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## As Covid-19 Closes American Classrooms, Families Turn to India for Homework Help

The coronavirus pandemic is boosting India's education-technology industry. 'We get that one-on-one attention they need and it's affordable'

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By Eric Bellman  
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NEW DELHI—Sheri Akerele has been struggling to keep her sons in third and seventh grade focused on online classes as coronavirus fears shut down in-person classes in their school in Atlanta for months.

Like many parents, she found her children weren't absorbing their lessons completely, but she could spend only so much of her busy day walking them through their lessons.

Luckily, she has online backup: an experienced teacher who lives in a small town in central India.

"We get that one-on-one attention they need and it's affordable," she said. "It's so hard learning from home."

Demand for online study support is fueling business for Indian teachers, who are tutoring American children on everything from calculus to computer programming. They are helping U.S. high-school students get through their homework and college students better understand their economics and engineering reading.

India's economy has been hard hit by the virus, contracting almost 24% in the quarter that ended in June. But its booming education technology industry is hiring a record number of new employees, with many Indians doing more learning online as well.



Michael Akerele, in third grade (top left), and his brother Christian, in seventh grade, live in Atlanta. They have been getting extra help in their studies from Rajeshwari Kumar, a teacher who lives in a small town in India. PHOTOS: ETUTORWORLD

Online student-services company Chegg, based in Santa Clara, Calif., saw the number of its student subscribers surge 69% year over year to 3.7 million in the quarter through September.

One of the company's more popular services—helping students work through difficult homework questions—depends on thousands of freelancers, largely from India, to do the answering. It added thousands more of them in recent months to respond to the surge in demand.

"One of the massive benefits of the Indian economy is the education system," said Erik Manuevo, vice president of content and operations at Chegg. "In subjects that are often challenging, the Indian education system is better equipped to train individuals to become experts."

Online tutoring, online education and online classes in everything from calligraphy to ukulele have shot up as people are forced to stay home. Many are looking to build on their skills from there.

The private tutoring industry could be worth more than \$100 billion worldwide and online tutoring is a growing part of that, said Andrew Geant, chief executive of Wyzant, a Chicago company that matches students with teachers. Last month, demand for its services jumped more than 100% from a year earlier for many important types of tutoring including economics and chemistry, he said.

"Parents of K-12 students are using tutors to oversee and augment their home schooling," he said. "College students are turning to tutors because they are no longer getting the resources and support from their campuses such as TAs, tutoring centers and peer study groups."

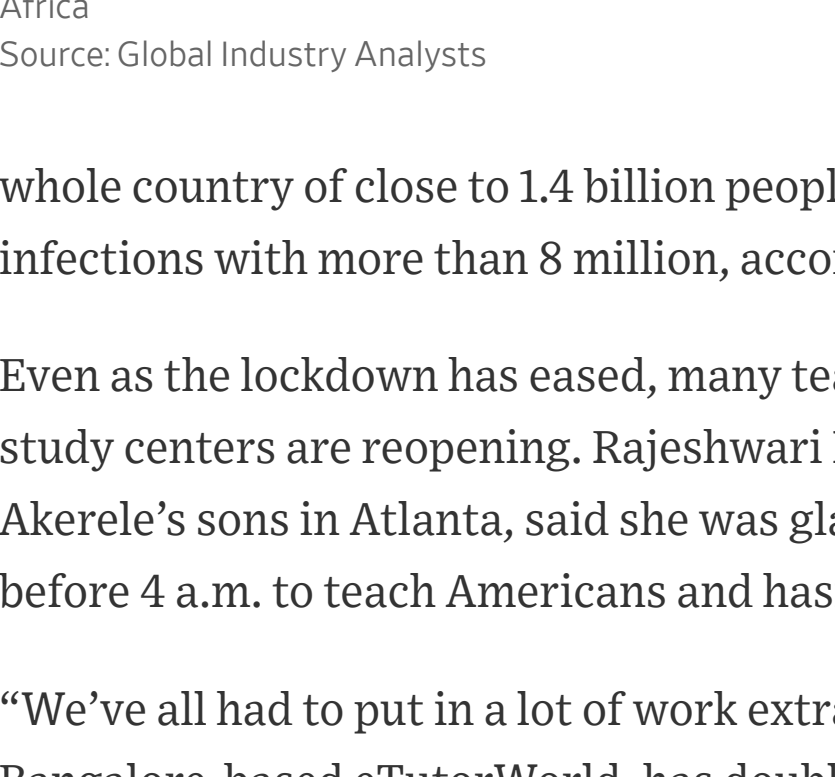
Wyzant only uses teachers from the U.S., where hourly rates vary widely but average about \$35 for tutors for elementary school students.

