child.

Peggy Cassidy is a retired English teacher who works 10 to 12 hours a week tutoring writing and SAT prep with a regional tutoring service called Back to Basics in Wilmington, Del., which serves hundreds of students in 50 subjects ranging from foreign languages to physics—taught at home—for \$45 per hour.

“My neighbor is in charge of two Huntington Centers, and he’s asked me if I’d like to work for him,” Cassidy says. “But they don’t do as much one-on-one tutoring as Back to Basics. After all those years of teaching in a classroom, I had no idea how much I’d enjoy doing one-on-one.”

Independent tutors can be found through your child’s school, the phone book, reference librarians or tutoring Web sites that match students with a database of instructors.

Results? Learning centers lure customers by promising better grades and test scores, but proving such claims can be more difficult than learning

Head Of The Class

A side-by-side comparison of the Big 4 Learning Center chains

Huntington Learning Center

Overview: Founded in 1977, Huntington offers a traditional approach to tutoring. The bulk of its students attend for remedial K-12 studies. Though Huntington boasts a 98 percent success rate, it offers no guarantee of improvement.

Price: \$46-\$53/hr.; \$70/hr. (one-on-one)

Additional Fees: \$195 diagnostic test

Maximum student/teacher ratio: 4:1

Kumon

Overview: Founded in 1950s Japan, Kumon has 1,100 U.S. centers and offers help in math and reading. Students meet with instructors up to twice a week for 30 to 45 minutes to assess progress on take-home assignments. There is no guarantee of improvement, but students only advance once they have mastered the previous level.

Price: \$80-\$100/month per subject

Additional Fees: \$30-\$50 registration fee

Maximum student/teacher ratio: 20:1

Score! Educational Center

Overview: Founded in 1992, Score is a sister company of test-preparation leader Kaplan. Score serves 200,000 students at 55 centers in 13 states and offers two programs, Advantage and Personal Academic Training (PAT). The Advantage program is geared toward K-8 students and uses customized computer programs to help students learn (with the help of a director). The PAT program is a more traditional model where an instructor works with students (not available at all centers).

Price: \$20/hr. (Advantage); \$36/hr. (PAT)

Additional Fees: \$125 registration fee

Maximum student/teacher ratio: 6:1 (Advantage); 3:1 (PAT)

Sylvan Learning Center

Overview: Founded in 1979, Sylvan has 1,000 learning centers. It guarantees to improve its students one grade-level equivalent in reading or math after 36 hours or it will provide 12 additional hours at no additional cost. Sylvan also offers programs online with real-time conversations with tutors.

Price: \$42-\$45/hr.; \$37-\$41/hr. (online)

Additional Fees: \$175 assessment fee

Maximum student/teacher ratio: 3:1

trigonometry. There’s been surprisingly little outside research conducted on supplemental-educational centers, but that may be about to change as the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act allocates federal money to cover the tutoring costs of struggling students in “failing” schools—those deemed by their states to be underperforming.

This will likely expand the supplemental education market and force certain academic standards, as every state is setting up its own approval process to determine which tutoring centers or services will be used. As you might imagine, this new provision has tutoring companies scrambling to get on state lists of approved supplemental-education providers.

“Let’s just say it’s piqued my members’ interest; it’s a substantial business opportunity for them,” says the Education Industry Association’s Pines. EIA represents 15,000 independent tutors and learning-center companies. “This is the first time in a large-scale fashion that the federal government is paying for tutoring.

“And because [the program] is aimed at low-income, under-performing kids, and the federal government is investing upward of \$2 billion a year, it’s creating fabulous opportunities for kids who normally can’t afford private tutoring.”

Currently, Huntington and Sylvan are accredited by the Commission on International and Trans-Regional Accreditation (CITA) as “supplementary education schools,” which means they meet 12 standards, including a clearly defined educational mission, ethical advertising claims, qualified staff, and clear admission and placement procedures.

Kumon and Score do not have CITA accreditation, but both have been approved as supplemental education providers through the No Child Left Behind Act.

Undoubtedly, with federal dollars will come greater scrutiny—and that may be better for everyone. For its part, the Council of Better Business Bureaus says it receives very few complaints about learning centers, and most parents and children who use a learning center had positive experiences.

