

Connecticut

Section 14



Homework Helpers

Your Dog Ate It? Too Bad: Tutors Could Have Lent a Hand With It

By MARGARET FARLEY STEELE

FOR the Rizzuto family in Darien, homework hassles are a memory now that a tutor helps the three school-age children with their assignments.

Danny, 12, a sixth grader, has learned to prioritize and write neatly.

"He's proud of his work now," said his mother, Regina Rizzuto.

Fay, 10, who is in fifth grade, benefits from brainstorming before a big project and not "just writing down the first thing that pops into her head," said her mother.

Michael, 8, a third grader, receives reading and writing support.

That the homework helper comes to the house "is huge for me," said Mrs. Rizzuto, a stay-at-home mother of four. Tending to her 4-year-old son in the evening left too little time to oversee the older children's schoolwork, she explained.

"They get a lot of homework and lots of projects," she said. "I felt I wasn't on top of it." With a tutor on the premises twice a week, the nightly ordeal went from "just get it done, get it done" to getting it done well,

she said.

Most suburban parents are familiar with so-called academic tutors, who help children with skills like reading or mathematics, or to study for standardized tests. Hiring a tutor just to help with homework is an outgrowth of this idea, although the distinction between helping with homework and teaching academic skills can be blurry.

The Rizzutos found their tutor through My Tutor and Me, a service in Darien that is one of several in Connecticut that provide some tutoring specifically for homework. Other homework tutoring services are offered by moonlighting teachers, working on their own, or by honors high school students.

There are no statistics on how many companies offer homework tutoring in the state, or how many tutors operate individually.

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Melissa Saul, above, a freshman at Weston High School, looks forward to sessions with Phyllis E. Nobile, owner of the Reading Company. Fred Converse, right, and his wife, Shannon, run My Tutor and Me in Darien.



Photographs by Debbi Morillo for The New York Times

Your Dog Ate It? Too Bad: Tutors Could Have Helped

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But executives in the tutoring industry believe there is a big future in homework tutoring in the affluent towns of Fairfield County and Westchester.

Phyllis E. Nobile, owner of the Reading Company, a tutoring service in Westport and Hartsdale, N.Y., has a theory about why parents are turning to homework tutors.

"It is the competitiveness of life," she said. "Everybody has college in their head. They want their kids to get into the best college they can."

Some educators wonder whether by focusing on homework, tutors could cross a line between helping children and doing their work for them.

If homework assistance provides encouragement and skills to youngsters who would otherwise give up or accept mediocrity, it can be positive, said Virginia Shiller, a child and family psychologist in New Haven and a lecturer at the Yale Child Study Center.

"I do see the potential if the emphasis is to have children feel good about the product and feel they're progressing," she said.

But she is concerned that affluent parents turn to homework tutors solely to help their children get better grades. She said there is a lot of pressure on children to succeed, "particularly in areas like Fairfield County."

"From kindergarten on, parents are thinking about college admissions," she said. "Many parents are fearful that if you're not on the honor roll in junior high, it will seal your fate for life."

But, she said, "If you give your kids space, it's possible they'll find their own motivation."

Even some tutors have doubts about how appropriate it is to help children do their homework.

"I don't want to get paid to help do someone's homework," said Eric Arzubi, co-owner of Raging Knowledge, whose company in Westport has five full-time tutors. Mr. Arzubi said he emphasized academic assistance over homework help, but, still, students enrolled in his skill-building program can use the offices to do their homework.

Huntington Learning Center, a national chain with a Westport office, offers academic tutoring only, and Sylvan Learning Center, also a national chain, with 15 Connecticut offices, schedules homework help solely for students already enrolled in its academic program.

Students who continually need homework assistance probably lack necessary academic skills, said Nancy Carver, a co-owner of the Learning Workshop in Ridgefield, which has four tutors and has been getting more requests for homework tutoring.

