

Low-income mothers lost tax refunds to tutoring companies using overseas instructors

Achievers Tutoring billed families thousands while paying Filipino instructors less than \$5 per hour

By: [Max Nesterak](#) - December 16, 2024 7:58 am



Success Tutoring founder Abdijalil Sheik-Yusuf testifies before the Minnesota Senate Taxes Committee on March 2, 2023. Photo by Andrew Olmscheid/Senate Media Services.

In March 2023, Abdijalil Sheik-Yusuf went before the Minnesota Senate Taxes Committee with a critical plea.

Not enough parents could take advantage of a state tax credit for low-income families for tutoring services from companies like his, Success Tutoring.

“What we have here is not an achievement gap, we have an opportunity gap. We have students who are not able to get the help that they need because the parents cannot afford it,” [Sheik-Yusuf said](#).

Sheik-Yusuf, wearing a plum-colored suit and Louis Vuitton scarf, said Success Tutoring had helped hundreds of students overcome the “literacy curve.” And they could help even more disadvantaged students if lawmakers would support a bill to raise the income ceiling and increase the amount of the credit.

“There’s a saying that we used to use in the classroom: Today’s reader is tomorrow’s leader. If we invest in education, it’s an investment in the child’s future,” Sheik-Yusuf said.

Sheik-Yusuf’s testimony was well received by both parties, who’ve long supported the K-12 Education Credit. The bill was folded into a larger tax package and passed with little attention. In fact, it was one of the few noncontroversial items of the 2023 session, when the Democratic trifecta passed a sweeping progressive agenda.

What lawmakers were unaware of at the time were the many disgruntled parents who say Success Tutoring and a related company called Achievers Tutoring outsource instruction to foreign teachers online whom their kids couldn’t understand.

Nor did lawmakers anticipate the outrage those parents would feel when they would later find thousands of dollars missing from their tax refunds to pay debts to Success Tutoring and Achievers Tutoring for services they say their kids barely used and didn’t benefit from.

The allegations surrounding the K-12 Education Credit come amid a larger crisis of fraud in state government, with hundreds of millions of dollars allegedly siphoned away from programs supposed to fund child nutrition, autism services, transportation and interpretation assistance.

The bill to increase spending on the tax credit was authored by Rep. Matt Norris, DFL-Blaine, who prior to his election to the Legislature, founded Minnesota Afterschool Advance to help more people use the credit. The organization, a collaboration between Venn Foundation and Youthprise, gives families zero-interest loans to pay for tutoring, music lessons or driver’s ed and collects the money from their tax refund. Norris helped grow the program to \$1.8 million in funding for educational programs in 2022, according to [his campaign website](#).

Norris had lobbied lawmakers for years to raise the income threshold and, after being elected in 2022, it was one of the first bills he authored. The bill ([HF915](#)) expanded the tax credit from \$1,000 to \$1,500 per child and more than doubled the income threshold to \$70,000, with higher earners eligible for a smaller credit. The bill also tied the income threshold to inflation, so it may increase every year.

After the law passed, state spending on the credit more than doubled, from \$5.3 million in 2022 to \$13.7 million in 2023.

Norris, who left Minnesota Afterschool Advance when he entered the Legislature, says he was unaware until recently of the mothers’ complaints — and debt.

Lul Mohamud’s story

Lul Mohamud learned about free tutoring help for her four children at the mosque she attended, Dar Al-Farooq, in Bloomington one day in summer 2022.

After prayer time, three men told the congregation that they could get their children back on track after the pandemic caused so many to fall behind in reading and math. The tutoring was completely free for low-income parents, she recalled them saying.

Mohamud said a mosque leader who previously ran the youth program encouraged families to sign up. So did members of a group that she respected called the Muslim Coalition.

“They were introduced at the mosque as good people so I trusted them,” Mohamud said in an interview in Somali through an interpreter. “(They) said if you don’t help your kids, your kids will fall behind.”

