

More parents of students find online tutors in India are a smart alternative to higher-priced U.S. help

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Four days a week, after school and before swim practice, Paulina DeHaan plunks down her backpack, pulls out her math textbook and logs on to her family's computer to do her homework.

A similar ritual goes on every afternoon in countless American households, with one major exception. As Paulina, a seventh-grader, converts fractions to percents, she's getting help from a teacher in India.

We've outsourced customer service call centers and computer help desks. Now, a growing number of U.S. families are hiring tutors based in the subcontinent to help their children with math, science – and even English. The Indian tutors, who start their shifts in the wee hours of the morning to be available to U.S. students during prime homework hours, cost far less than their American counterparts.

After Paulina finishes her math lesson, her 10-year-old brother, Andrew, signs on for help with English grammar. His tutor, who goes by the screen name Bindu K, gently scolds him for not doing the homework she'd assigned.

"Why didn't you do your homework, my dear?" she asks in English that carries the hint of a British accent.

Andrew, who likes math, science and kicking soccer goals more than studying the parts of speech, fidgets and twirls the digital pen that he uses to write his answers, which then appear on the computer screen that both teacher and student can view.

For today's lesson, Bindu is working with Andrew on using who, whom, which and that correctly in a sentence, a facet of the language that stumps many native speakers.

When Andrew guesses wrong, Bindu, who just finished a deep meditation session before signing onto her computer 9,000 miles away, marks up the computer screen with red X's.

"American children are the same as children anywhere. One day, they are bright and do their work very well. One day, they are tired and difficult," Bindu says with a sigh after Andrew's lesson. "To be able to be a successful teacher, you need to be extremely patient."

Parents looking to boost their children's grades have plenty of choices. There are nationwide chains like Sylvan Learning Center, as well as dozens of independent companies with clever names like Math Magician, Math Medics and Mathnasium. And that's not even counting all of the high school students, college students and teachers who tutor on the side.

Despite the competition among private tutors, hiring one can be costly. At Sylvan, which offers a 3-student-to-1-tutor ratio at their centers throughout the city, fees are \$45 to \$50 an hour. An in-home private tutor can run \$65.

Before hiring their Indian tutor, Kurt and Vivian DeHaan, who live with their two children and a dog in a spacious house in east Oceanside, signed up their children for Kumon, a company founded in Japan through which children complete prescribed assignments on their own with tutors available if they need help. But the DeHaan children found the after-school lessons a chore and begged her not to take them, Vivian DeHaan said.

Besides, between driving the kids to school, soccer, swimming and basketball, they felt like they were already making too many trips in the family minivan.



CHARLIE NEUMAN / Union-Tribune
Math isn't Paulina DeHaan's favorite subject. So she gets help from a tutor - based in India. Because of the time difference, Indian tutors work through the night. Paulina uses a digital writing tablet and pen.



CHARLIE NEUMAN / Union-Tribune
Paulina uses a digital writing tablet and pen.

With the cost of a locally based in-home tutor too high, the DeHaans decided to try Growing Stars, the India-based company whose tutors charge \$15 to \$20 an hour.

Growing Stars, which has an office in Santa Clara, was founded five years ago by Biju Mathew, a software designer who emigrated from India in 2000.

Two of his three children had tutors in India, but he couldn't afford the same here. With his technical expertise and overseas contacts, he immediately thought of the business potential of connecting Indian tutors with American students.

Now with 60 tutors, Growing Stars' tutors communicate with their students by voice, instant message and on a whiteboard, software that works like a shared electronic chalk board, enabling both student and teacher to write on the same canvas. Like other online tutoring services, Growing Stars does not use Web cams or video.

More than 90 percent of his tutors have master's degrees, Mathew said. And all of his teachers speak fluent, if accented, English. Hindi is the national language of India, and there are at least 20 regional dialects. Yet it's common for educated Indians to speak English, in part because of British colonial history and in part because English is valued as the international language of commerce. In some schools, Indian students are taught all of their subjects in English.

To make sure they're easily understood, Growing Stars' teachers undergo several weeks of training in accent reduction and American culture. One of the first lessons they learn is to expect American students to call them by their first name.