"We provide general homework help

while trying to correct the deficit academic skills and teach study skills so that they will be more independent," Ms. Carver said.

Prices for homework tutoring vary. My Tutor and Me charges \$80 an hour for help with elementary- and middle-school homework, and \$90 an hour for help with high school homework. The Learning Workshop charges \$75 to \$85 an hour.

Study Works, also in Ridgefield, has two tutors and charges \$75 an hour. The Reading Company charges \$95 an hour. On the other hand, student tutors at Greenwich High School Student Employment Service earn an average of \$20 an hour.

My Tutor and Me has 130 tutors serving Fairfield County and parts of Westchester and New Haven Counties, and was founded by Shannon Converse, a special education teacher in Darien who runs the company

Reading, writing, arithmetic and — oh, why not? — homework.

with her husband, Fred. About 30 to 40 percent of the jobs involve homework, said Ms. Converse, who described the market as "fabulous."

"Fairfield County is an area where education is a priority for families," said Ms. Converse, noting that the company's expansion plans call for "really digging in" there.

At the Reading Company, at least 70 percent of the 50 to 60 students tutored weekly receive homework guidance, said Ms. Nobile, its owner.

"We teach the students how to learn, and we do that through their assignments," Ms. Nobile said.

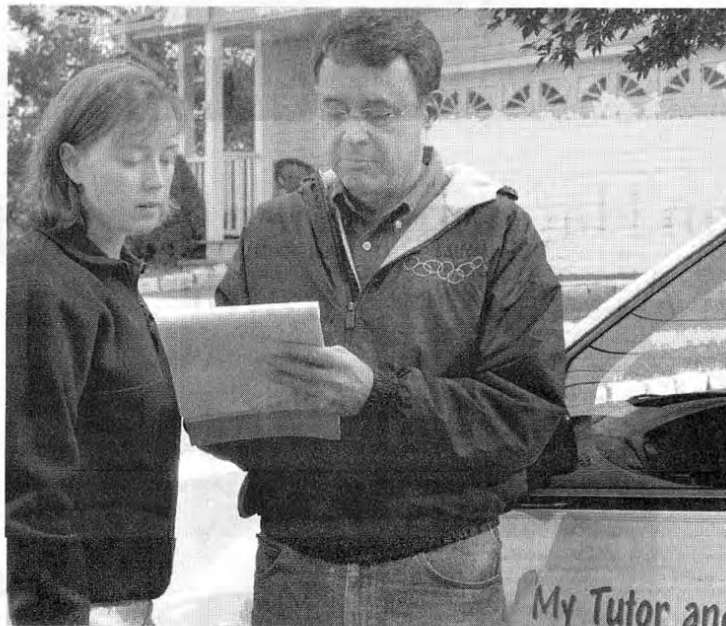
Score, an academic tutoring service with 168 offices nationwide, is trying out its first "Homework Club" at its Darien site.

"We definitely see a need for it based on the requests in Fairfield County," said Jenna Held, a Score spokeswoman.

Open only to students enrolled in its supplemental instruction program, the pilot program allows for up to five students per instructor three or four hours a week for \$30 an hour. Depending on its success, the program eventually might open to the general public, said Amanda Saulsbury, director of the Darien Score.

Parents turn to homework tutors for many reasons. Some point out that homework is harder than it used to be, especially, the math, and that there is more of it, even in the lower grades.

"What we require in second grade is probably what I did in third or fourth grade," said Kathleen Byrnes, a second-grade teacher in the Greenwich schools who has



Fred and Shannon Converse, who own My Tutor and Me, said about 30 to 40 percent of their tutoring jobs involve homework. They employ 130 tutors.

also taught middle school, and now tutors the Rizzuto children.

Other parents hire a tutor so they can avoid the inevitable battles with their child if they try to help themselves. These conflicts can be especially fierce in the middle school years, parents and tutors said.

When Cindy Saul, a Weston mother, assisted her 14-year-old daughter, Melissa, both became frustrated.