As she was leaving the mosque, the men were standing outside the exit signing people up, and she gave one of the men her phone number. The man called her later that day. She gave him her Social Security number, and he gave her an address in Bloomington.

Mohamud says she didn’t bring her kids to begin tutoring until some months later, as school was getting back into session. She went to the address of a nondescript, three-story office building. It wasn’t at all like she pictured. It was a small office space without any clues that children learned there — no chalkboard or textbooks.

A representative for Achievers Tutoring said she would need to buy \$50 laptops for each of her kids, ranging from kindergarten to eighth grade, to do the tutoring online. Mohamud didn’t have \$200 for four computers — the man only accepted cash — but she was able to get two. Her two other kids could use the laptops they had from school.

Mohamud said he directed them to go to another address in Bloomington the following week for online tutoring sessions.

But that turned out to be no more promising. Instead of teachers, there were half a dozen or so young men there, scrolling on TikTok. One directed her to set up the laptops for the kids to use and told her she could leave and come back later to pick them up.

“When I saw the place, I determined it wasn’t a place I could leave my children alone,” Mohamud said.

She stayed, and watched her kids log into a virtual class with an instructor whom she believes was in another country. Mohamud speaks Somali and only a little English, but her kids are native English speakers and said they couldn’t understand the teacher. After about 40 minutes, the lesson was over.

It seemed like a joke, but Mohamud said she tried bringing them back one more time. After that, she decided to pull her kids out. She went back the next week to return the laptops, both of which had already stopped working.

Months later came a horrible surprise — thousands of dollars were taken out of her tax refund to pay for the two subpar tutoring sessions. Her refund wasn’t enough to cover the entire expense, so she went into debt.

Mohamud had signed up with a company called Achievers Tutoring, a company created in 2021 by Osman Sheik-Yusuf, who shares a last name with Abdijalil Sheik-Yusuf, the Success Tutoring founder, according to records from the Minnesota Secretary of State. (The men did not answer a question from the *Reformer* on how they’re related).

Both companies were registered with the same business address in Bloomington. Both companies have nearly identical websites offering online courses in math, English, coding and public speaking. Both boast “975+ satisfied students, 150+ teachers and 27+ years in experience.” And both websites have identical testimonials from four satisfied individuals all named “Griffin Wooldridge” with different stock images.

When sent a list of questions by the *Reformer*, both companies sent nearly identical statements with the same lawyer copied on the email.

The statements say Osman Sheik-Yusuf and Abdijalil Sheik-Yusuf launched their respective companies to help students of color overcome the achievement gap.

“For those who have not received the credit, we encourage them to Adhere to the guidelines set by the Minnesota Department of Revenue and Minnesota Afterschool Advance,” the statement from Osman Sheik-Yusuf said.

Abdijalil Sheik-Yusuf, when asked again about the list of questions sent by the *Reformer*, wrote “We compliance (*sic*) with all guidelines.”

Mohamud says dozens of Somali mothers who signed up for tutoring services with the two companies have formed a WhatsApp group to try to help one another. Eighteen moms shared their stories with *Sahan Journal*, which first reported complaints about Success Tutoring.



Success Tutoring’s Abdijalil Sheik-Yusuf (left) and Achievers Tutoring’s Osman Sheik-Yusuf promise parents success in school and life for their children on social me

The companies promote their services on social media, mostly in Somali. In one TikTok video for Success Tutoring, Abdijalil Sheik-Yusuf sports a large gold watch and tells viewers from a black SUV that the only thing parents need to make their children successful is to sign up for Success Tutoring. In another video for Achievers Tutoring, Osman Sheik-Yusuf flashes the peace sign from a Tesla Cybertruck.

The two men also posted videos with grinning parents and children holding certificates, saying they’ve caught up to grade level in math and reading.

In a June 2023 letter, the Minnesota Department of Revenue told Mohamud she was being audited because of the \$3,000 she claimed for the K-12 Education Credit.

