



Policy Document

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## INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC POLICY INSIGHTS

MANAGING STUDENTS' LEARNING LOSS POST-  
COVID-19

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Post-COVID-19, reports expressed a worry about the worldwide trend of learning loss due to school closures and the subsequent disruption. Despite the fact that learning loss is a worldwide problem, the context and characteristics of student accomplishment vary greatly among countries due to differences in social, economic, and political situations. Because we know that school disruption inevitably affects low-achieving children in the UAE, we predict a major fall in performance in the UAE. It is thus necessary to implement policy alternatives on a wide scale. These rules cannot be implemented by small groups. It should begin by creating a task group to create and monitor the quality of services offered under these policies.



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## Background

Reports of learning conditions post-COVID-19 indicated a concern about the global trend of learning loss resulting from school closure and the consequential disruption. Schools worldwide went through a lockdown and lost on average 79 instructional days (about 40%) in 2020. They varied extensively in the effectiveness of implementing improvised distance learning programs. In all cases, students lost the opportunity to learn through in-person interaction, which was the conventional mode of all learning processes for decades. Consequently, learning loss could not be prevented in the best cases because of the disruption of the traditional learning system (UNESCO, UNICEF, The World Bank, and OECD, 2021).

In the last decades, education research investigated the phenomenon of students' learning regression and losing some of what they learned, especially in math and literacy. Educators noticed this trend at the beginning of the academic year when students come back from summer vacations, and that is why they call this phenomenon "summer learning loss" (Alexander, Boulay, and Pitcock, 2016; Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsay & Greathouse, 1996). They found that students' achievement declines or slows down after coming back from the summer break, and it is more prevalent in earlier grades and in reading and math (Quinn & Polikoff, 2017; Kuhfeld, 2019).

When students were notified to stay at home and learn through distance education, educators speculated that they would experience "learning loss... an absolute reduction in learning levels and less progress than what would be expected in a typical year" (UNESCO et al., 2021, p.15). Since the pandemic and the consequential educational disruption, researchers have been drawing future scenarios using the evidence in the literature of summer learning loss (Kuhfeld, Soland, Tarasawa, Johnson, Ruzek & Liu, 2020). Early cross-national studies corresponded to educators' and researchers' speculations. For example, in a survey administered in 8 countries, teachers reported a drop in test scores (Chen, Dorn, Sarakatsannis & Wiesinger, 2021). The OECD recent report also showed a lag in achievement across countries and highlighted the exacerbation of lag among students from low socioeconomic status (OECD, 2021).



The achievement gap was always a concern where researchers and policy-makers have tried various ways to minimize it. However, it got wider after the pandemic, where low achievers fell far behind. This achievement gap was further exacerbated by the increased vulnerability of the academically disadvantaged students to drop out of school. If not addressed early, would place economic and social consequences not only on an individual level but also on a local and national scale.

A critical issue for policy-makers is achievement lag because its accumulation leads to educational, social, and economic consequences. The government will need to spend more on disadvantaged schools by providing more experienced staff and enriching resources. Socially, the achievement gap may push low-achieving students to drop out of school and be more vulnerable to commit crimes (Rumberger and Losen, 2016). Economically, learning loss could lead students to earn lower wages in the future as studies showed that income is associated with schooling years and the attained skills and competencies. Moreover, the lag in future-labor skills risks the growth of countries' GDP as the economy has evolved to be knowledge-based and dependent on highly skilled human capital (Hanushek and Woessmann, 2020).

The main objective of this policy brief is to highlight the interventions and mechanisms that may contribute to limiting learning loss and accelerating learning in the UAE. The ideal situation is to have public open student performance data to assess the local needs. Yet, the exceptionality of the post-COVID-19 challenges means that most education system still do not have sufficient data, and only some of them has initiated steps towards measuring the learning loss (UNESCO et al., 2021). However, cross-national studies indicated that the trend of learning loss is global (Chen et al., 2021; OECD, 2021). Another significant finding in the reports is that most low-achieving students struggle with learning loss. According to international assessment data, a substantial percentage of students in the UAE are considered low achievers (scoring below OECD average in all domains in PISA2018). Therefore, we expect that the problem of learning loss should be systematically addressed within the national education system.

## Policy Issues

### Underlying Factors

#### Governance

Handling the problem of the learning loss and the exacerbating achievement gap is primarily the responsibility of the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the local education councils and departments. The complication in this challenge is no different from other educational issues- it has many interdependent factors. For example, MOE has to ensure that the curriculum is updated, teachers are trained, schools are equipped, parents are involved, etc. Each of these domains has its unit and team in the Ministry and the local authorities (such as councils or local education department). Therefore, all those teams should be brought on board to synergize the efforts in the “collaborative stakeholder engagement” framework. Such a framework operates by forming organizational partnerships between entities and individuals whose actions are aligned to meet a shared goal. This mechanism allows organizations to optimize the use of resources maintained by each partner (Desai, 2018).

