



# Demand for tutoring soars as parents spend thousands to help kids amid disrupted online learning

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Rafay Mufti, 11, a Grade 6 student at Northport Elementary School, reviews Kumon math exercises with his mother, Anila Hussain, at the family home in Port Elgin, Ont.

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

After nearly two years of COVID-fuelled on-again, off-again in-class and online learning, a growing number of Canadian parents are turning to tutors or programs such as Kumon or Oxford Learning to keep their kids from falling behind.

The cost of that extra academic help is significant, ranging from \$120 to as much as \$700 a month, depending on the program and how many times a week a child attends. And that's just for one child.

After Monday's announcement of yet another delayed return to school in Ontario, the demand for tutoring in that province may well rise even further.

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Anila Hussain enrolled her son Rafay, who is now in Grade 6, in Kumon in the summer of 2020 to help improve his math and English skills and keep him learning over the lazy summer days.

"He started spending too much of his time on video games and the computer," Ms. Hussain says from her home in Port Elgin, Ont.

At the time, her husband was working from home while she commuted to her job. "We wanted to keep him busy, and we wanted him to learn and be good in mathematics, and English as well."

The cost – \$280 a month (\$140 for each subject) – was worth it, Ms. Hussain says. "Two subjects were a bit expensive for us, but I wanted to invest in him." With both parents working they were able to afford it; now her son is just doing math, so the cost has been halved.

Kumon has improved Rafay's math skills, she adds, and she knows exactly what he's learning. "He has become very fast with calculations and mental math."

Kathryn Mandelcorn, a money coach with Spring Plans, an advice-only financial planning firm, says being able to afford tutoring comes down to choosing how to allocate the money you earn.

The best way to budget is to look at your whole financial situation, says Ms. Mandelcorn, who is based in Port Moody, B.C. That means taking the total annual costs you have for tutoring, clothing, car repairs and other expenses, and breaking them down into monthly costs. Then park that cash each month in a short-term savings account – preferably one created solely to cover each particular expense.

That shows you the real picture. If the budget is tight, then ask what discretionary costs you're willing to cut. "It's allowing you to see your finances clearly so that you can make an intentional and informed choice," she says.

Barbara Knoblach, a certified financial planner and money coach in Edmonton with Money Coaches Canada, says that since the pandemic, more parents are budgeting for tutoring services.

"Most parents see these expenses as temporary, until the children have been able to close the gap in learning," she says. As a result, they cut back on entertainment, eating out or travel to afford these expenses. "They use funds that currently do not get spent, due to pandemic restrictions, on additional schooling for their children."

The pandemic has also forced tutoring services to change the way they operate during lockdowns. Rather than small face-to-face sessions, they've had to shift quickly to remote tutoring.

Lorelei Burgess, owner and director of an Oxford Learning centre in Halifax, saw demand rise 25 per cent to 30 per cent with the pandemic because parents wanted their children to have help with online school. "Our main focus at that time was maintaining some consistency, some level of learning, because there was no formal learning happening from school – it was very sudden."

The biggest increase in her students numbers were kids in grades 2 to 4 who were struggling with reading, and high-school students in grades 10 and 11 who found math challenging. "I think parents are really starting to recognize just how much kids have lost due to the disruption in learning," she adds.

The cost of Oxford Learning ranges from about \$500 to \$700 a month, depending on the number of one-hour sessions each week, rather than the number of subjects taught. "It's

one of those things that parents are certainly prioritizing” as part of their budgeting, and some ask grandparents for help as well, Ms. Burgess says.

Lenka Whitehead, president of Oxford Learning Centres Inc., based in London, Ont., says enrolment is expected to be up about 10 per cent year over year across the country, and that’s led to the opening of additional centres.

“Parents have not been set up to become the teachers at home,” she says. “Literacy skills have slipped significantly. ... We are seeing that math is affected the most.”

Among all of the age groups, she says, “the younger children are really, really struggling.”

French has also been a challenging subject for many students, and demand at the Toronto-based French Tutoring Centre has risen by 30 per cent since the start of the pandemic, says executive assistant Peter Nagerl. A one-hour session ranges from \$40 to \$50.

However, not all tutoring services have seen a boost from shifts to remote teaching. Many students faced with making the adjustment dropped out, says Janet Mockler, owner and director of a Kumon centre in northeast Toronto. A lot of parents were “very leery” of virtual tutoring because it was another online experience, she says. “They didn’t want to add to that pain for the child.”

But, at least before the Omicron variant emerged, that was beginning to change. Demand rose as students returned to the centre in person, particularly for children in Grade 1 or 2 who started learning to read while classes were virtual and had difficulty, she says. Students in grades 5 and 6 were coming in to catch up on math skills.

With Monday’s announcement of a two-week return to online learning in Ontario, Ms. Mockler says she’s quickly shifting students to online sessions. “It is a simple matter to move families to virtual classes at the same time as their current in-centre classes,” she says. “Very few are not comfortable with it, and those families are indicating that they’d like a break for January, in the hope that this is a short-term lockdown.”

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