The agency requested a dizzying number of documents showing what programs her children were enrolled in, the dates her children met with a qualified instructor and the type of tutoring they received.

They wanted to see that she had paid for 25% of the tutoring services, as required by state law, and the contract she supposedly entered into with Minnesota Afterschool Advance. They also wanted her children's birth certificates and school records or medical bills showing she is their guardian.

Mohamud was overwhelmed. The letter was in English, not Somali. They were also asking for things she never had: She didn't sign a contract; she said she gave her information over the phone. She didn't have a receipt for what she paid; she was told it was free. She didn't have verification that the instructor was qualified; she didn't know the teacher's full name.

With her tax credit claim denied, in September, she received a letter from the Department of Revenue saying the entirety of her state tax refund — \$2,418.43 — was used to pay for her debt to Minnesota Afterschool Advance, which had advanced the money to Achievers Tutoring.

Like most low-income parents, Mohamud was counting on her tax refund — bolstered by the child tax credit — to pay for necessities and a trip to Texas with her family.

It didn't just happen once. The next year, in 2024, more of her tax refund disappeared.

The *Reformer* interviewed two other women who enrolled their kids in Success Tutoring and whose stories are strikingly similar to Mohamud's experience with Achievers Tutoring: They gave their Social Security numbers over the phone for supposedly free tutoring that would help their children recover from pandemic learning loss. Then, they got cheap laptops for the online sessions.

Raho Hussein said her 10th grader, a native English speaker, was put in a tutoring session where the instructor was teaching "ABCs" and "1-2-3's." Sometimes the instructor didn't show up at all. She had thousands of dollars taken from her tax return.

So did another mom, Sawda Ali, for her four kids. She said she only intended to sign up her two oldest children but she was also charged for tutoring for her 3-year-old and 4-year-old even though they are too young and never attended tutoring.

The women also said their kids, who are native English speakers, couldn't understand their instructors because of their heavy accents. They looked Asian, and the mothers believed they were in a foreign country.

Tutoring from the Philippines

Julieross Elveña, an Achievers Tutoring instructor based in the Philippines, said she was recruited through a Facebook page for Filipino freelancers about four years ago.

She spoke to a *Reformer* reporter who logged into her virtual classroom one evening this month through a publicly available link on the Achievers Tutoring website. The *Reformer* also entered two other virtual classrooms, both led by instructors based in the Philippines.

The instructors aren't licensed to teach in Minnesota, although at least two do have baccalaureate degrees according to their LinkedIn profiles.

Elveña spoke with clear English, which is one of the official languages of the Philippines, although the other two instructors the *Reformer* spoke to had thicker accents.

She said she has 17 students with Achievers, who are divided into two groups she meets with twice a week. She said she's mostly there to answer questions as the kids work through online modules in reading and math.

Elveña has been able to help students catch up to grade-level in reading and math, some more quickly than others, she said.

"I do love teaching," she said.

She said she gets paid \$4.50 per hour.

"It's not that much I guess compared to if I work in Minnesota," Elveña said, laughing.

Achievers Tutoring charges parents \$166 per month per child for two subjects, according to the company's website. Contracts posted to Success Tutoring's website start at \$150 per month, with a three-month minimum and no refunds.

Parents are also charged for tutoring regardless of whether children actually attend, according to contracts available on both companies' websites.

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Refunds denied

Mohamud and the other mothers have been trying for months to get their money back. She started with Osman Sheik-Yusuf, who she says told her he would get the necessary paperwork to the state authorities.

Had he done so, taxpayers would have underwritten the unsatisfactory tutoring services.

So long as parents submit paperwork showing the educational expenses qualified for the tax credit, the state pays for 75% of the cost. But if the expenses are not qualified, or paperwork is missing, the funds are paid back through the parents' tax refund.

Because the process is so complicated, Minnesota Afterschool Advance advertises free tax preparation help to families who take out loans for tutoring with them.

