

# U.S. homework outsourced as "e-tutoring" grows

By Jason Szep *Thu Sep 28, 10:43 AM ET*

Private tutors are a luxury many American families cannot afford, costing anywhere between \$25 to \$100 an hour. But California mother Denise Robison found one online for \$2.50 an hour -- in India.

"It's made the biggest difference. My daughter is literally at the top of every single one of her classes and she has never done that before," said Robison, a single mother from Modesto.

Her 13-year-old daughter, Taylor, is one of 1,100 Americans enrolled in Bangalore-based TutorVista, which launched U.S. services last November with a staff of 150 "e-tutors" mostly in India with a fee of \$100 a month for unlimited hours.

Taylor took two-hour sessions each day for five days a week in math and English -- a cost that tallies to \$2.50 an hour, a fraction of the \$40 an hour charged by U.S.-based online tutors such as market leader Tutor.com that draw on North American teachers, or the usual \$100 an hour for face-to-face sessions.

"I like to tell people I did private tutoring every day for the cost of a fast-food meal or a Starbucks' coffee," Robison said. "We did our own form of summer school all summer."

The outsourcing trend that fueled a boom in Asian call centers staffed by educated, low-paid workers manning phones around the clock for U.S. banks and other industries is moving fast into an area at the heart of U.S. culture: education.

It comes at a difficult time for the U.S. education system: only two-thirds of teenagers graduate from high school, a proportion that slides to 50 percent for black Americans and Hispanics, according to government statistics.

China and India, meanwhile, are producing the world's largest number of science and engineering graduates -- at least five times as many as in the United States, where the number has fallen since the early 1980s.

Parents using schools like Taylor's say they are doing whatever they can to give children an edge that can lead to better marks, better colleges and a better future, even if it comes with an Indian accent about 9,000 miles away.

## SLANG & AMERICAN ACCENTS

"We've changed the paradigm of tutoring," said Krishnan Ganesh, founder and chairman of TutorVista, which offers subjects ranging from grammar to geometry for children as young as 6 years old to adults in college.

"It's not that the U.S. education system is not good. It's just that it's impossible to give personalized education at an affordable cost unless you use technology, unless you use the Internet and unless you can

use lower-cost job centers like India," he said over a crackly Internet-phone line from Bangalore. "We can deliver that."

Many of the tutors have masters degrees in their subjects, said Ganesh. On average, they have taught for 10 years. Each undergoes 60 hours of training, including lessons on how to speak in a U.S. accent and how to decipher American slang.

They are schooled on U.S. history and state curricula, and work in mini-call centers or from their homes across India. One operates out of Hong Kong, teaching the Chinese language.

As with other Indian e-tutoring firms such as Growing Stars Inc., students log on to TutorVista's Web site and are assigned lessons by tutors who communicate using voice-over-Internet technology and an instant messaging window. They share a simulated whiteboard on their computers.

Denise Robison said Taylor had trouble understanding her tutor's accent at first. "Now that she is used to it, it doesn't bother her at all," she said.

TutorVista launched a British service in August and Ganesh said he plans to expand into China in December to tap demand for English lessons from China's booming middle class. In 2007, he plans to launch Spanish-language lessons and build on Chinese and French lessons already offered.

A New Delhi tutoring company, Educomp Solutions Ltd., estimates the U.S. tutoring market at \$8 billion and growing. Online companies, both from the United States and India, are looking to tap millions of dollars available to firms under the U.S. No Child Left Behind Act for remedial tutoring.

Teachers unions hope to stop that from happening.

"Tutoring providers must keep in frequent touch with not only parents but classroom teachers and we believe there is greater difficulty in an offshore tutor doing that," said Nancy Van Meter, a director at the American Federation of Teachers.

But No Child Left Behind, a signature Bush administration policy, encourages competition among tutoring agencies and leaves the door open for offshore tutors, said Diane Stark Rentner of the Center on Education Policy in Washington.

"The big test is whether the kids are actually learning. Until you answer that, I don't know if you can pass judgment on whether this is a good or bad way to go," she said.

---

Copyright © 2006 Reuters Limited. All rights reserved. Republication or redistribution of Reuters content is expressly prohibited without the prior written consent of Reuters. Reuters shall not be liable for any errors or delays in the content, or for any actions taken in reliance thereon.

Copyright 2006 © Yahoo! Inc.