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Tutors Hold Key to Higher Test Scores, for a High Fee

By HOPE REEVES

Adam Fisher remembers walking home from elementary school thinking not about Mister Softee or Ms. Pac Man but about Ms. Grace, his third-grade teacher. Why, he wondered, had she explained a new math concept in such a roundabout way? If only she had laid it out like this, he recalls thinking, reworking the lesson in his head, then we would have understood it immediately.

This was not the first time Mr. Fisher had pondered the art of teaching and learning. In fact, he had been tutoring his classmates since the previous year, having discovered that he had a knack for explaining concepts so the other kids understood them.

A slender fellow with a goatee and a mass of curly hair, Mr. Fisher, 34, still tutors students. Only today his students are seeking higher test scores - and his tutorials cost \$375 to \$425 an hour.

Mr. Fisher is among about 100 tutors working for Advantage Testing Inc., an Upper East Side test preparation firm. He joined nine years ago, with no formal teaching experience but a master's degree in music from Juilliard and a Harvard physics degree, and is now one of the firm's most senior tutors. He says he consistently raises SAT scores by more than 200 points and achieves similar results in graduate school exams.

The faculty members, as Advantage calls its tutors, have made a profession of preparing students for tests like the SAT's and SAT II Subject Tests, the Graduate Record Exam, the Graduate Management Admission Test and the law school and medical college admissions tests.

To apply for the job each had to meet the firm's prerequisite of scoring, cold, in the 99th percentile or above on any test in which they intended to tutor - for Mr. Fisher, the law school and graduate management test and the SAT. Tutors are paid \$165 to \$685 for a 50-minute session, depending on seniority. (Lower rates are offered to needy students, and the firm does some pro bono work.)

But while Mr. Fisher earns over \$100,000 a year, he insists he is not in the job just for the money. And a visit to the sparsely furnished Upper West Side apartment he shares with his wife and infant daughter lends credence to his claim.

Sitting in his home office at Broadway and 73rd Street, his prized cello balanced against the bare wall, he says he tutors for three reasons: because he wants to be able to live comfortably in the city, he wants time to practice and perform his music and, most important, he loves to teach. "I earn enough to raise a family in Manhattan," he said. "I'm a teacher who gets paid equitably. I don't feel guilty about that."

In fact, Mr. Fisher feels pretty good about what he does. He argues that test-prep can be much more than rote learning aimed at achieving a superficial score. To him, studying for a school entrance exam is an opportunity for a student to learn not only facts and procedures but also a systematic approach to learning itself.

"My job is not to teach a student the trick to getting a high score; my job is getting a student to make the knowledge theirs so it becomes part of them," Mr. Fisher said.

"I view standardized tests not as a number that gets you into college but as a tool that prepares you for the rest of your life.

"When, not if, my students learn the 3,000 to 4,000 words for the SAT verbal section," Mr. Fisher added, betraying a determination his students must quickly pick up on, "those words become part of their life, something they can use forever."

Mr. Fisher's students seem to agree.

Steve Feldman, a 23-year-old Manhattan resident, said that the three months Mr. Fisher tutored him for the law school exam prepared him well for the mental rigors of the law. Originally scoring in the 16th percentile, Mr. Feldman ended up in the 85th percentile. He was accepted to his first-choice school, Tulane University, and credits much of his success to his tutor's method and disposition.

"Even though he's a lot smarter than I am, he never made me feel that way," Mr. Feldman said. "He was so laid-back and patient, I instantly felt comfortable with him, and my score kept going up."

Mr. Feldman started with another Advantage tutor but switched to Mr. Fisher because he felt a quicker connection, he said, adding that he was impressed by how Mr. Fisher organized the sessions and by how well he understood the test.

"He knows the LSAT inside and out," Mr. Feldman said. "He would sit and watch me take a practice test and figure out, just by watching me, what I was having trouble with. Then we'd work on that until I had it down."

Though Mr. Feldman estimates that his two months of tutoring twice a week cost him "three-quarters of a year's tuition" (Tulane Law charges \$33,000 a year in tuition and fees), it was worth it, he said.

"This was an investment in my future."

Vanessa Gottlieb, on the other hand, started out with a high SAT score. Still, Mr. Fisher helped her raise it enough to gain early admission to Georgetown University.

"He's great at breaking down the fundamentals and brought my math to a whole new level," she said.

Ms. Gottlieb's mother, Shannon Such, said her daughter enjoyed the sessions. Possibly more impressive, she said, was how much Mr. Fisher seemed to care. "I got the feeling he really enjoyed his work and liked helping these kids," Ms. Such said.

Indeed, Mr. Fisher glows when he talks of the mental gymnastics he must perform, confessing that his favorite part of the job is when a student gets really stuck. It is then, he says, that he gets to exercise his creativity. How to get this technique through to this kid? How to break down a complicated concept so each part is small enough to digest? That's what excites him.

"You can't imagine how rewarding it is to see a kid finally get it," he said. "They get that giddy feeling. You can see it on their faces, and half the time they wind up walking out of my office so distracted they forget their coat."