"In the Indian culture, teachers are highly respected. Students call them 'teacher' or 'sir' or 'ma'am,' " Mathew said.

But U.S. students call their Indian tutors by the first name.

"Our teachers have to understand that it's not disrespectful," Mathew said.

Despite those efforts, some in the education community question whether offshore tutors are familiar with state education standards. "It could be anybody on their other end," said John See, spokesman for the American Federation of Teachers union. "We think when it's possible, the best way is to have face-to-face communications with students."

There's a 13-1/2-hour time difference between San Diego and Cochin, India, a city in southwest India where Growing Stars' is headquartered. Five days a week, Paulina's tutor, also named Bindu, goes to sleep at 10 p.m. and gets up at 1:20 a.m. to make it to work for her 2 a.m. shift.

Bindu is 28 and the mother of a 4-year-old daughter. She has university degrees in math and education, and she taught in schools in India for five years before making the switch to online tutoring for the better pay and the challenge, she said.

Growing Stars pays its tutors about 16,000 rupees a month, or \$400. That's nearly twice what they'd make as teachers in their local school.

"It's an odd time for us," said Bindu, who takes a nap in the afternoons while her mother watches her daughter. "At first it was tough, but after 2-1/2 years of doing it, I've gotten used to the schedule."

At 4 p.m. in Oceanside and 5:30 a.m. in India, Bindu, logs onto her computer and sends an instant message greeting. "Hello Paulina!!! How are you?"

For the next hour, they discuss finding greatest common denominators and prime factorizations. In the background, there's the faint patter of other voices.

Paulina, who prefers English and reading to math, enjoys the time with her tutor. "She's nice and she explains things really good," Paulina said. "If I'm having a hard time, she makes it more interesting by using real life problems," like the time Bindu helped to explain ratios by comparing the amount of cheese and pepperoni on a hypothetical pizza.

And despite the distance, relationships can develop. Paulina grew fond of the first Indian tutor her parents hired. When the tutor left Growing Stars last year to get married, the DeHaans bought her a diamond pendant as a wedding gift.

To her parents' delight, Paulina's tutoring sessions seem to be working. Last year, Paulina was a B student in math. On this year's progress report, she received an A-plus. "I didn't like math since I always used to struggle," Paulina said. "But I like it better now. You like things more when you're not struggling."

ONLINE LIFELINES

Thinking of trying online tutoring? Though each company requires slightly different equipment, it's recommended that you have a computer with a high-speed Internet connection, a headset and a digital drawing tablet and pen, which costs about \$250.

TutorVista (tutorvista.com), based in Bangalore, India, has 16,000 students and employs 600 tutors in India, the Philippines, Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong and Thailand, most of whom have masters or Ph.D.s. For \$99 a month, students can sign up for unlimited tutoring. TutorVista offers instruction in 30 subjects, including English grammar, physics, chemistry, SAT prep and foreign languages.

"This is not about finding a cheap tutor," said John Stuppy, TutorVista's president, who has worked for the Princeton Review and Educational Testing Service (ETS), which administers the SATs. "This is about finding the best tutor in the world you can, where you happen to be able to pay them less."

Growing Stars (growingstars.com) offers tutoring in a wide range of subjects and SAT prep. The company maintains a library that includes many of the textbooks used by California schools, or parents can pay to have Growing Stars buy a copy. Cost is \$15 to \$20 an hour.

Sylvan Learning Center, which has 1,100 locations nationwide, also now offers online tutoring. While the vast majority of the company's 150,000 students per year go to one of the franchised centers, the online segment is growing, said Richard Bavaria, Sylvan Learning Center's vice president of education. The cost is \$45 to \$50 per hour, the same as face-to-face tutoring. Unlike the Indian companies, Sylvan has 30 years of experience helping students, Bavaria said.

For free homework help, anyone with a San Diego library card can access Tutor.com through a program funded by the San Diego Unified School District, the city public library system and local businesses.

To log on to tutor.com, visit the library's Web site at sandiego.gov/public-library, then click the Live Homework Help icon. Tutor.com's instructors include college and grad students, professionals and stay-at-home mothers. Tutor.com's regular rate is \$29.99 for 50 minutes. County residents living outside the city limits can also get a card.

– JENIFER GOODWIN