

Reimplementing Primary Promise in LAUSD

I. Introduction¹

In response to remote learning, Primary Promise was piloted in 2020, and by 2023, it had expanded to 453 Title I LAUSD schools, serving 14,000 students at a cost of \$192 million annually (Beutner and Cortines, 2023). Despite support from many teachers, parents, and LAUSD board members, Primary Promise was suspended in May 2023 by current LAUSD Superintendent Alberto Carvalho due to unsustainable costs. As a substitute intervention, Carvalho implemented Literacy and Numeracy, which is less expensive per student but has been poorly received by LAUSD staff members and might be suspended prior to the 2024-2025 academic year (ibid). The impetus for these interventions is LAUSD students' low performance in reading and math, with just 42% and 31%², respectively, meeting or exceeding state standards (EdSource, 2024). Given LAUSD's high percentage of economically and ethnically disadvantaged students, pressure exists to alleviate educational inequities and ensure all students receive a fair public education.

The following will argue that Primary Promise should be reimplemented in LAUSD due to research showing the effectiveness of similar tutoring programs, the

¹The target audience of this paper are philanthropists who are contributing funds to public education initiatives. Authored on behalf of the Los Angeles Unified School District Education Foundation, a 501C3 charitable organization, the paper aims to engage donors by showcasing the foundation's commitment to identifying and implementing innovative programs that significantly impact students, teachers, and families throughout Los Angeles (Every.Org, 2024).

² Averages were calculated from California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) for grades 3-8th and 11th across the following years: 2019, 2022, and 2023 (EdSource, 2024).

popularity of Primary Promise among different stakeholders, and the economic viability of the program. The problem that Primary Promise was designed to ameliorate, low literacy rates for K-3rd graders in LAUSD, will be explained in greater detail before focusing on the effectiveness of Primary Promise.

II. LAUSD's Literacy Problem

LAUSD's Student Demographics

LAUSD, the second-largest school district in the US, educates approximately 500,000 students, many of whom encounter obstacles in accessing high-quality public education (LAUSD Dashboard, n.d.). During the 2023-2024 school year, 86% of LAUSD students qualified for free or reduced lunch, 15% were classified as Students with Disabilities (SWD), and 19% were Multilingual Learners (MLLs) (ibid; Dataquest, 2023). In 2022-2023, nearly 40% of K-12 students were chronically absent, defined as missing 10% or more school days in a year (Dataquest, 2023). These figures pertain to a student population that is over 70% Latinx and only 10% White (see figure 1) (LAUSD Dashboard, n.d.).

Figure 1: LAUSD Student Demographics for 2023-2024 academic school year

Source: LAUSD Dashboard

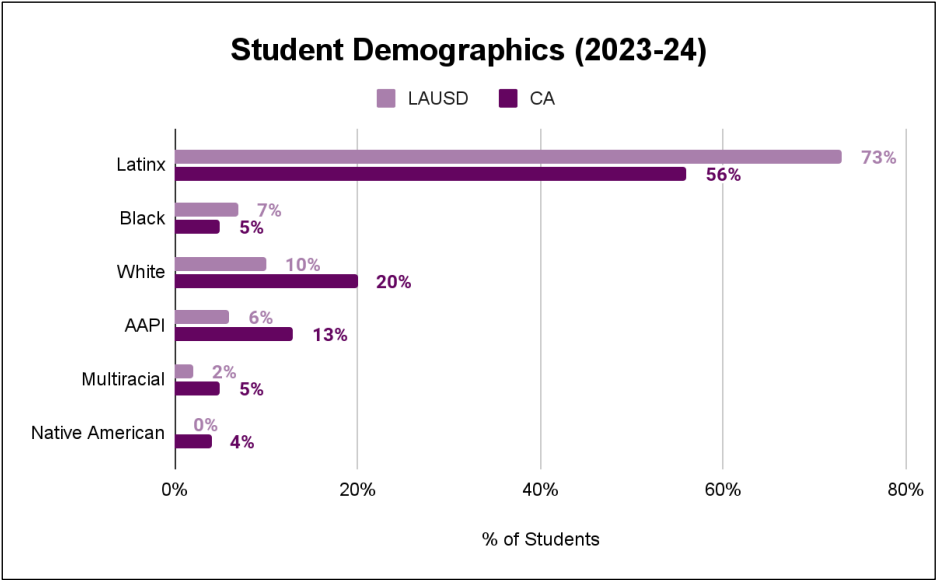
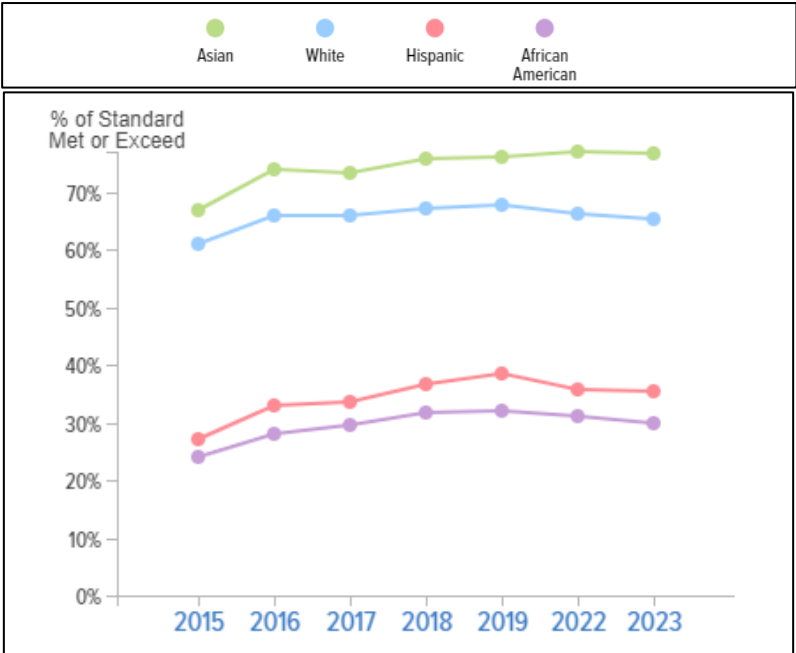


Figure 2: English Achievement Gap Results: Racial/Demographic Breakdown

Source: LAUSD Dashboard



LAUSD Literacy

Academically, over half of LAUSD students fail to meet CAASPP English Language Arts (ELA) standards with significant disparities among White/Asian and Hispanic/African American students (see figure 2) (EdSource, 2024). This academic struggle is evident as early as third grade, where only 43% of students met or exceeded ELA standards in the 2022-2023 academic year, approximately 18,000 elementary students. The Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) is an assessment for kindergarteners through second graders that uses different criteria than CAASPP. Between 2020 and 2023, roughly 60% of kindergarteners, first graders, and second graders met or surpassed the Early Literacy Benchmarks for DIBELS³ (LAUSD Dashboard, n.d.). However, more than 36,000⁴ LAUSD students in these grades failed to meet the literacy benchmark. As students' progress from kindergarten to second grade, the percentage of Students with Disabilities (SWD) and English Language Learners (ELLs) meeting the Early Literacy Benchmarks declines drastically. In the 2022-2023 academic year, only 30% of second graders with disabilities and 43% of ELLs achieved the benchmark, significantly lower than the grade average of 60% (ibid). A year prior, in first grade, the same cohort of students saw 43% of SWD and 50% of ELLs meeting grade level (ibid).

