A Moonshot to Overcome Pandemic Learning Loss

Bringing High-Dosage Tutoring to Students Nationwide Through the Personalized Learning Initiative (PLI)
As students continue to struggle with pandemic-era learning loss, this project represents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to scale what we know works to support student learning in an equitable way.

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The worldwide COVID pandemic created not only a once-a-century public health crisis, but also a once-a-century education crisis. The closing of schools and shift to remote learning cost the average student at least half a school year’s worth of learning, and also widened existing disparities: Black and Hispanic students and those from low-income families fell even further behind.¹

This is not just a temporary, one-time setback. Students who are far behind grade level will struggle to keep up with and benefit from regular grade-level classroom instruction. Failure to quickly and effectively mitigate pandemic-induced learning loss has the potential to harm learning for the rest of a student’s school career and affect long-term educational attainment and economic mobility. The data show that students who can’t read at grade level by third grade are four times as likely to not graduate high school, while ninth graders who have not yet passed algebra I are five times less likely to graduate.² Learning loss puts students more at risk of missing critical stepping stones to a high school diploma.

We’ve known how to accelerate student learning since at least the 15th century at Oxford University: tutoring. The individualized attention that tutoring makes possible ensures that everyone is being taught material that they can engage with and is exactly at the right level for them. Research by the University of Chicago Education Lab in partnership with Chicago Public Schools and Saga Education shows this approach can double or even triple the rate of student learning. Based on the strength of the evidence and the size of these impacts, U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona encouraged districts around the country to prioritize federal pandemic relief funds for high-dosage tutoring to remediate pandemic-related learning loss.

The challenge before us, then, is not so much a pedagogical one as it is one of economics or scale. High-quality, high-dosage tutoring can cost $2,000 to $4,000 per student per year. While the lifelong benefits to students easily justify those costs, in practice most public-school systems cannot afford to deliver that type of tutoring to all the students who would benefit - even with a massive one-time infusion of federal pandemic relief. Achieving Secretary Cardona’s goal of overcoming pandemic learning loss, and remediating pre-pandemic disparities, will require figuring out how to deliver Oxford-quality tutoring at public school prices. And that, in turn, will require an ambitious R&D initiative to scale up this promising strategy.

The Plan

The University of Chicago is partnering with MDRC and other researchers from leading institutions to launch the Personalized Learning Initiative, a nationwide R&D initiative to scale the benefits of tutoring. From now through the 2024-25 academic year, we seek to:

- **Serve** up to 30,000 high-needs students with different forms of tutoring in partnership with districts around the US including Chicago, New Mexico, and Fulton County
- **Implement** and trouble-shoot the design of tutoring in the challenging current environment
- **Measure** impacts on student learning through a rigorous multi-year randomized controlled trial, and share results back to districts to help them make real time improvements
- **Scale** these new tutoring models nationwide with the assistance of key partners

Learn More

We are undertaking this initiative in partnership with the newly formed non-profit Accelerate. To learn more about how to support this work, please contact Sadie Stockdale Jefferson, Executive Director of the Education Lab at ssjefferson@uchicago.edu.

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² 80% 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). 16% 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)).