It's unclear how much Achievers and Success have received from state funds. The Minnesota Department of Education certifies tutoring companies for the tax credit program but doesn't track how much tutoring companies are paid. The Department of Revenue only provided the total amount claimed under the credit, but said they don't know how much was paid to individual tutors or lenders like Minnesota Afterschool Advance because it comes from individuals' tax returns, which are private.

Mohamud said Osman Sheik-Yusuf stopped returning her calls, so she went to another man she knew to complain. But he blocked her number.

She and other moms complained about the men on social media and warned others not to use their services. That seemed to motivate Osman Sheik-Yusuf to resolve their complaints: the Venn Foundation contacted her with a form that would give them business power of attorney to represent her before the Department of Revenue. But she

wasn't sure what the form meant and was by that point too distrustful to sign anything she didn't understand.

Mohamud says Osman Sheik-Yusuf also asked for a meeting with her and an imam at the Dar Al-Farooq mosque to mediate the dispute. But she says it ended with Sheik-Yusuf insulting her with a pejorative for a rural, uneducated person. Mohamud says she and her children no longer go to the Dar Al-Farooq mosque, having lost faith in its leaders.

A spokesperson for Dar Al-Farooq denied that an imam ever mediated a dispute at the mosque with a parent and Osman Sheik-Yusuf. Mohamud shared screenshots of text messages between her, Sheik-Yusuf and a religious leader connected to the mosque.

The spokesperson for Dar Al-Farooq also denied representatives from the companies ever addressed the congregation and said the mosque has "no formal or informal ties" with Osman and Abdijalil Sheik-Yusuf.

The Dar Al-Farooq spokesperson also sent a recent [article on Somali Media MN](#), however, promoting Success Tutoring, saying it would provide "valuable context for your story" including the "systemic challenges minority families face ... accessing the education tax credit."

While the mosque claims it has no ties with Osman Sheik-Yusuf and Abdijalil Sheik-Yusuf, the two appeared in a video promoting their services as recently as last month with a man who is the board secretary for Dar Al-Farooq, also known as the Al Jazari Institute, according to the organization's most recently available tax filing. The man is also a lead organizer for ISIAH's Muslim Coalition, the group that Mohamud trusted.

Asked about the video, the spokesperson for Dar Al-Farooq said the man was there in his "personal capacity."

Mohamud and other Somali mothers said they sent a letter to Attorney General Keith Ellison in April but have yet to hear back. The Attorney General's Office did not respond to requests for comment about whether they're investigating the mother's complaints.

This year, after Mohamud's tax return was garnished again, she and the other mothers became more assertive.

They went on a Somali-language YouTube channel to warn other families not to sign up for the services, after which she says she and the other women received threatening phone calls. They filed a police report in Minneapolis, but the case went nowhere. A spokesman for the police department said the case is inactive.

They went to the Department of Revenue and were advised to call a consumer complaint line. They had already done that, too.

Mohamud had met with Rep. Hodan Hassan, a Democrat from Minneapolis, who had helped her find the address for the Venn Foundation. So she and seven other moms went to the address, which turned out to be the home of Venn Foundation Director Jeff Ochs. (Hassan did not return calls or an email seeking comment.)

That was in the summer, and while he seemed helpful, the women still haven't been made whole.

"We have gone everywhere looking for assistance," Mohamud said.

In response to an interview request, Minnesota Afterschool Advance Director Erin Martin shared a joint statement with its parent organizations Youthprise and Venn Foundation saying they have a formal process for families with concerns.

"When there are breakdowns in the system that ultimately result in MAA families not receiving the (Minnesota Education Tax Credit) and instead repaying MAA from their normal tax refund, we understand and share their frustration," the statement said.

"MAA is actively working with a number of stakeholders, including Minnesota Department of Revenue and a local faith leader, to understand and help address the concerns of a group of families, as well as to work on improving the overall (Minnesota Education Tax Credit) and assignment system for all involved moving forward."

Mohamud said there have been three meetings with a different imam and representatives from Minnesota Afterschool Advance, but they've since broken down.

