



The Learning Curve

October 04

Cargill Scholars® is an educational, social and economic development program for socio-economically disadvantaged children who attend school in Minneapolis or its northern and western suburbs. The program is designed to improve the academic achievement of 50 children who joined the program in the fourth grade (they are now in the seventh grade), with the goal being their successful completion of high school and admission into a post-secondary institution. The Cargill Foundation has committed up to \$5 million over five years to Cargill Scholars.

Tutoring: Why we do it

From the day we started to imagine what Cargill Scholars might look like in reality, tutoring was always in the picture. Both good sense and good research tell us that intensive, one-on-one work with an expert tutor can be a powerful way to improve a student's academic performance. It's no coincidence that families with financial means often arrange private tutoring when their children are not doing as well as they could in school.

Nearly one-third of the Cargill Scholars speak a language other than English at home. Even aside from English fluency, many of the parents feel unequipped to help their children with academic work. Most of the families have very limited financial means to provide private tutoring.

This helps to explain why so many Cargill Scholars parents give high priority and high expectations to the tutoring component of Cargill Scholars. In the twice-yearly survey of parents, we typically hear several comments stressing the importance of tutoring and suggesting even more tutoring for their child.

When it came to selecting a partner to provide tutoring services, Change of Mind Learning Systems appealed to us immediately. They use the "direct instruction" method and materials, which have been rigorously field-tested in more than 3,000 studies. This method takes a careful, systematic approach and emphasizes mastery of each skill before moving on to the next level. In 1999, when 24 popular school-reform approaches were independently reviewed, direct instruction was one of only three with strong evidence of improving students' achievement.

Reading has been the main focus for Cargill Scholars tutoring in the first few years of the program. As students get up to speed in reading, the focus will shift to math if they need it, and then study skills. For the past three summers we have held a three-week Summer Academy to strengthen study skills.

Tutoring is not without its challenges, as you'll see in this issue. Our program coaches and tutoring partners need persistence and creativity to make it work. The early results are encouraging, and we're still learning.

Toni Green

Senior Program Officer, Cargill Foundation

The nuts and bolts

- At the start of each school year, the Cargill Scholars coaches meet with each of the Scholars' teachers to pave the way for tutoring.
- Change of Mind Learning Systems provides a professional tutor for each Cargill Scholar.
- All tutors have a college degree, all have teaching experience, and nearly all have a current teacher license.
- At the beginning of each school year, students are tested on their basic skills. Their tutoring sessions focus on the area that needs the most work.
- Tutors use a set of carefully sequenced teaching materials for reading, math, comprehension, and study skills.
- The Scholars typically work with their tutor for one hour two days per week, with a goal of at least 60 hours for the school year. In the latest school year, Scholars had an average of 74 hours of tutoring.
- Most tutoring takes place at school during the school day to avoid transportation difficulties and costs.
- After every 30 hours of tutoring, the students are retested to check their progress.
- Tutors sometimes accommodate teachers' requests to work with the students on specific schoolwork, but the main focus is on the method and materials used by Change of Mind.



"I started out as a Cargill Scholars tutor myself, so I know it's very, very rewarding working with the Scholars. You see such dramatic results. There are always a few who are not moving ahead as fast as you know they can, but that keeps the challenge in the job."

Kristin Lotthammer
Director of Education,
Change of Mind Learning Systems

The challenges

- Providing the tutoring at school during the school day, which solves a host of logistical problems, also takes the Scholars out of the classroom. The program coaches have to find an hour that the Scholar can afford to miss class, and match that to a tutor's availability.
- For some students, the only time that works is before or after school. Then transportation becomes the challenge. Some schools offer late bus service to accommodate after-school activities.
- There's no such thing as over-communicating with classroom teachers about the tutoring their students receive. They want to know what the student is working on, and they want the tutor to know what's going on in class. But often they are too busy to meet regularly with tutors. Now each teacher receives a monthly report that describes the specific material their student is working on, including what they have mastered and what is still a struggle for them.

- Scholars' "enjoyment" of the tutoring remains fairly high but has dipped a bit since the rave reviews when the program first started, similar to parents' ratings of the tutoring.
- Because of the need for program coaches to connect with each classroom teacher at the beginning of every school year, tutoring sometimes gets a late start. However, the coaches have found that after the school staff becomes familiar with Cargill Scholars, it's much easier to get things rolling at the start of the year.

Signs of progress

- Although we can't isolate the results of tutoring in a comprehensive program like Cargill Scholars, the best way to gauge the impact of tutoring is to look at the Scholars' academic progress.
- Cargill Scholars works with students who have struggled academically, and that hasn't changed overnight. However, their teachers last spring reported that 51% of the Scholars showed average academic skills, up from 38% when the project started.
- Twenty-four Scholars made the honor roll at their school in 2003-04.
- The Wide Range Achievement Test results show dramatic improvement. In three years, the number of Scholars who score at or above their grade level in reading has shot up from 16% to 78%. The math portion of the test has only been given for two years, but results are also strong (from 38% to 64% scoring at grade level).
- The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test results show an increase in the number of Scholars who are at the norm for their age in receptive language (comprehension of words they hear or read), but a decrease in expressive language (ability to recall different words with a similar meaning).
- The tutoring is also intended to strengthen Scholars' motivation to succeed in school. In the latest report, about half of the Scholars rank in the top 30 percent of their class in motivation, according to their teachers.



Tutor Melissa Andersen with Cargill Scholar Maximino Garcia-Marin

People are talking

- Teachers generally give high marks to the tutoring. In the latest survey, 97 percent rated the quality of tutoring “good,” “very good,” or “outstanding.” They also gave positive marks to the results (89%), the timing (87%), and the frequency (95%) of tutoring sessions.

“[The student] has greatly benefited from the one-to-one learning. ... I believe that besides improving academic skills, the tutoring has helped with self-esteem, organization skills, and determination to do well in school.”

- Classroom teacher

- Parents' average rating for their child's tutoring is between “good” and “very good.” When they suggest changes in the tutoring, it is typically to ask for more.

“She needs the tutoring more than anything else, because when she gets home, we cannot help her with it, because we cannot read and write.”

- Cargill Scholars parent

- As for the Scholars themselves, 9 out of 10 say they enjoy the tutoring, although not as many gave the strongest possible answer in the latest survey (39% “strongly agree,” compared with 57-60% previously).

“They help you understand how to be a better student.”

“The tutoring improved my grades.”

“They push you to improve in every matter.”

- Cargill Scholars

Next issue:

Middle school is a whole new world. The next issue of the *Cargill Scholars Learning Curve* will focus on the new challenges and changes for the program as well as for the Scholars themselves.



The Learning Curve
Issue 3, October 2004

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Cargill Scholars, visit
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Scholars are available at
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