In the context of the UAE, a fundamental entity that should be actively collaborating with MOE efforts is the Ministry of Community Development and the corresponding local councils with similar responsibilities. Their role will provide information about the community needs based on their knowledge of the demographic structure, social legislation, the vulnerable population, and the social activity trends.

Partnerships should also engage the Federal Authority of Human Resources stood out during the pandemic to contribute to the development of policies that support working parents. The expertise they have developed would be invaluable for the MOE efforts where they do not have to reinvent the wheel in developing social policies for the working parent’s population. In addition, the team will need collaboration from the Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Authority to provide them with the demographic data that will help them develop the required policies. There is no doubt that the MOE has its own data; however, the Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Authority may provide data and insights of children and other groups of the population who are not registered in the MOE datasets.

The UAE has various councils and organizations that work as think tanks and advocates for developing social policies. The knowledge and expertise that these organizations have developed would significantly contribute to the quality of the policies. Examples of them are The Supreme Council for Motherhood and Childhood, Abu Dhabi Early Childhood Authority, Salama Bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation (Abu Dhabi), Dubai Women Establishment, Dubai Foundation For Women & Children, The Supreme Council of Family Affairs (Sharjah), Knowledge Without Borders (Sharjah), Children's Center (Sharjah) and many others.

### **Financing**

After the pandemic, the struggle with budgets was a global phenomenon that affected every entity (public or private) in all domains. The challenge encountered by education administrators is that they need a considerable budget to maintain the requirements of school reopening. Most of it will be spent on partnering with the health practitioners, restructuring the school facility to meet the precaution measures, and purchasing protective equipment (Will, 2020). At the same time, we ask to make resources more accessible to students, provide tutoring, and manage the extra costs of school reopening.

A substantial part of the budget would go to human capital, such as benefiting from the expertise of subject experts such as curriculum developers, highly experienced teachers and professionals. Most likely, the government would need to hire new staff as it is highly unlikely that current staff will be willing to work for extra hours while offering extra pay. They are already under high pressure trying to remediate students' achievement and maintain health precautions and procedures.

Another area of primary consideration is the budget of setting the facilities where the suggested policies will take place. Learning loss hits students on a large scale, and therefore, there will be a substantial number of students needing to use the facilities (which would be schooling in most cases) because they maintain the optimum educational environment. Even if we considered implementing the policies in facilities like libraries and sports clubs, they are not designed for high dosage learning nor do they have enough space for the targeted population.

Some researchers suggested that learning loss policies (such as tutoring) should be funded by philanthropic and social service organizations similar to AmeriCorp, Saga Education and Reading Corps (all in the U.S.) (Nickow, Oreopoulos & Quan, 2020). Such organizations probably have plans and designated funds for such missions as National Fund, Dubai Cares, Takatuf, and Teach For UAE. However, the need for policies is larger than the funding capacity of these organizations. In such a crisis mode, supplying it with governmental funds is essential.

Moreover, a critical issue in the context of the UAE is to consider that most of its students attend private schools, which are in most cases not funded by the government. To ensure the equity of learning opportunity, financing the suggested policy in this brief should consider the financial challenges experienced by private education, which is most probably influenced by the market crash and the dropping out of students whose families cannot afford tuition anymore. Many schools would end up with controlling their spending by downsizing their staff and cutting down their resources. Therefore, to keep these schools running and prevent the interruption of their students' learning, they might need to receive some government stimulus.

## **Delivery**

In such critical and uncertain times, addressing the risk of learning loss requires a thorough consideration of the urgency of the interventions to be implemented. Undoubtedly, students' and school staff's safety comes first, and it has a higher priority than advancing achievement. Then comes the need to prepare the education administration system and its leaders (in all levels, from the Minister to the unit heads) to understand that the rapid change in policies and procedures is the constant in this crisis. Therefore, they need to be familiar with the mechanism of change management in the educational context. Indeed, the current conditions require us to set policies, train and educate the staff about them and implement them simultaneously.

Interestingly, the UAE government has issued as many policies as it would in years during this period. This indicates that the government can accelerate the policy development process and implement it promptly. Moreover, the efforts taking place in the National Crisis and Emergency Management Authority showed that the interdisciplinary collaboration

among the different ministries and departments is well established. Such an environment increases the odds of developing appropriate policies and implementing them effectively.

## Policy Options & Recommendations

Although the learning loss phenomenon is global, the context and dimensions of student achievement in every country vary widely based on social, economic, and political conditions. In the UAE, we expect the achievement decline to be significant as we know that education disruption hardly hits low-achieving students, who make up a considerable percentage of UAE students. Therefore, policy options would need to be delivered on a large scale. Implementing these policies can't be achieved by small teams. Still, instead, it should start with constructing a task force that designs and oversees students' accessibility to quality services provided by these policies.