LAUSD serves a historically marginalized student body by their socio-economic status, ethnicity, and diverse learning needs. The prevalence of low ELA scores and

³ Students typically perform higher on DIBELS than CAASPP, as the standards are easier to meet and not because younger students are performing better.

⁴ Calculated by taking product of 2023-2024 enrollment sum (K: 28,403; Grade 1: 30,474; Grade 2: 32,070) and percentage of students who did not meet the DIBELS literacy standard (40%)

below grade-level literacy rates among such disadvantaged demographics underscores the crisis facing LAUSD schools, affecting students, families, and LAUSD staff members alike.

Importance of Literacy by 3rd Grade

While math scores lag behind ELA scores in many grades, our intervention prioritizes addressing low literacy scores due to the critical importance of reading at grade level by third grade and the necessity of reading comprehension skills in math.

The adoption of the Common Core restructured math standards, placing increased emphasis on word problems and students' abilities to interpret written text.

Strengthening students' literacy skills is expected to enhance their math scores, although the reverse correlation is less likely. While resources should still be allocated to provide interventions and programs for students with low math scores, our intervention focuses specifically on literacy improvement.

An influential study on the significance of reading at grade level by third grade was conducted by The Annie E. Casey Foundation. This foundation initiated a longitudinal study involving 4,000 students born between 1979 and 1989 in the United States to explore the correlation between third grade reading levels, poverty, and high school graduation rates. The researchers discovered that among children who did not graduate high school, 88% were not proficient in reading by third grade (Hernandez,

2012)⁵. Additionally, they observed a nine-percentage point difference in high school graduation rates between students proficient in reading by third grade who experienced poverty and those who did not (see figure 3). However, among students who were not reading at grade level by third grade, there was a 17-percentage point difference in high school graduation rates. This suggests that poverty exacerbates the correlation between students not reading at grade level by third grade and their likelihood of not graduating high school.

Similar patterns emerged for Black and Hispanic students. Among students who failed to graduate high school but were reading at grade level by third grade, there were minor differences in ethnicity (see figure 4). However, among students who were not proficient by third grade, nearly twice as many were Black or Hispanic compared to White students. This implies that race may influence the impact of not reading at grade level by third grade on high school graduation rates.

Given this research and the fact that over 80% of LAUSD's student body consists of economically disadvantaged and Black or Hispanic students, the detrimental effects of students not reading at grade level by third grade may be particularly pronounced within the LAUSD.

⁵ Hernandez, Donald. The Annie E. Casey Foundation. Double Jeopardy: How Third Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation. Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012.

Figure 3: Children not graduating from high school by age 19, by poverty experience and reading proficiency

Source: Double Jeopardy: How Third Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School

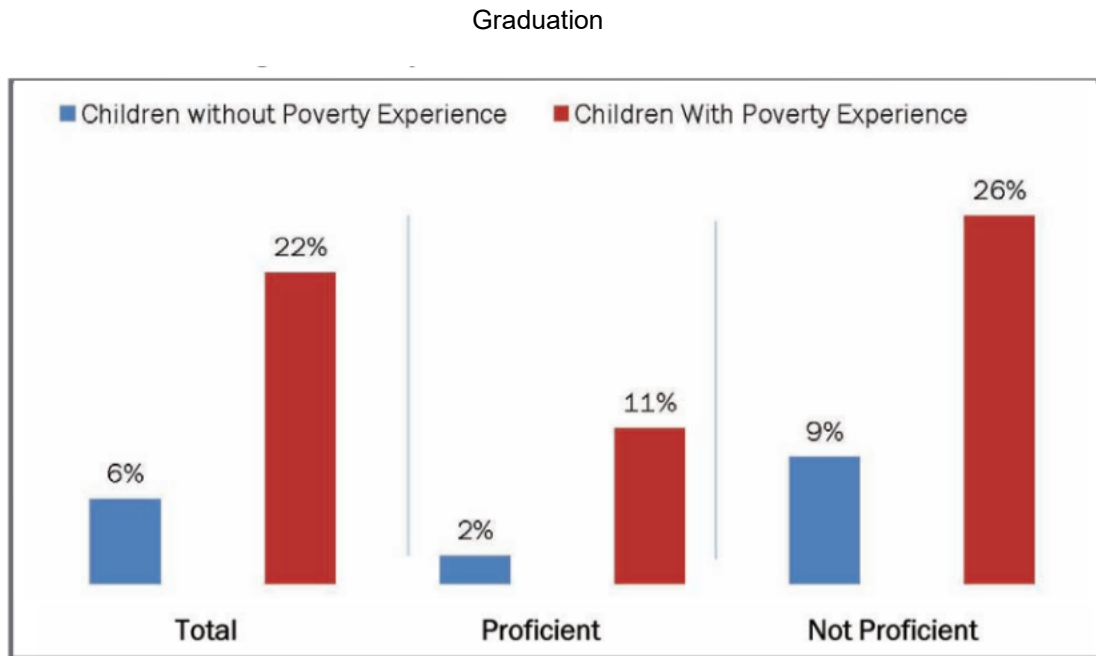
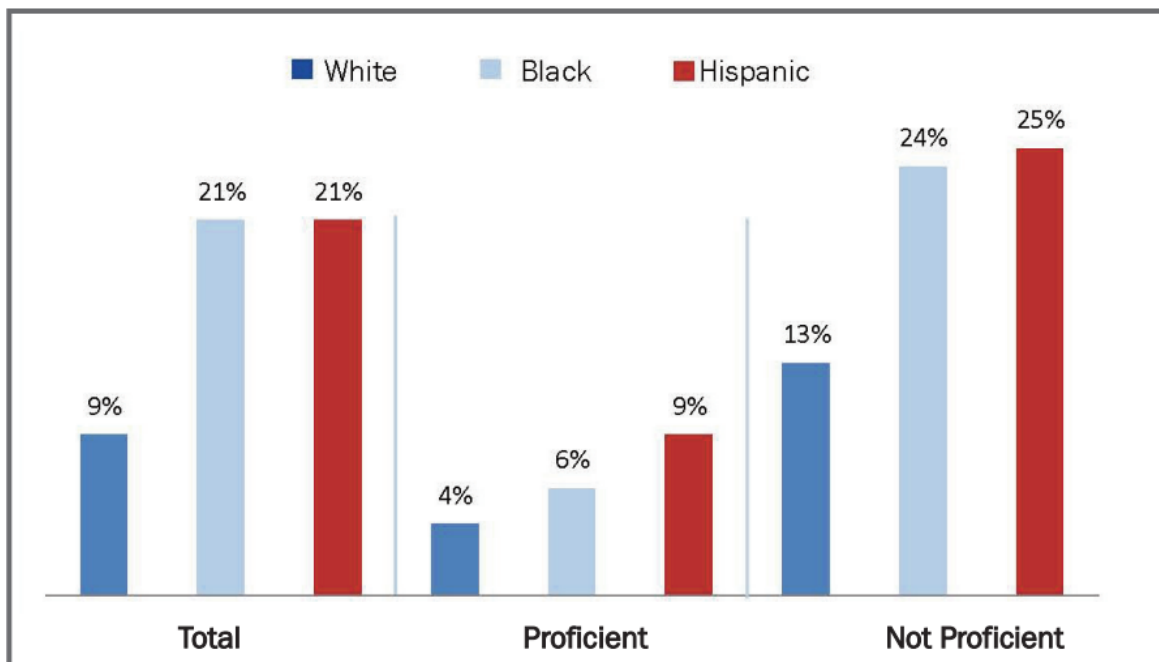