Tutor outsourcing companies in India—which often charge less than \$25 an hour—say the surge in demand was initially tough to fulfill. But they have quickly added thousands of new tutors because so many Indians are looking for extra work now.

For months, Indians were stuck at home in the world's biggest lockdown, which included the whole country of close to 1.4 billion people. India is second behind the U.S. in total infections with more than 8 million, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

Even as the lockdown has eased, many teachers have lost jobs as few physical schools or study centers are reopening. Rajeshwari Kumar, the Indian teacher who tutors Ms. Akerele's sons in Atlanta, said she was glad to have the extra work. She has been getting up before 4 a.m. to teach Americans and hasn't taken time off since March.

"We've all had to put in a lot of work extra hours," she said. The company she works for, Bangalore-based eTutorWorld, has doubled its revenue and staff since Covid-19 hit. It charges families in the U.S. about \$18 an hour.



\*Includes Canada, Latin America, the Middle East and Africa. Source: Global Industry Analysts

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Tutors in India say the rush of new customers has brought in a new kind of student. Parents who previously just asked for help with math and science subjects are now wanting more support for subjects like history and social studies. Home-schooling families are another type of new customer that has emerged as many have lost access to their regular in-person tutors.

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— Erik Manuevo, Chegg

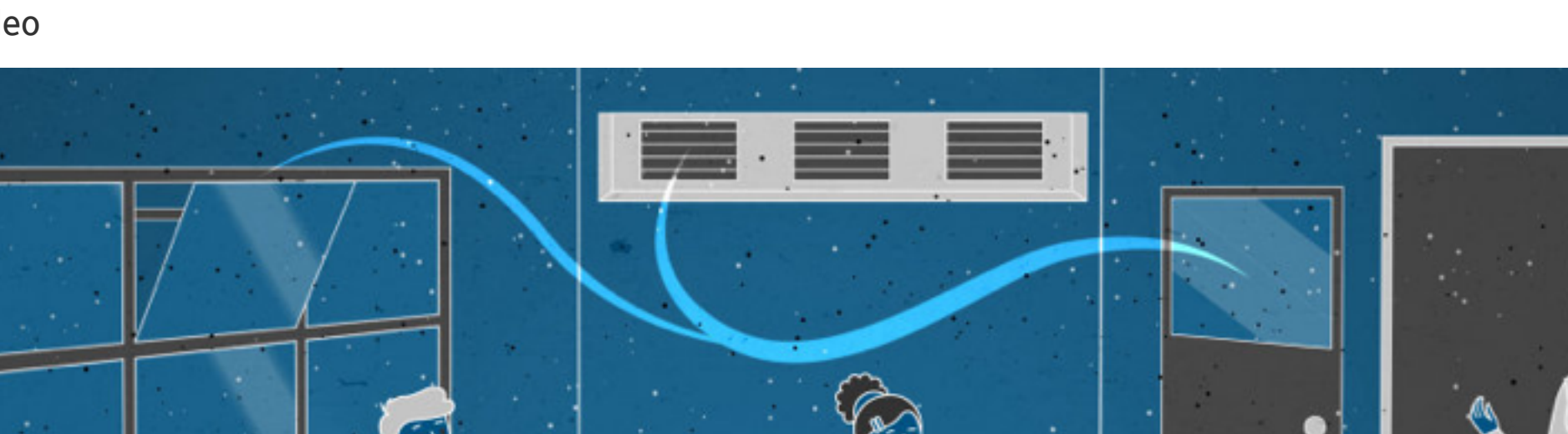
Meanwhile, some of the new parents seem to be using the online tutors as a form of distraction for their bored children, asking them to just occupy the children productively without giving any specific idea of what they want them to learn.

"Some parents are coming to us and they're kind of treating us like a babysitting organization," said Mukul Agrawal, CEO of eTutorWorld. "They say, 'We don't care what you teach but keep them busy.'"

Some parents are using affordable Indian tutors to teach their children new skills while they are stuck at home.

One of the hottest education technology companies in India right now is WhiteHat Jr., which offers one-on-one coding lessons for children. Most of its customers are in America and demand for its services are up close to 90% this year.

Related Video



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Chris Soekiatno, a coder based in Eastvale, Calif., has all three of his children learning coding now as the service makes it affordable.

"They were all off from school and we didn't know what we were going to do," he said. "It was so boring."

The Akerele boys are continuing their online classes with Ms. Kumar even as their school has reopened. The lessons have helped the elder of the two, Christian, consistently ace his math tests.

"It's really good. I had a great experience and I hope to continue out through high school," he said.

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