Martin testified before the Legislature in support of the bill expanding eligibility for the credit in March 2023, even holding up Abdijalil Sheik-Yusuf's Success Tutoring as an example of one of the many Black-owned organizations they partner with that provide "culturally relevant" services to low-income students in "new and creative ways."

Asked if Minnesota Afterschool Advance still works with Success Tutoring and Achievers Tutoring, a spokeswoman said the businesses "are not an offering on MAA's [menu](#) of available service providers."

A spokesperson for the Minnesota Department of Education would not say if the agency is investigating Success Tutoring and Achievers Tutoring, saying only the companies are no longer certified as eligible to be paid through the tax credit. Certification expires after two years, and there are only five providers currently certified, according to the Department of Education. That means many providers on MAA's menu are not certified.

Youthprise spokeswoman Lynne Matthews also said Minnesota Afterschool Advance will periodically visit tutoring sites in person. If their expectations are not being met those tutors could be removed from their services menu, she said.

Asked if the organization would make the mothers whole, Matthews wrote, "Despite having no responsibility or legal obligation to do so, MAA wants to do what it can to help ease the burden that families may be experiencing as a result of systems failure, in certain circumstances."

A spokesperson for the Department of Revenue did not say if the agency is investigating Success Tutoring and Achievers Achievers, saying the agency can't comment on specific cases. The spokesperson said they had met with "multiple taxpayers" with concerns about the tax credit.

"We are working with all parties involved to ensure specifics of the program are being properly communicated," spokesman Ryan Brown wrote in an email.

Tutoring companies continue expansions

The tax credit remains popular with key legislators, including Republicans. Rep. Kristin Robbins, R-Maple Grove, was one of the architects of the credit when it was created in 1997 as the head of a group called Minnesotans for School Choice. Robbins and Norris, who expanded the credit's use as the head of Minnesota Afterschool Advance, defended its value despite allegations of misuse.

"Regardless of the issue with Success Tutoring, this is a tax credit that serves tens of thousands of families across the state," Norris said. "And the income limit and the credit limit hadn't been updated in over 25 years."

Norris said he didn't have enough information to say what the state should do to ensure low-income families aren't losing their tax refunds to pay for substandard tutoring, but said it is something that should be looked at.

Robbins called the women’s experience “terrible” and was surprised to learn that it was possible for non-government organizations like Minnesota Afterschool Advance to be repaid from parents’ tax refunds and other credits — like the child tax credit and earned income tax credit — if the Education Tax Credit wasn’t awarded by the Department of Revenue.

She said that wasn’t the case when she advocated for its creation in the 1990s and she said she’s troubled by the existence of middlemen like Minnesota Afterschool Advance who have a claim to parents’ entire returns.

“If there’s a loophole that says they can claw back from other parts of the tax return, that should not be,” Robbins said. “If the tutoring service doesn’t provide the service and the family wants to withhold the payment, then that’s something the family and the tutoring service have to work out.”

Meanwhile, Mohamud and the other mothers say they continue to receive threatening phone calls and text messages from anonymous numbers for speaking out about their experiences.

And Achievers Tutoring and Success Tutoring continue to recruit families to their services.

Achievers Tutoring recently posted a video on TikTok and Facebook, which was shared by Success Tutoring, with Osman and Abdijalil Sheik-Yusuf meeting with an imam at the mosque and lead organizer with ISAIAH’s Muslim Coalition.

They were in Columbus, Ohio, promoting their tutoring services to families there. Ohio’s program that funds tutoring services is easier to navigate, according [to the article](#) shared by Dar Al-Farooq in its email to the *Reformer*.

The men asked viewers to come to the Minnesota Capitol in January for Youth Day to advocate for making tutoring funding easier to access.

“We need to make the funding accessible. We need to make the funding something that is practically usable,” Abdijalil Sheik-Yusuf said.

Reporting and interpreting contributed by Kayseh Magan.

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