Figure 4: Children not graduating from high school by ethnicity and 3rd grade reading proficiency

Source: Double Jeopardy: How Third Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation



III. Intervention

Background of Primary Promise

The literacy challenge outlined above is not unfamiliar to LAUSD administrators. In March 2020, the COVID pandemic compelled schools across the nation to transition to remote learning. Former LAUSD Superintendent Austin Beutner expressed concerns that younger students in the district might struggle to adapt to online learning. In response, Beutner initiated the Primary Promise program, a tutoring intervention centered on literacy, in August 2020 across 48 schools, catering to 750 first-grade students (Harter, 2023)⁶. The tutoring initiative encompassed several crucial features that will be revisited throughout this paper:

- Literacy teachers were recruited and trained (by a third-party entity).
- Each school formed small groups of primary and literacy teachers to identify high-need⁷ students for the program and to monitor their progress.
- Tutoring sessions were of high dosage, lasting 25-30 minutes per day (D'Souza, 2023)⁸.

The initial trial of Primary Promise spanned from August 2020 to February 2021. During this period, Superintendent Beutner reported that prior to the intervention, only 9% of the 450 participating students were meeting grade-level standards. However, by

⁶ Harter, C. (2023, June 9). LAUSD superintendent defends replacing primary promise amid community outcry. *Daily News*. Retrieved from <https://www.dailynews.com/2023/06/09/lausd-superintendent-defends-replacing-primary-promise-amid-community-outcry/>

⁷ High-need students were defined as students who were MLLs, students experiencing homelessness, foster youth, and had low reading scores (Los Angeles Unified School District, 2021).

⁸ D'Souza, K. (2023, June 7). Carvalho says replacing primary promise will do more for LAUSD for less money. *EdSource*. Retrieved from <https://edsource.org/updates/carvalho-says-replacing-primary-promise-will-do-more-for-lausd-for-less-money>

February, this figure rose to 37%, demonstrating significant improvement. In comparison, among the rest of the first graders, 37% were on grade level at the beginning of the year (BOY), but this figure only increased slightly to 39% by the middle of the year (Los Angeles Unified School District, 2021).

Encouraged by these outcomes, Primary Promise was expanded in subsequent years, reaching 14,000 students from kindergarten through third grade across 453 Title I schools in the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 academic years. The program garnered appreciation from the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and teachers throughout the district. However, the cost of the program surged to \$134 million dollars, averaging \$9,571 per child⁹. If the program had continued expanding to encompass all LAUSD elementary schools as initially planned, the projected cost would have escalated to \$192 million, averaging \$1,011 per child¹⁰.

Despite its success, prior to the 2023-2024 school year, Superintendent Alberto Carvalho decided to disband the program due to concerns about its expense. In its place, Carvalho introduced the Literacy and Numeracy Intervention (LNIT), which, like Primary Promise, aimed to support students in need but with a different approach.

Notable changes in LNIT compared to Primary Promise include:

- LNIT serves all students (K-12th)

⁹ Calculated by taking the quotient of \$134 million and 14,000

¹⁰ Calculated by taking the quotient of \$192 million and the sum of 2023-2024 K-5 student enrollment (189,862). Data from LAUSD Open Data Dashboard.

- Literacy teachers are no longer hired by the district. Instead, general primary and secondary teachers receive additional Professional Development (PDs) training on how to better support students.
- Costs \$122 million (\$300 per child)¹¹

Both Primary Promise and Literacy and Numeracy Intervention were partially to fully funded, depending on the school year, by financial aid from the U.S. government that was circumstantially provided due to the pandemic's effect on learning loss. The funding expired in June 2024, threatening the continuation of LNIT and similar programs across the country¹².

Intervention Proposal

Primary Promise should be reintroduced in half of the 63 elementary schools designated as priority schools¹³ within the LAUSD for the 2024-2025 school year. We recommend that the 32 schools are chosen randomly, so that this iteration of Primary Promise can serve as a Randomly Controlled Trail (RCT)¹⁴ to bolster the research and evaluation of the program. By choosing priority schools, this program can help students in greatest need of additional support.

The cost per child served in previous iterations of the program ranged from \$10,000 to \$1,000. We estimate that there are around 17,000 K-5 elementary students

¹¹ Calculated by taking the quotient of \$122 million and total TK-12th grade enrollment (400K)

¹² The economic concerns of Primary Promise and LAUSD's decreasing budget are legitimate and will be addressed in greater detail in section six of this paper.

¹³ LAUSD identified 100 priority schools (63 elementary) as schools that are performing the lowest across several measures (Seshadri, 2024).

¹⁴ Randomly Controlled Trials is a one of the better research methods to evaluate if an intervention is causally related to an outcome.

at priority schools in LAUSD¹⁵, and our program would focus on 8,500¹⁶ K-3rd grade students. Based on our calculations, our program would cost about \$9,839.35¹⁷ per student served, totaling \$84¹⁸ million dollars.

The characteristics of the program would be similar to the previous design: small groups of four to five students, hiring and training literacy teachers, high dosage tutoring sessions (25-30 minutes) for twenty minutes per week, and it should continue to occur during the school day (as opposed to after school hours). We anticipate that students receiving tutoring will improve by an average of 0.36 standard deviations (SDs) in ELA¹⁹. However, more evaluation specific to Primary Promise is needed to confirm this effect size.

The theory of action behind the intervention is that by targeting lower-performing K-3rd grade students at priority schools, Primary Promise will intervene in LAUSD students who need the most help. Focusing specifically on literacy by 3rd grade will hopefully spill over into other subjects and future grades, as research referenced earlier shows the correlations with reading on grade level for third grade students.

¹⁵ Calculated by dividing total students at priority schools (53,959) by number of priority schools (100). Then multiplied the quotient of student per school (539.59) by the number of elementary schools the program would serve (32). High schools are likely bigger than elementary schools, so our costs are conservative.

¹⁶ Multiplied number of elementary students served (17K) by ratio of elementary grades served (3/6)

¹⁷ Used data from previous Primary Promise costs and students served to create linear formula. Coordinates were (14,000 students served, \$9,571 per student) and (189,862 students served, \$1,011 per student). Used point-slope formula to find that the slope for those coordinates equals -.0487. Then created linear formula that $y = -.0487x + 10253.3$, where x equals number of students served and y equals cost per student. When x equals 8,500, y equals \$9,839.35.

¹⁸ Per student cost (\$9,839.35) multiplied by number of students served (8,500).

¹⁹ This means that a student who was performing in the 50th percentile of the class would increase their performance to 64th percentile after receiving tutoring

IV. Effectiveness of tutoring intervention

Meta-Analysis of Academic Interventions

This section will focus on three different pieces of literature: a meta-analysis of academic interventions, a meta-analysis²⁰ of tutoring interventions, and a single study on the effect of tutoring on Hispanic and Non-Hispanic students. Cumulatively, the research suggests that a tutoring intervention program like Primary Promise will have a large effect size on LAUSD K-3 grade elementary students.

