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BUILDING KNOWLEDGE
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

Education Insights,
Real-World Impact

Overcoming Pandemic Learning Loss

THE CHALLENGE

The once-a-century public health crisis created a once-a-century public education crisis. Thanks to the federal government's "Operation Warp Speed," the public health crisis is now mostly behind us. The same cannot be said for our public education emergency, which, despite $190 billion in federal aid to schools, has been slower to resolve—especially for the most disadvantaged children.

WHY HAVE WE NOT MADE MORE PROGRESS IN OVERCOMING PANDEMIC-INDUCED LEARNING LOSS?

Part of the issue is that the federal funding to schools was probably not enough to start with, even had those dollars been deployed optimally (equal to about a 6% increase in annual K-12 spending in the US). But it's also the case that school districts have struggled to scale one of the only interventions capable of accelerating student learning enough to remedy pandemic learning losses: high dosage tutoring.

EVIDENCE ON HIGH DOSAGE TUTORING

A pre-pandemic study by our University of Chicago-based research team, in partnership with Chicago Public Schools and non-profit Saga Education, delivered tutoring to thousands of economically disadvantaged, predominantly Black and Brown students on Chicago's South and West Sides. To make sure students participated, high dosage tutoring was embedded into the school day for the entire school year.

> "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

Tutoring involved small student-tutor ratios (2:1) and the use of trained recent college graduates or mid-career switchers who are willing to work at a public-service stipend to help hold costs down to make such an intensive intervention cost-feasible. The data show this type of tutoring can *double or even triple* what students learn in a year.[1]

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It was no surprise then that US Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona called on school districts to prioritize their federal pandemic relief funds for high dosage tutoring. Unfortunately, districts around the country have struggled to act on Secretary Cardona's recommendation.

SCALING CHALLENGE

Whether this type of tutoring can be scaled in the aftermath of the pandemic is an open question. Many schools have struggled to deal with the logistics of re-opening, including declining enrollment, chronic absenteeism, and worsening mental health crises among young people. Exacerbating matters is the labor shortage felt by industries across the economy, including schools. Education agencies attempted to scale up tutoring in this environment more quickly and at a larger scale than had previously been attempted. A different scaling problem is that these agencies were adapting tutoring program parameters to try to fit their local context without any guidance about which program design features are essential (versus unnecessary) to promote student learning.

THE SOLUTION

We need a crash R&D program to figure out how to scale tutoring to help as many children as possible. In partnership with MDRC, the Education Lab launched the Personalized Learning Initiative to do just that. What is the best type of tutoring to help each student learn as much as possible at the lowest possible cost? To answer that question, we will:

- **Partner** with school districts around the country to serve thousands of low-income children with different 'flavors' of tutoring that seek to solve the scale problem in different ways (virtual rather than in-person tutoring; strategic use of AI as a complement to tutors, etc.)
- **Measure** the impacts on student learning of these different flavors of tutoring for different students and different contexts
- **Create** a 'blueprint' for districts about how to most effectively scale tutoring

WHY WE NEED TO ACT NOW

At the time of the pandemic, 50 million American children were of school age. The vast majority of them were negatively affected by the pandemic, losing half a year of schooling on average—even more for the most disadvantaged children.

> "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

That creates an enormous risk that an entire generation will miss key developmental milestones. The data show that children who can't read by the end of 3rd grade are four times as likely to drop out of high school; children who haven't passed algebra by the end of 9th grade are five times as likely to drop out. This is not just a schooling problem; given the well-documented relationship between education and almost every other major life outcome, failing to remediate pandemic learning loss will mean widening inequality in income, wealth, health, home ownership, criminal justice involvement, and retirement security, as well as depressed economic growth for the nation as a whole. Pandemic learning loss is the most important problem no one is talking about.

LEARN MORE

To learn more about the Personalized Learning Initiative, contact Education Lab Executive Director **Sadie Stockdale Jefferson, PhD** (ssjefferson@uchicago.edu).

ENDNOTES

1. Guryan, Jonathan, Jens Ludwig, Monica P. Bhatt, Philip J. Cook, Jonathan M. V. Davis, Kenneth Dodge, George Farkas, Roland G. Fryer Jr., Susan Mayer, Harold Pollack, Laurence Steinberg, and Greg Stoddard. 2023. "Not Too Late: Improving Academic Outcomes among Adolescents." *American Economic Review*, 113 (3): 738-65.