Using Online Tutoring to Address COVID-19 Learning Loss and Create Jobs

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Summary

The next administration should create a plan for a public, online platform to connect teachers with college students and recent graduates to serve as tutors for K-12 students. One-on-one tutoring is a proven intervention that improves children's educational competencies and increases students' self-confidence. Along with supporting students, this platform could provide needed employment for young adults and enable teachers and students together to produce improved educational outcomes.   The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the closure of more than 124,000 schools with the majority of students now learning online. Meanwhile, millions of college students have lost part-time work or are graduating into a historically difficult job market that does not have positions for them to fill. Just as the New Deal created work programs that both created employment and improved our national landscape, our country requires creative solutions that can meet the urgent needs of our time, can be quickly scaled up using modern technology and can adjust to the changing needs dictated by the cycles of the coronavirus.

Challenge and Opportunity

This proposal would seek to address four pressing challenges facing the United States, all that have been worsened due to COVID-19:

1. Less than 40% of eighth-graders in the U.S. are proficient in math and reading.[1] Now, millions of children are forced to take classes online, leaving them at risk of even falling further behind.

2. While there is traditionally a "summer slide" in terms of student retention of knowledge, the COVID slide will be far worse, with early indications[2] suggesting "students will return in fall 2020 with roughly 70% of the learning gains in reading relative to a typical school year. However, in mathematics, students are likely to show much smaller learning gains, returning with less than 50% of the learning gains and in some grades, nearly a full year behind what we would observe in normal conditions."

3. During the 2015-16 school year, over 30% of college students in the U.S. lived in poverty.[3] Now, millions of recent college graduates and college students are facing unemployment or underemployment, both in terms of seeking full-time jobs and losing part-time jobs on campus or in the service economy.

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[1] The Nation's Report Card (2019) How Did U.S. Students Perform on the Most Recent Assessments? https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/.

[2] Dr. Megan Kuhfeld and Dr. Beth Tarasawa (April 2020). The COVID-19 slide: What summer learning loss can tell us about the potential impact of school closures on student academic achievement." NWEA Research. https://www.nwea.org/content/uploads/2020/05/Collaborative-Brief_Covid19-Slide-APR20.pdf

[3] Richard Fry and Anthony Cilluffo (May 2019). A Rising Share of Undergraduates are From Poor Families, Especially at Less Selective Colleges. Pew Research. https://pewrsr.ch/2w3n87j.

4. The U.S. is facing a teacher shortage and high teacher turnover rates, negatively impacting student success. One of the most cited reasons for leaving teaching is lacking support. Now, teachers are trying to quickly readjust learning methods and are struggling to find support.

Plan of Action

Goals
1. Use a proven method of educational intervention (one-on-one tutoring) to improve educational outcomes for millions of K-12 students.
2. Provide flexible employment to college students and recent graduates in need of supplemental income or loan forgiveness.
3. Support teachers who are struggling to meet the individualized needs of all students, particularly those falling further behind in an on-line classroom environment.

The Solution

These problems can be addressed by creating a public online platform by which teachers can request college student tutors for their K-12 students. This public effort would focus on

- Providing assistance to the students with the greatest needs
- Providing employment to qualified persons who, because of the state of the economy, will have difficulty in finding employment
- Supporting teachers' efforts by providing individualized attention to struggling students.

The Platform

This policy proposal would rely on the Administration to launch an online platform, similar to tutoring platforms already created for students whose parents can afford the service such as Skooli, Wyzant or Varsity Tutors. There are also models on the state level, such as the Tennessee Tutoring Corps, and others focused on specific at-risk population groups, such as Reconstruction.[4] This program would use a similar technology platform but would be a national program with a greater focus on assisting teachers and helping students, regardless of a family's ability to pay.

The platform would facilitate the following process:
1. Tutor Hiring: College students or recent graduates apply through an online portal to be tutors. Selected tutors will undergo a communications and soft skills assessment, as well as a proficiency exam in subjects they wish to tutor. Tutors could be compensated with

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[4] See https://reconstruction.us/ and https://tntutoringcorps.org/.

an hourly wage. The program could also include payment terms that enable education loan forgiveness.

2. <u>Request for Service:</u> Teachers make tutoring requests on behalf of their students. They then provide digital materials that they would like the student to work on with a tutor.

3. <u>Registration:</u> The student registers on the platform and provides relevant information a tutor would need to assist the student.

4. <u>The Match:</u> The student is matched with a tutor based on a number of factors, including ratings (see #7), time availability and languages spoken. Once the match is made, a time is set up for the session. If the initial session is successful, recurring sessions can be scheduled.

5. <u>The Tutoring Session:</u> The digital content, provided by the teacher, appears on the screen of the student and the tutor and they begin a conversation using textual, video and audio tools. The session will be recorded and remain in the students' portal for the student and the teacher to review if needed.

6. <u>Payment:</u> The session time is automatically recorded, clocking the tutor's hours worked.

7. <u>Ratings:</u> Tutors are rated (and reviewed) immediately after the session by students. Tutors could also receive ratings (and reviews) from teachers who see changes in understanding by students. These rankings and reviews will be considered when matching students to tutors.

<u>Institutional Setting and Program Funding</u>
This program could be located under or collaborate with any of these agencies: Corporation for National and Community Service (AmeriCorps), Department of Education, or Department of Labor.

Once the platform is built, funding could be distributed to school districts using pre-existing formulas to provide funds to where the need is greatest, such as using prioritizing schools with at least 70% of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch. The school district could then give teachers a budget for the teachers to use for the students they believe would benefit most from the program.

Conclusion

This platform would create benefits throughout the educational ecosystem:

- <u>For K-12 students</u>: easy access to assistance to improve understanding of subject matter.
- <u>For college students and recent graduates</u>: easy access to part-time and flexible work to supplement incomes or provide loan forgiveness.

- <u>For teachers</u>: accessible support to provide assistance to struggling students.
- <u>For parents</u>: assistance support their children's educational success.
- <u>For providers of educational content</u>: The program can generate data about what materials are difficult to understand for intended audiences and what are paths for improving outcomes.

Our youth need support with essential and basic skills, our young adults need job opportunities and our teachers need additional resources. We should take advantage of this moment to create a program that addresses these needs quickly, sustainably and equitably.

About the Authors

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Blair Levin has worked for the past 25 years at a high-level at the intersection of broadband policy and capital markets. From 1993-1997 Levin served as Chief of Staff to FCC Chairman Reed Hundt. In 2009 he co-led the technology transition team for President-elect Obama and returned to government service from 2009-2010, to oversee the development of the National Broadband Plan for the United States. He is currently an equity analyst at New Street Research and a non-resident Senior Fellow of the Metropolitan Policy Project of the Brookings Institution.

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