In their research, Dietrichson et al. conducted a meta-analysis of academic interventions, including 101 studies, 76 of which were randomized controlled trials (RCTs), focusing on interventions for elementary and middle school students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (2017)²¹. Among the 36 studies that specifically examined tutoring interventions, which share common characteristics with Primary Promise such as small group settings, structured programs, and durations of 12-20 weeks, tutoring emerged with the largest average effect size of 0.36 standard deviations (SD)²² (see figure 5). This implies that a student performing at the 50th percentile before tutoring would, on average, increase their performance to the 64th percentile afterward, assuming no other students received academic interventions.

²⁰ Meta-analysis uses statistical methods to synthesize results across different studies for a given topic. Regarded as one of the stronger methods to produce reliable, scientific evidence.

²¹ Dietrichson, Jens, et al. "Academic interventions for elementary and middle school students with low socioeconomic status: A systematic review and meta-analysis." *Review of educational research* 87.2 (2017): 243-282.

²² This was statistically significant given that 95% confidence interval did not contain zero.

While feedback and progress monitoring showed promising results, with an effect size only 0.4 lower than tutoring, this was based on a smaller sample of five studies. Nonetheless, if effective, these strategies could complement Primary Promise, potentially enhancing its overall impact.

The findings of this meta-analysis are likely generalizable to Primary Promise due to the similarities in LAUSD's student demographics and the characteristics of tutoring programs. However, it's worth noting that only four out of the fourteen interventions reviewed had ten or more studies included, which could influence the generalizability of the results to other interventions. Nevertheless, the study underscores the statistically significant impact of tutoring interventions, suggesting they are among the most effective academic interventions for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Figure 5: Number of studies, weighted averaged effect size, and confidence Interval

Source: Academic Interventions for Elementary and Middle School Students with Low SES (Dietrichson et al., 2017)

Intervention component	<i>k</i>	Average effect size	95% Confidence interval
Incentives	8	0.01	[-0.02, 0.04]
After school programs	3	0.02	[-0.06, 0.11]
Summer programs	8	0.03	[-0.06, 0.12]
Coaching students	11	0.04	[-0.14, 0.22]
Psychological interventions	7	0.05	[-0.16, 0.26]
Personnel development	8	0.07	[-0.05, 0.18]
Increased resources	2	0.08	[0.01, 0.15]
Computer-assisted instruction	9	0.11	[-0.01, 0.22]
Coaching personnel	10	0.16	[0.04, 0.28]
Content changes	9	0.19	[0.06, 0.31]
Cooperative learning	10	0.22	[0.10, 0.34]
Small-group instruction	4	0.24	[0.00, 0.48]
Feedback and progress monitoring	5	0.32	[0.18, 0.47]
Tutoring	36	0.36	[0.26, 0.45]

Meta-Analysis of Tutoring Interventions

The second meta-analysis, conducted by Nickow et al. (2020), synthesized 96 randomized controlled trial (RCT) studies specifically focusing on tutoring interventions to identify the characteristics that yield the largest effect size. The majority of these studies shared similarities with Primary Promise: they predominantly focused on literacy (80%), occurred during school hours (80%), were conducted at elementary schools (93%), and involved tutors who were not necessarily professional teachers²³.

The research team found that tutoring interventions, on average, improved learning outcomes by 0.37 standard deviations (SD), slightly higher than the result reported by Dietrichson et al. This suggests that the true effect size of tutoring intervention programs may be around 0.36 to 0.37 SD. Additionally, the meta-analysis revealed several other findings:

1. Tutoring in literacy yielded larger effect sizes in earlier grades compared to older grades.
2. Tutoring led by teachers and paraprofessionals produced stronger effects than programs relying on volunteers.
3. Tutoring during school hours had a more significant impact than tutoring after school.
4. Tutoring sessions held three to four days per week resulted in the largest returns on learning outcomes.

²³ Nickow, Andre, Philip Oreopoulos, and Vincent Quan. "The impressive effects of tutoring on prek-12 learning: A systematic review and meta-analysis of the experimental evidence." (2020)

These characteristics align closely with the design of Primary Promise, suggesting that the tutoring intervention is well-suited to have a significant effect on high-need students within LAUSD.

Tutoring Effects for Hispanic and Non-Hispanic Students

The final piece of supporting research was a randomized controlled trial (RCT) spanning two years, comparing the effects of tutoring on Hispanic and non-Hispanic students' reading abilities²⁴. The intervention, led by instructional assistants who were hired and trained, closely resembled the structure of Primary Promise, with tutoring sessions lasting 30 minutes per day. The study included 299 K-3 grade students, with 159 being Hispanic, across 14 elementary schools in the United States.

Researchers measured students' literacy skills at the end of each academic year for four years: two years during the intervention and two years afterward to assess the longevity of the benefits. The findings revealed that students who received the intervention exhibited significantly faster increases in reading test scores compared to the control group. Initially, before the tutoring began, both groups performed at similar levels, but by the end of the intervention period and two years later, the intervention group read 14 Correct Words Per Minute (CWPM) faster than the control group.

Researchers found that reading test scores increased significantly faster for students who received the intervention than the control group. At T1, before tutoring began, the intervention students read at the same level as the control group, but by T5,

²⁴ Gunn B, Smolkowski K, Biglan A, Black C, Blair J. Fostering the Development of Reading Skill through Supplemental Instruction: Results for Hispanic and Non-Hispanic Students. J Spec Educ. 2005

two years after the tutoring ended, the invention group read at 14 Correct Words Per Minute (CWPM) faster than the control students (figure 6) (ibid). Researchers also found that Hispanic students who received tutoring improved at a faster rate and had a smaller fade effect at T5 than non-Hispanic students (figure 7). Despite Hispanic students scoring initially lower (T1) on an oral reading test (Word Attack) than non-Hispanic students, those the received the intervention were slightly outperforming their non-Hispanic peers four years later (T5). Their research suggests that Hispanic students benefit as much or perhaps more than non-Hispanic students. Given that 73% of LASUD students are Hispanic, we believe Primary Promise will be an impactful intervention if reimplemented.

While it cannot be guaranteed that Primary Promise will replicate the exact effect size observed in the aforementioned studies, the intervention shares many effective qualities identified in the research. Therefore, the findings are generalizable and suggest that Primary Promise has the potential to significantly benefit students within LAUSD.

Figure 6: Growth curves for oral reading fluency within each condition

Source: Gunn B, Smolkowski K, Biglan A, Black C, Blair J. Fostering the Development of Reading Skill through Supplemental Instruction: Results for Hispanic and Non-Hispanic Students. J Spec Educ. 2005