Lessons Learned. Kelsey Muchnok had just finished fourth grade when she started working on math at Score, and she's now a sixth-grade honor-roll student in Valencia, Penn.

"Kids can take their success at Score and apply it to any school," says Kelsey's mother, GeorgeAnne, who was so pleased with Kelsey's progress that she took her son to Score, too.

For the past 7 months, Christy Bull's 16-year-old daughter, Cody, has been going to a Sylvan Learning Center for 4 hours a week to work on her reading and math skills. "She does one hour of homework and one hour of Sylvan work twice a week," says Christy Bull. "The tutors are very flexible; they met

with Cody's teachers and got her curriculum."

While she's pleased with her daughter's progress, Bull is astonished at the price tag. "It's more than college. I know because I have a daughter in college," she says. Still, she's likely to keep Cody in Sylvan until she's reading at a ninth-grade level. Bull hopes that comes soon.

Anita Regmi's two daughters are doing Kumon math. "One of our friends told us about Kumon and we said, 'Let's try it.' Neesha was a good student and didn't need it, but she liked it and stayed in it," Regmi says. "Last summer I had her drop Kumon because she had so many other activities, but

this school year she told me, 'Mom, I want to do Kumon again.' That made me realize how good it is."

And as for the mountain climber, Michael Tran? While his mother says that Michael's reading has improved, she is interested in finding a program with one-on-one tutoring.

"Score is good for kids who just need a little push," she says. "But Michael needs more of a push." ◆

Anne Cassidy is a freelance writer in Virginia who has covered family topics for magazines including Family Circle and Ladies Home Journal. She is the author of the book "Parents Who Think Too Much."

Tips From an Expert on Selecting a Learning Center

Too many times parents only ask 'how much?' says Dr. Edward E. Gordon, author of "Tutor Quest" and president of Imperial Consulting, a large, regional tutoring and educational consulting service in Chicago. "They tend to go with the cheapest or most convenient service. That would be like buying only the cheapest car and forgetting about mileage or other questions."

Here are a few key points Gordon and other experts urge parents to keep in mind when selecting a learning center:

Question Tutor Qualifications: Inquire about certification, degree and years of experience. "If your child has a reading problem, ask if the teacher is a reading expert," Gordon says. Because centers stress *mastery learning* and have their own curriculums, tutors may teach many different subjects and may not be an expert in your subject area.

Understand Guarantees: Some centers promise extra instruction if there's no improvement, but be sure you understand how improvement will be measured. "If you read the fine print, you may discover that the tutor has the right to select the pre- and post-tests," Gordon writes in "Tutor Quest." "By carefully selecting tests that are too easy or not age-appropriate, letting the tutor 'teach the test,' repeatedly giving the same or very similar tests over and over again, or a combination of these strategies, the guarantee for the tutoring can appear to have been met."

Don't Pay for What You Don't Need: Make sure you're not paying for information you can get for free through the school, advises Thomas Redicks, director of the National Tutoring Association. "Find out from tutoring centers what tests their initial assessment is based on. Usually the standardized achievement tests are the California or the Iowa

tests. [Both Huntington and Sylvan use versions of the California test.] And the information from these tests is often available at no charge at school. Why pay the fee when you can go to the guidance office and ask for a record of your child's achievement-test scores?"

Talk to Teachers: Students learn best when there's cooperation between teacher, tutor and parent. Let your child's teacher know a tutor is being used, and ask the tutor to contact a school if the teacher has questions. Some tutoring centers (such as Huntington) will attend individual education plan (IEP) meetings at your child's school free of charge. Check with the teacher to see if progress is being made in the classroom.

Discuss Learning Style: Kids who have trouble concentrating might be distracted at Score, since there's a high level of noise and activity. On the other hand, a child who's bright but unmotivated may receive just the enthusiasm he or she needs there. Likewise, Kumon might instill discipline through its daily drill, or it might completely turn off a child. Huntington and Sylvan offer fairly similar environments, but even these can vary depending upon the franchise owner, clientele and location. Be a good detective: Ask questions, find people you know who went there, and observe the center before you sign up for services.

Be Involved: Students aren't the only ones who can learn from tutors. Parents may also learn a thing or two by watching a tutor at work. The good tutors will share their skills so that you can more effectively help your child learn at home, too.

