

Education Insights,
Real-World Impact

Overcoming Pandemic Learning Loss



THE CHALLENGE

The worldwide COVID pandemic created not only a once-a-century public health crisis, but also a once-a-century education crisis. This has set students back dramatically—particularly Black and Hispanic students and those from low-income families.¹ This isn't just bad for the students themselves, but—given the growing importance of education for economic success—for efforts to reduce inequality and promote economic growth. The country desperately needs some way to greatly accelerate learning to overcome pandemic learning loss.

The good news is that we've known how to accelerate learning since at least the 15th century, starting at Oxford University: tutoring. Tutoring solves the two biggest challenges teachers face with regular classroom instruction: individualizing instruction for students who vary widely in their academic level and needs; and (perhaps relatedly), classroom management. Data generated by our University of Chicago Education Lab research team, in collaboration with Chicago Public Schools and Saga Education, shows tutoring can double or triple how much students learn in a year. No wonder U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona encouraged all districts to prioritize their federal pandemic relief funds for high-dosage tutoring.



We need to accelerate learning for the millions of students who have fallen behind during the pandemic. I care deeply about addressing this urgent recovery challenge and helping America's students realize their true potential. I am thankful so many people are committed to this undertaking, which is important for the future of our country.

Ken Griffin, Founder and CEO, Citadel

Unfortunately, districts around the country have struggled to act on Secretary Cardona’s recommendation. Cost is one barrier. Even with federal relief funds, districts can’t afford to help every child who needs support. And even when funding is available, labor shortages make it hard to recruit enough tutors.

We need a crash R&D program to develop and test new versions of tutoring that are, hopefully, more scalable. Without that an entire generation of students—tens of millions of children around the country—will live with the academic and economic scars of the pandemic. The R&D problem to be solved is not pedagogical so much as one of economics: How do we scale the benefits of tutoring to every child who would benefit? How do we deliver Oxford-quality tutoring at massive scale at public school prices?

THE PLAN

The University of Chicago Education Lab is collaborating with MDRC, school districts, and departments of education in states all around the country to solve the challenge of how to scale high-dosage tutoring. Our goal is to overcome pandemic-induced learning loss and undo the wide disparities that predated (and were exacerbated by) the pandemic. We are focusing on important educational outcomes such as *third grade literacy* (the data show that students who can’t read at grade level by third grade are **four times as likely** to drop out) and *middle school/high school math* (ninth graders who haven’t passed algebra I are **five times more likely** to drop out).²

Over the next several years, through our Personalized Learning Initiative, we seek to:

- **Serve** 30,000 high-need students with different innovative (and hopefully more scalable) forms of tutoring in collaboration with sites across the country, including Chicago, New Mexico, and Fulton County, Georgia
- **Continual improvement** by measuring impacts on student learning and sharing results back to sites to make real-time adjustments in program design and implementation
- **Scale** the most promising of these new tutoring models nationwide in collaboration with America Achieves, one of the nation’s leading incubators of educational innovations, and Accelerate, a national initiative to embed high-dosage tutoring in public schools



High-dosage tutoring is providing our children the support they need to recover from the learning challenges of the pandemic and reach their full academic potential. We’re proud to be an anchor partner in this project so that we can reach students across Chicago and learn how we can best tailor our supports.

Pedro Martinez, CEO of Chicago Public Schools

We have generous support from Arnold Ventures and Citadel through the 2023-24 academic year. But test score data nationwide make clear the U.S. is far from overcoming pandemic learning loss. We seek additional support to extend this work into future years, serve more students, and help districts nationwide overcome this generational challenge.

LEARN MORE

To learn more about how to support this work, contact Sadie Stockdale Jefferson, PhD (ssjefferson@uchicago.edu).

ENDNOTES

1. Thomas Kane, The Atlantic. “Kids are far, far behind in school.” May 22, 2022.
2. Eighty percent of students who do not pass algebra do not go on to graduate high school compared to only 15% of students who do pass algebra. See *Solving Our Algebra Problem: Getting All Students through Algebra I to Improve Graduation Rates*, Schachter (2013). Sixteen percent of students who are not at grade level reading proficiency in 3rd grade do not go on to graduate high school compared to only 4% of students who are proficient. See “Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation,” Hernandez (2011).