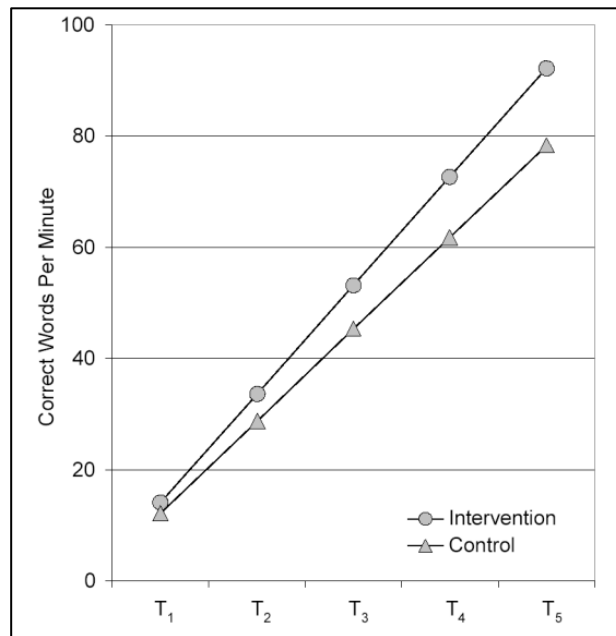
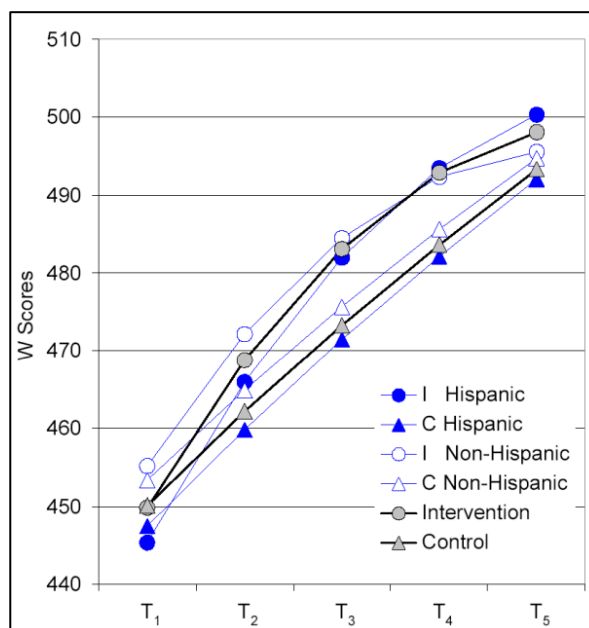


Figure 7: Growth curves for word attack (W Score) within each condition and by condition for ethnicity

Source: ibid



V. Popularity of Primary Promise

The immense popularity of Primary Promise among parents is evident through the unwavering support of groups like Parents Supporting Teachers (PST). PST, a parent-led advocacy group in Los Angeles, unanimously supported piloting Primary Promise in 2020, and their enthusiasm remains steadfast (Change.org, n.d.). Currently, PST actively advocates for the reintroduction of Primary Promise, featuring a petition prominently on their website.

While quantitative data on LAUSD teachers' attitudes toward Primary Promise is unavailable, anecdotal evidence from sources like PST and news articles suggests its popularity among teachers. However, it remains uncertain if this sentiment is universal among all teachers. Nevertheless, research indicates that Primary Promise may have a higher likelihood of success compared to LNIT due to its nature as a reform that does not necessitate significant changes in instructional practices. According to Cohen and Mehta (2017)²⁵, successful reforms are those that do not impose additional burdens on teachers and are consistent with the values of educators, parents, and students.

Primary Promise aligns well with these characteristics as it hires and trains literacy teachers, thereby avoiding the need for additional training or workload for professional teachers. Conversely, LNIT mandates professional teachers to undergo professional development training, which contrasts with successful reform strategies

²⁵ Cohen and Mehta. 2017. "Why Reform Sometimes Succeeds: Understanding the Conditions that Produce Reforms that Last." *American Educational Research Journal*, 54(4): 644-690.

identified by Cohen and Mehta. Additionally, successful reforms often offer practical solutions to known problems in education, a trait exhibited by Primary Promise.

LAUSD's decision-making process regarding the removal of Primary Promise from its programs remains opaque. While some articles suggest Superintendent Carvalho was solely responsible for the decision, there is little clarity on the data or considerations that informed this choice, apart from concerns about costs (Blume, 2023).. If Primary Promise were to be reintroduced at a lower cost, it is uncertain how LAUSD board members would vote, as communication regarding the decision-making process has been limited.

VI. Economic Viability

The proposed design of Primary Promise, targeting K-3 grades in 32 priority schools, comes with an estimated cost of \$84 million, amounting to \$9,839.35²⁶ per student and serving approximately 8,500 students. If this expense remains prohibitive, a more focused approach targeting only third graders could be considered. In such a scenario, approximately 2,833²⁷ students would be served at a cost of \$10,115.33²⁸ per student, totaling about \$29 million²⁹. Both iterations would be more economical than LNIT as a whole (\$122 million). However, it's important to note that LNIT per student

²⁶ See calculations in footnotes 15-18

²⁷ Total amount of elementary students at LAUSD (17K) priority school divided by six (K-5 are six grades).

²⁸ Used linear formula from footnote 17. $Y = -.487X + 10253.30$. $X = 2,833$ students; $Y = \$10,155.33$ per student.

²⁹ Multiplied number of students by cost per student ($2833 * \$10,115.33$)

cost is significantly lower (\$300). Our argument emphasizes that Primary Promise is a targeted intervention aimed at assisting high-need students at critical grade levels.

To ensure the sustainability of Primary Promise, LAUSD could explore reallocating Title I Funds to support the program. Title I Funds are specifically designated to address the needs of academically at-risk students and are allocated to schools based on the number of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch (Federal State Programs, 2016)³⁰. Given that most priority schools have a high percentage of students qualifying for these programs, reallocating these funds could be a viable option. Additionally, seeking state and federal grants, such as the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds allocated by the California legislature, could provide further financial support for Primary Promise (Legislative Analyst's Office, 2023)³¹.

VII. Conclusion

In conclusion, while there may be limited data on the effectiveness of Primary Promise specifically, extensive research underscores the effectiveness of tutoring as an academic intervention. Primary Promise embodies key characteristics of successful reform initiatives, particularly those related to tutoring programs. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that Hispanic students, who make up a significant portion of

³⁰ Federal State Programs. (2016). *Title I - How to Avoid Doing More* [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from <https://www.lausd.org/cms/lib/CA0100043/Centricity/Domain/185/Title%20I%20-%20How%20to%20Avoid%20Having%20To%20Do%20More.pdf>

³¹ Legislative Analyst's Office. (2023, March 10). *School Reopening: Federal Funds for California*. Retrieved from [https://lao.ca.gov/Publications/Report/4734#:~:text=Schools%20in%20California%20received%20%2423,Emergency%20Relief%20\(ESSER\)%20fund.](https://lao.ca.gov/Publications/Report/4734#:~:text=Schools%20in%20California%20received%20%2423,Emergency%20Relief%20(ESSER)%20fund.)

LAUSD's student population, may particularly benefit from such interventions. While the cost of Primary Promise may pose a challenge, the potential rewards in terms of improving graduation rates and academic outcomes for the most vulnerable students are considerable. Investing in accelerating learning for high-need students is crucial for ensuring equity and opportunity within LAUSD.

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Seshadri, M. (2024, February). LAUSD's 100 priority schools target districts' highest-need students. *EdSource*. Retrieved from <https://edsource.org/2024/lausds-100-priority-schools-target-districts-highest-need-students/706760>

What I learned:

- Corrected for subject-verb agreement
- Improved use of commas
- Corrected a few run-on sentences

Primary Promise is a literacy-focused tutoring program for elementary students in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). Piloted in 2020 in response to remote learning, three years later the program had expanded to 453 Title I LAUSD schools, serving 14,000 students, but costing the district \$192 million per year (Beutner and Cortines, 2023). Despite support from many teachers, parents and LAUSD board members, Primary Promise was suspended in May 2023 by current LAUSD Superintendent Alberto Carvalho due to unsustainable costs. As a substitute intervention, Carvalho implemented Literacy and Numeracy which is less expensive per students but has been poorly received by LASUD staff members and might also be suspended prior to the 2024-2025 academic year (ibid). The impetus for these interventions is LAUSD students' low performance in reading and math, where just 42% and 31%³², respectively, are meeting or exceeding state standards (EdSource, 2024). Given LAUSD's high percentage of students who are economically and ethnically disadvantaged (non-white), LAUSD is pressured to alleviate such education inequity and ensure all students receive a fair start in public education.

