

A Moonshot to Overcome Pandemic Learning Loss

Bringing High-Dosage Tutoring to Students Nationwide through the Personalized Learning Initiative



The Challenge

The COVID pandemic has 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 has widened disparities in learning. While we are still striving to understand the full impact of the pandemic, recent analysis suggests that students at high-poverty schools that stayed remote lost the equivalent of five months – half a school year – of learning, with Black and Hispanic students falling even further behind.¹

This is not a temporary, one-time setback — students this behind can no longer keep up with grade-level classroom instruction, meaning that they will continue to fall further and further behind over time. We are at risk of failing, and losing the long-term potential of, a massive share of this current generation of young people.

There is at least one solution to this challenge that has been known and used 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 in the modern-day context can double or even triple the rate of student learning. Given this promising evidence, U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona recently called on school districts across America to provide high-dosage tutoring to every student in need of support.

However, tutoring at scale is expensive. High-quality, high-dosage tutoring can cost \$2,000 to \$4,000 per student per year. This is unfortunately a price many public school systems (especially those in big cities) simply cannot afford at the scale necessary to overcome pandemic-related learning loss – much less at the scale needed to overcome pre-pandemic disparities. Achieving Secretary Cardona's goal will require an ambitious R&D initiative to figure out how to increase the scalability of this promising strategy.

The Opportunity

One important opportunity to scale the benefits tutoring provides comes from the fact that there are now new ways to provide the sort of personalized instruction and feedback that comes from tutoring, namely through technology. For at least some students, 'ed tech' platforms can substitute for at least part of the time they would have otherwise spent in (more expensive) person-to-person tutoring, but at much lower cost in a very scalable way (since software runs perfectly over and over again). When the University of Chicago Education Lab partnered with Chicago Public Schools and Saga Education on a modified tutoring program, which now had students spend only every other day in person with a tutor, but with the off days now spent on a high-quality ed tech platform, the result was to cut costs relative to regular tutoring by one-third but without compromising at all the substantial learning gains that result.

How far can we go in incorporating technology (even more) in tutoring programs without compromising effectiveness for student learning? No one yet knows the answer to that question, nor exactly how to do that. It's also possible that the answer varies across students, so that the optimal mix of in-person tutoring time vs. time on ed tech platforms would need to be targeted differently for different students with different learning needs and styles. Without answers to these questions, it will be difficult to effectively scale tutoring to benefit the massive number of students who need it.



“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.”

Monica Bhatt, PhD, Senior Research Director,
University of Chicago Education Lab

The Plan

The University of Chicago is partnering with MDRC, a leading research non-profit, as well as expert education researchers at Northwestern University, Stanford University and the University of Toronto, 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:

- Partner with the Chicago Public Schools, New Mexico, Fulton County and several other districts around the country to help serve up to 30,000 high-needs students
- Provide policy design advice and technical assistance for the successful implementation of different forms of tutoring for students
- Rigorously measure impacts on student learning through a multi-year randomized controlled trial of the sort that provides gold-standard evidence in medicine, and feed results back to districts to help them make course corrections
- Disseminate and scale these new tutoring models nationwide with the assistance of America Achieves, one of the nation's leading education-innovation incubators, Accelerate, a new non-profit set up to scale tutoring nationwide, and the National Student Success Accelerator at Brown University

Together, we will determine how to deliver one of the most promising learning interventions — at scale — to a student population in urgent need of support. If we get this right, not only can we reverse the impacts the pandemic has had on learning, we can also address longstanding disparities in public education nationwide.

This work is generously supported by America Achieves, Arnold Ventures, Citadel Founder and CEO Ken Griffin, AbbVie, Crown Family Philanthropies, and Vivo Foundation. We are undertaking this initiative in partnership with the newly formed non-profit Accelerate.

Get Involved

For more information on this Personalized Learning Initiative and how you can get involved, please reach out to Sadie Stockdale Jefferson (ssjefferson@uchicago.edu) or Jens Ludwig (jludwig@uchicago.edu).

“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