"I would lose patience and Melissa would lose patience with me," she said.

Through word of mouth she found Ms. Nobile of the Reading Company. The tutor "has taught her all sorts of study tricks and makes her feel good about her work," Mrs. Saul said. Melissa, a freshman at Weston High School, said she no longer refuses to do homework and looks forward to her weekly sessions with Ms. Nobile. "She has a really fun personality," Melissa said.

Another problem is that many parents do not have the time to help with homework themselves because of their jobs and other commitments.

"Families are busier," said Ms. Carver of the Learning Workshop. "It's easier to get a child to focus for an hour when they're here with no distractions and have someone's complete attention than it is at home."

Whatever their reason for hiring the tutor, many parents, like Mrs. Rizzuto, are re-

lieved to stop sweating over their children's vocabulary lists, lab reports and algebraic equations.

"When you step in, some parents think you're an angel of God," said Janie Larson of New Milford, a teacher who runs Study Works.

Some homework tutors emphasize academic skill-building more than others. But at the outset they share a similar task: teaching children how to do homework.

Designating a quiet place — not the couch or the kitchen table, Miss Byrnes said — keeping a planner, clarifying directions, mastering effective study skills and chunking the time are some of the basics.

"They don't know how to start, how to schedule their time or how to prioritize," Miss Byrnes said. "Maybe a student is excited about a project on Ben Franklin that's due in a month. But there's a math assignment due the next day. They need help knowing that's what they have to start on."

The Rizzuto children start the homework before Miss Byrnes arrives, Mrs. Rizzuto said. The tutor reviews it, and guides them through corrections. She also drills them before tests, directs their research and sets up the parameters for their projects.

Ms. Nobile said many children do not really understand how to study.

"They'll say 'I reread the chapter five

times but still got a 64.'"

Note-taking is a key element of her program. "Reading and writing together equals thinking," she said. The students then can study from their notes and have their parents quiz them, she said.

Middle school presents the greatest homework challenge, as students suddenly face multiple teachers and long-term assignments, parents and tutors said. For Collin Hill of Ridgefield, the transition was stressful.

"It was difficult getting organized and staying on task," said his mother, Sybil Hill. She hired a tutor, a local elementary school teacher to help him one hour a week, and paid her \$60 an hour. "I was able to stay out of his work, which helped me," she said. "It put the onus on him, but he still had an adult to keep on top of him."

Now in seventh grade, Collin seems better organized, she said; he no longer has a tutor. But if he falters, she will hire help again. "I want the best academic experience for my children," said Ms. Hill, the mother of three.

Ideally, homework tutors guide the students and stop at that.

"They have to do the work themselves," said Mrs. Larson, an eighth-grade social studies teacher in Ridgefield. "I'm there to encourage them to make mistakes, review their work and fix it."

She views herself as a "secret weapon." On rare occasions in her job as a teacher, she sees work obviously done by a tutor and not the child. "Then it's time to talk to the parent," she said.

Teachers approve of tutoring that is collaborative. What they disdain are parents who resort to tutoring because they want their children in honors courses.

"There's this mentality that 'I'd rather see them struggle and I'll get a tutor,'" Mrs. Larson said. "It puts a lot of pressure on the kids."

John Drummond, chairman of the math and science departments at Weston High School, called that "survival tutoring" and said it prevented teachers "from getting a true read on what the student understands developmentally."

Parental involvement in homework is crucial, said Ms. Nobile of the Reading Company. "Parents need to know when the quizzes and tests are coming up. They shouldn't do the work but they should know what is expected."

Involved mothers like Mrs. Rizzuto say the process is less about grades than helping their children learn to persevere and develop self-confidence.

"If my kids are able to get an A, I want them to. If they can get a C instead of a D, I want the C," Mrs. Rizzuto said. "Education is what you have at the end of the day. I want them to be the best they can be."