The following will argue that Primary Promise should be reimplemented in LAUSD due to the substantial research that shows the effectiveness of similar tutoring programs, the popularity of Primary Promise across different stakeholders, and the economic viability of the program. The problem that Primary Promise was designed to ameliorate, low literacy rates for K-3rd graders in LAUSD, will be explained in greater detail before focusing on the effectiveness of Primary Promise.

VIII. LAUSD's Literacy Problem

LAUSD's Student Demographics

LAUSD is the second-largest school district in the US, providing education to about 500,000 students, many of which face challenges in receiving high quality public education (LAUSD Dashboard, n.d.). For the 2023-2024 school year, 86% of LAUSD students qualified for free or reduced lunch, 15% were classified as Students with Disabilities (SWD), and 19% were Multilingual Learners (MLLs). (ibid; Dataquest, 2023).

³² Averages were calculated from California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) for grades 3-8th and 11th across the following years: 2019, 2022, and 2023 (EdSource, 2024).

In 2022-2023 almost 40% of K-12 students were chronically absent (ibid) or missed 10% more of school days in a year ("Chronic Absenteeism in California," n.d.). These statistics are affecting a student population that is over 70% Latinx and just 10% White (*figure 1*), suggesting education inequities (LAUSD Dashboard, n.d.).

LAUSD Literacy

Academically, more than half of LAUSD students are not meeting CAASPP English Language Art (ELA) standards, with vast discrepancies among students who are either White or Asian, and Hispanic or African American (*figure 2*) (EdSource, 2024). Low English scores on CAASPP are present as early as third grade, where in 2022-2023 just 43% of students met or exceeded ELA standards, roughly 18 thousand elementary students. Students in kindergarten through second grade are given a different assessment, Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), which measures students on different standards than CAASPP. From 2020-2023, about 60% of kindergartens, first graders and second graders met or exceeded the Early Literacy Benchmarks for DIBELS³³ (LAUSD Dashboard, n.d.). In sum, more than 36,000³⁴ LAUSD students *are not* meeting the literacy benchmark in kindergarten through second grade. As student's progress from kindergarten through second grade, the percentage of SWD and English Language Learners (ELLs) that meet the Early Literacy Benchmarks decreases precipitously. In 2022-2023, only 30% of second graders that had disabilities met the benchmark and 43% of ELLs, remarkably lower than grade average of 60% of students meeting the benchmark (ibid). A year prior, in first grade the same cohort of students had 43% of SWD and 50% of ELL meet grade level (ibid).

LAUSD's students are historically marginalized by their socio-economic status, ethnicity, and diverse learning needs. Given that low ELA and literacy rates plague such disadvantaged demographics illustrates the crisis in LAUSD schools for students, families, and LAUSD staff members.

Importance of Literacy by 3rd Grade

While math scores are lower than ELA in many grades, our intervention chose to focus on low literacy scores due to the importance of reading on grade level in 3rd grade and the use of reading comprehension skills in math. The acceptance of the Common Core restructured math standards, placing more emphasis on word problems and student's abilities to decipher written text. Thus, strengthening students' literacy skills should bolster their math scores, however the reverse is less likely to occur. Resources

³³ Students typically perform higher on DIBELS than CAASPP, as the standards are easier to meet and not because younger students are performing better.

³⁴ Calculated by taking product of 2023-2024 enrollment sum (K: 28,403; Grade 1: 30,474; Grade 2: 32,070) and percentage of students who did not meet the DIBELS literacy standard (40%)

should still be used to supply interventions and programs to help students with low math scores, but that is not the focus of this intervention.

An impactful study on the importance of reading on grade level by third grade was conducted by The Annie E. Casey Foundation. The foundation initiated a longitudinal study on 4,000 students born between 1979-1989 in the U.S. to study how 3rd grade reading levels and poverty correlated with high school graduation rates³⁵. The researchers found that of children not graduating high school, 88% were not reading proficient by 3rd grade (Hernandez, 2012). Additionally, they found that among high schoolers who didn't graduate and were proficient in reading by third grade, there was nine percentage point difference in children who experienced poverty and those who did not (*figure 3*). However, among students who were not reading on grade level by third grade, there was a difference of 17 percentage points. This suggests that poverty exacerbates the relationship of student's not being grade level by third grade and not graduating high school.

Similar results were found for Black and Hispanic students. Students who were unable to graduate high school but read on grade level by third grade had slight differences in ethnicity (*figure 4*). However, among students who were not proficient by third grade, almost twice as many students were Black or Hispanic as they were White. This suggests that race may influence the effect that not reading on grade level by third grade may have on high school graduation rates.

Given this research and that over 80% of LAUSD's student body are both economically disadvantaged and Black or Brown students, the deleterious effect of students not reading on grade level by third grade may be especially pronounced in LAUSD.

IX. Intervention

Background of Primary Promise

The literacy problem outlined above is not new to LAUSD administrators. In March 2020 the COVID pandemic forced schools across the country to attempt remote learning. Former LAUSD Superintendent Austin Beutner was worried that the district's younger students would struggle to learn in an online format. In response, Beutner piloted Primary Promise, a tutoring intervention focused on literacy, in

³⁵ Hernandez, Donald. The Annie E. Casey Foundation. Double Jeopardy: How Third Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation. Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012.

August 2020 across 48 schools, serving 750 first grade students (Harter, 2023)³⁶. The tutoring program had several important characteristics that we will return to throughout this paper:

- Literacy teachers were hired and trained (by a third party who),
- Each school formed a small group of primary and literacy teachers to select high needs³⁷ students into the program and measure students' work
- Tutoring groups occurred in small groups of four to five students
- Tutoring sessions were high dosage (25-30 minutes per day) (D'Souza, 2023)³⁸

The first trial of Primary Promise lasted from August 2020 to February 2021, in which Beutner claimed that prior to receiving the intervention only 9% of the 450 students were meeting grade-level standards, but by February 37% of students were meeting the grade-level standards, compared to the rest of the first graders where 37% were on grade-level by beginning of the year (BOY), but just 39% were on grade level by the middle year³⁹ (Los Angeles Unified School District, 2021). Given the success, Primary Promise expanded in 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 reaching 14,000 students in grades Kindergarten through third grade across 453 Title I schools. The program was valued by the Parent Teacher Association (PTA)⁴⁰ and teachers across the district, however, the program cost did balloon up to \$134 million dollars, or \$9,571 per child⁴¹. Had the program continued expanding to serve all LAUSD elementary schools, the initial plan, it would have cost \$192 million or \$1,011 per child.⁴²

However, prior to the 2023-2024 school year, Alberto Carvalho, elected LAUSD Superintendent in 2022, chose to disband the program over concerns that the program was too expensive. In replacement, Carvalho launched Literacy and Numeracy Intervention which similarly to Primary Promise sought to support students who need additional support but is designed very differently. Some

³⁶ Harter, C. (2023, June 9). LAUSD superintendent defends replacing primary promise amid community outcry. *Daily News*. Retrieved from <https://www.dailynews.com/2023/06/09/lausd-superintendent-defends-replacing-primary-promise-amid-community-outcry/>

³⁷ High-need students were defined as students who were MLLs, students experiencing homelessness, foster youth, and had low reading scores (Los Angeles Unified School District, 2021).

³⁸ D'Souza, K. (2023, June 7). Carvalho says replacing primary promise will do more for LAUSD for less money. *EdSource*. Retrieved from <https://edsource.org/updates/carvalho-says-replacing-primary-promise-will-do-more-for-laUSD-for-less-money>

³⁹ More research is needed to confirm these results, and there are at least two studies that are currently ongoing.

⁴⁰ Change.org. (n.d.).

⁴¹ Calculated by taking the quotient of \$134 million and 14,000

⁴² Calculated by taking the quotient of \$192 million and the sum of 2023-2024 K-5 student enrollment (189,862). Data from LAUSD Open Data Dashboard.

important changes to the Literacy and Numeracy Intervention (LNIT), in contrast to Primary Promise, are:

- LNIT serves all students (K-12th)
- Literacy teachers are no longer hired by the district. Instead, general primary and secondary teachers receive additional Professional Development (PDs) training on how to better support students.
- Costs \$122 million (\$300 per child)⁴³

Both Primary Promise and Literacy and Numeracy Intervention were partially to fully funded, depending on the school year, by financial aid from the U.S. government that was circumstantially provided due to the pandemic's effect on loss learning. The funding expired in June 2024, threatening the continuation of LNIT and similar programs across the country⁴⁴.

Intervention Proposal

Primary Promise should be reimplemented at half of the 63 elementary schools of the LAUSD priority schools⁴⁵ for the 2024-2025 school year. We recommend that the 32 schools are chosen randomly, so that this iteration of Primary Promise can serve as a Randomly Controlled Trail (RCT)⁴⁶ to bolster the research and evaluation of the program. By choosing priority schools, this program can help students in greatest need of additional support.

The cost per child served in previous iterations of the program ranged from \$10,000 to \$1,000. We estimate that there are around 17,000 K-5 elementary students at priority schools in LAUSD⁴⁷, and our program would focus on 8,500⁴⁸ K-3rd grade

⁴³ Calculated by taking the quotient of \$122 million and total TK-12th grade enrollment (400K)

⁴⁴ The economic concerns of Primary Promise and LAUSD's decreasing budget are legitimate and will be addressed in greater detail in section six of this paper.

⁴⁵ LAUSD identified 100 priority schools (63 elementary) as schools that are performing the lowest across several measures (Seshadri, 2024).

⁴⁶ Randomly Controlled Trials is a one of the better research methods to evaluate if an intervention is causally related to an outcome.

⁴⁷ Calculated by dividing total students at priority schools (53,959) by number of priority schools (100). Then multiplied the quotient of student per school (539.59) by the number of elementary schools the program would serve (32). High schools are likely bigger than elementary schools, so our costs are conservative.

⁴⁸ Multiplied number of elementary students served (17K) by ratio of elementary grades served (3/6)

students. We created a linear equation to estimate that our program would cost about \$9,839.35⁴⁹ per student served or a total of \$84⁵⁰ million dollars.

Characteristics of the program would be similar to the previous design: small groups of four to five students, hire and train literacy teachers, high-dosage tutoring (25-30 minutes) for twenty minutes per week, and it should continue to occur during the school day (as opposed to after school hours). We anticipate that students receiving tutoring will improve by an average of .36 standard deviations (SDs) in ELA⁵¹, however more evaluation specific to Primary Promise is needed to confirm this effect size.

The theory of action behind the intervention is that by targeting lower performing K-3rd grade students at priority schools, Primary Promise will intervene in LAUSD students who need the most help. Focusing specifically on literacy by 3rd grade will hopefully spill over into other subjects and future grades, as research referenced earlier shows the correlations with reading on grade level for third grade students. this intervention will hopefully help students read on grade level.

X. Effectiveness of tutoring intervention

Meta-Analysis of Academic Interventions

This section will focus on three different pieces of literature: a meta-analysis of academic interventions, a meta-analysis⁵² of tutoring interventions, and a single study on the effect of tutoring on Hispanic and Non-Hispanic students. Cumulatively, the research suggests that a tutoring intervention program like Primary Promise will have a large effect size on LAUSD K-3 grade elementary students.

Research by Dietrichson et al. reviewed 101 studies, 76 were RCTs, that focused on academic interventions for elementary and middle school students from low socioeconomic status (2017)⁵³. Their research compared different interventions in effort to find the most effective academic intervention for students from low-income backgrounds. Of the 36 studies that focused on tutoring interventions, there were

⁴⁹ Used data from previous Primary Promise costs and students served to create linear formula. Coordinates were (14,000 students served, \$9,571 per student) and (189,862 students served, \$1,011 per student). Used point-slope formula to find that the slope for those coordinates equals -.0487. Then created linear formula that $y = -.0487x + 10253.3$, where x equals number of students served and y equals cost per student. When x equals 8,500, y equals \$9,839.35.

⁵⁰ Per student cost (\$9,839.35) multiplied by number of students served (8,500).

⁵¹ This means that a student who was performing in the 50th percentile of the class would increase their performance to 64th percentile after receiving tutoring

⁵² Meta-analysis uses statistical methods to synthesize results across different studies for a given topic. Regarded as one of the stronger methods to produce reliable, scientific evidence.

⁵³ Dietrichson, Jens, et al. "Academic interventions for elementary and middle school students with low socioeconomic status: A systematic review and meta-analysis." *Review of educational research* 87.2 (2017): 243-282.

common characteristics with Primary Promise such as small groups, tutoring programs were structured, and the duration was 12-20 weeks (ibid). The meta-analyses found that of the 14 different academic interventions, tutoring had the largest average effect size .36 SD⁵⁴ (figure 5) (ibid). This means that a student who was performing in the 50th percentile of the class would increase their performance to 64th percentile after receiving tutoring, assuming the rest of the students did not also receive an academic intervention. While feedback and progress monitoring had an effect size that was just .4 lower than tutoring, the amount of studies reviewed was only five. Additionally, if the intervention is effective, it could easily be incorporated into Primary Promise, potentially increasing the effect size of Primary Promise.

The results of this research can be generalizable to Primary Promise due to LAUSD's similarities in students' low socioeconomic status and commonalities in the tutoring programs characteristics. However, only four of the fourteen interventions had ten or more studies reviewed. While we are confident in the effect size of tutoring, it is possible that other academic interventions would perform differently if more studies were reviewed. Nonetheless, this study suggests that tutoring has a statistically significant effect size and is one of the more effective academic interventions for students with low socioeconomic status.

Meta-Analysis of Tutoring Interventions

The second meta-analysis of interest synthesized 96 RCT studies which all focused on tutoring interventions in effort to identify which characteristics of tutoring interventions produce the largest effect size. The majority of studies reviewed had similarities with Primary Promise: 80% focused on literacy, 80% of tutoring interventions occurred during school hours, 93% of studies occurred at elementary schools, and a majority of tutors were not professional teachers (Nickow et al., 2020)⁵⁵. The research team found that tutoring improved learning outcomes by .37 SD (ibid), which is .01 SD greater than the result found in Dietrichson et al.. This adds further evidence that the true effect size of tutoring intervention programs is likely around .36 to .37 SD. Other findings included were tutoring in literacy yielded larger effect sizes in earlier grades than older grades, stronger effects for teacher and paraprofessional led tutoring programs (as opposed to volunteers), tutoring during school had larger impacts than tutoring after school, and tutoring three to four days a week had the largest returns (ibid). These characteristics are all present in Primary Promise, increasing the likelihood

⁵⁴ This was statistically significant given that 95% confidence interval did not contain zero.

⁵⁵ Nickow, Andre, Philip Oreopoulos, and Vincent Quan. "The impressive effects of tutoring on prek-12 learning: A systematic review and meta-analysis of the experimental evidence." (2020)

that the tutoring intervention would have a significant effect on high-need students in LAUSD.

Tutoring Effects for Hispanic and Non-Hispanic Students

The last supporting body of research was a RCT, two-year tutoring intervention that sought to compare the effects of Hispanics and Non-Hispanics who received support with reading⁵⁶. The tutoring occurred for 30 minutes per day and was led by instructional assistants who were hired and trained, similar to Primary Promise. The sample was 299 K-3 grade students, 159 of which were Hispanic, across 14 elementary schools in the United States. Researchers measured students' literacy skills at the end of each academic year for four years. The intervention occurred for two years and then measurement continued for two years after to measure if the benefits faded, and if so, how quickly they faded.

Researchers found that reading test scores increased significantly faster for students who received the intervention than the control group. At T1, before tutoring began, the intervention students read at the same level as the control group, but by T5, two years after the tutoring ended, the intervention group read at 14 Correct Words Per Minute (CWPM) faster than the control students (figure 6) (ibid). Researchers also found that Hispanic students who received tutoring improved at a faster rate and had a smaller fade effect at T5 than non-Hispanic students (figure 7). Despite Hispanic students scoring initially lower (T1) on an oral reading test (Word Attack) than non-Hispanic students, those who received the intervention were slightly outperforming their non-Hispanic peers four years later (T5)⁵⁷. Their research suggests that Hispanic students benefit as much or perhaps more than non-Hispanic students. Given that 73% of LASUD students are Hispanic, we believe Primary Promise will be an impactful intervention if reimplemented.

While we cannot guarantee that Primary Promise will replicate the effect size found in the three aforementioned studies, we believe that Primary Promise has many similar qualities that were found to be effective and that the research findings are generalizable to our proposed intervention.

XI. Popularity of Primary Promise

⁵⁶ Gunn B, Smolkowski K, Biglan A, Black C, Blair J. Fostering the Development of Reading Skill through Supplemental Instruction: Results for Hispanic and Non-Hispanic Students. J Spec Educ. 2005

⁵⁷ This effect may fade out in future years

Primary Promise was incredibly popular among parents. Parent's Supporting Teachers (PST) is a parent led advocacy group in Los Angeles whose mission is to "amplify voices of public-school families" (Change.org, n.d.). In 2020, PST board members unanimously supported piloting Primary Promise, energy that has not wavered (ibid). Currently, PST has a petition to reimplement Primary Promise that is featured on the front of the website.

Quantitative data on LAUSD teachers attitudes towards Primary Promise does not exist. Some sources like PST and news articles suggest it's popular among teachers, but it is unclear if it's popular for all teachers. However, research does suggest that Primary Promise is more likely to be successful than LNIT because it is a reform that do not require "deep change in instruction" (Cohen & Mehta, 2017)⁵⁸. Since Primary Promise hires and trains literacy teachers, professional teachers are not asked to receive additional training or add to their workload. However, Literacy and Numeracy Intervention mandates professional teachers to attend professional development training that focuses on extending the capacity of existing teachers, the opposite of successful reforms found by Cohen and Mehta. Other relevant characteristics of successful reforms are reforms that offered "tools, materials, or guidance", provided "solutions to problems that people in education knew about" and reforms that are "consistent with values of educators, parents, and teachers" (ibid). Collectively, Primary Promise consists of more characteristics of successful reforms than LNIT, suggesting that in addition to a large effect size on student's learning that Primary Promise has traits of successful reforms.

LAUSD has seven board members that vote on decisions that influence the school district. It is unclear how board members voted to remove Primary Promise, as some articles reference Superintendent Carvalho single-handily removing Primary Promise (Blume, 2023). Overall, there was little communication about the data that was used to make the decision other than Carvalho citing concerns with money. If Primary Promise was reintroduced to the board at a lower cost, it is unclear how board members would vote.

XII. Economic Viability

The proposed design of Primary Promise, serving K-3 grades in 32 priority schools, would cost about \$84 million dollars, \$9,839.35⁵⁹ per student, and serve around 8,500 students. If this is still too costly, Primary Promise could be narrowed to

⁵⁸ Cohen and Mehta. 2017. "Why Reform Sometimes Succeeds: Understanding the Conditions that Produce Reforms that Last." *American Educational Research Journal*, 54(4): 644-690.

⁵⁹ See calculations in footnotes 15-18

just target just third graders. In this scenario, about 2,833⁶⁰ students costing \$10,115.33⁶¹ per student and summing to about \$29 million⁶². Both iterations would be cheaper than LNIT as whole (\$122 million); however, we recognize that per student LNIT is far less costly (\$300). Our argument is that Primary Promise is carefully targeted intervention that helps students in high need at the most crucial grade(s).

This program could be more sustainable if LAUSD chooses to reallocate Title I Funds to Primary Promise. Title I funds are funds that are designed to meet the needs of academically at-risk students and are allocated per school based on the numbers of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch (Federal State Programs, 2016)⁶³. Most priority schools have near 99% of their students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. Additionally, applying for state and federal grants may help the sustainability of Primary Promise. The California legislature allocate \$21.1 billion dollars towards Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds which broadly supported services for low-income students and addressing learning loss (Legislative Analyst's Office, 2023)⁶⁴.

XIII. Conclusion

While there is limited data about the effectiveness of Primary Promise, rigorous research suggests that tutoring is an effective academic intervention, that the design of Primary Promise consists of the most effective characteristics among tutoring programs, and that Hispanic students may stand to benefit the most from tutoring. Primary Promise exhibits several characteristics of successful reforms which are not shared by the Literacy and Numeracy Intervention. We acknowledge that the cost of the program is high; however, the reward of improving graduation rates for the lowest performing students at the lowest performing schools is also high. For LAUSD's disadvantaged students to gain equal footing, there must be investment in accelerating learning for high-need students.

⁶⁰ Total amount of elementary students at LAUSD (17K) priority school divided by six (K-5 are six grades).

⁶¹ Used linear formular from footnote 17. $Y = -.487X + 10253.30$. $X = 2,833$ students; $Y = \$10,155.33$ per student.

⁶² Multiplied number of students by cost per student ($2833 * \$10,115.33$)

⁶³ Federal State Programs. (2016). *Title I - How to Avoid Doing More* [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from <https://www.lausd.org/cms/lib/CA01000043/Centricity/Domain/185/Title%20I%20-%20How%20to%20Avoid%20Having%20To%20Do%20More.pdf>

⁶⁴ Legislative Analyst's Office. (2023, March 10). *School Reopening: Federal Funds for California*. Retrieved from [https://lao.ca.gov/Publications/Report/4734#:~:text=Schools%20in%20California%20received%20%2423,Emergency%20Relief%20\(ESSER\)%20fund.](https://lao.ca.gov/Publications/Report/4734#:~:text=Schools%20in%20California%20received%20%2423,Emergency%20Relief%20(ESSER)%20fund.)