Students' low achievement is a concern that has its roots deep in the history of every education system. What we are trying to address here is how to curb its exacerbation. Therefore, the policy options that we recommend are central to the learning process and focus primarily on instruction. The current problem requires "restructuring curriculum and instruction" to adjust to the post-pandemic needs. Moreover, to mitigate the learning loss due to lack of in-person education, students need "tutoring" to receive high dosage instruction and increasing instructional time to make up for the instruction days they lost.

### Restructuring curriculum and instruction

We need to consider the perspective that the pandemic changed education forever. We see learning and teaching now from a different angle. New opportunities have emerged, such as parents' readiness to rely on distance learning and increased involvement in their children's education. On the other hand, challenges and dysfunctions revealed areas we did not pay attention to or could not resolve, such as our systems' inadequacy for digital learning.

Before we think of adjusting curriculum and instruction, we need to reflect on how the pandemic prompted all stakeholders to question the meaning of schooling. Students

would question if they have to make daily trips to schools, teachers would wonder whether they should be the primary channel of education, and policy-makers would ask if this is the new norm. Therefore, the first step required in this transformation is for a nation to revise its vision of education and evaluate its alignment to the local values and aspirations. For example, some agendas consider that schooling is where students learn responsible citizenship. In contrast, others are inclined towards perceiving schools as a place that prepares students for the labor market (Labaree, 1997). Countries vary widely in their disposition within these two scales, and their stand is strongly tailored to a nation's history, politics, economy, and culture. The pandemic has shaken our perspectives on many levels and dimensions, and therefore, a country's leadership needs to ensure that the current educational processes are aligned with the transformed views.

Although the pandemic was unfortunate, it provided an opportunity to introduce a long wait for change-- the diversification capacity and differential learning standards and curricula. While most curricula stand on standards and learning objectives, some are constrained and designed to have little room for differentiation. The factors of class size and student-teacher ratio also hinder differentiation because it is time and effort-consuming.

However, shifting to online learning opened a door for personalizing education. Some students could slow or accelerate their learning process because it is not linked to the class period or classroom walls. Moreover, teachers can save much time and effort by using technology platforms that employ assessment tools that capture students' levels and calibrate the platform's instructions or resources. For example, mathematics and reading platforms designed by subject experts provide the student with a series of tasks that vary in their difficulty level to identify his ability and suggest the next job that is appropriate for him at this stage. Using such resources opens educators' eyes that a student does not have to receive instruction designed for the class as a whole.

Standardizing education is a top-down model scribed for the masses of students in the system. However, if we aspire to personalize education, we would open the opportunity for students to set their learning objectives and paths. We would expect students to be selective of their learning plans, the instruction that they prefer to receive, and they will have an abundance of competitive resources to access. We have to admit that national

curricula are not flexible enough to adjust to this coming trend. However, curricula experts should start working on setting the minimum suite of knowledge and skills that every student should attain and the branching paths that may divert from that base.

Implementing this step on a wide scale would be very complicated. However, we should admit that the door to this opportunity has opened up, and many providers of educational services will fill the vacuum. For example, many education services will emerge to provide assessment tools for schools and families who want to be involved in their children's education. Other benefits would provide digital libraries, subject-specific exercises, and tutoring.

Therefore, the education administrators and policy-makers should seriously consider that many parents will drive their children to take this path. In addition, the market competition will present its diverse product, which will lead them to question whether they have to constrain themselves to the system's standards. The system should adjust to such change and consider incorporating it into the education process. This will require investing in hiring curriculum experts easily accessible by curriculum coordinators and teachers for guidance.

Another facet of the phenomenon of granting the student more agency in his learning (basically his parents as the decision-makers of their child's learning) is watching them practice student-directed learning style. This style was emphasized when the student engaged in distance learning and depended on themselves in many tasks. This transition yielded many considerations for pedagogy which mainly relied on teacher-directed learning style. Therefore, instruction should consider the guidance and support teachers should provide to students in such a trend. They also need to re-consider the teacher's role as the instructor, and a commander and s/he might transform to be more of a coach and a facilitator.

In response to this change, policy-makers should consider the following:

- Revise the national education agenda
- Hire curriculum and instruction experts to revise the national standards and assess their fit for the change happening in education and the community.

- Ensure the standards are flexible for differentiation and applicable for diverse learning modes and contexts.
- Provide professional development, coaching and mentoring for teachers to differentiate students' needs.
- Provide teachers with emerging digital resources that can help them assess students' levels and find the appropriate tasks for growing their current ability. This step requires sustained efforts in keeping up with the updates in these resources as the I.T. behind it is evolving rapidly.
- Supervising and regulating the private education service providers. It is expected that they will grow in their quantity and scope in addition to the growth of their consumers.
- A close consistent study of the achievement gap. The private education market's growth could result in an enlarging achievement gap caused by socioeconomic status (Koran, 2020). Affluent families would consume these services, which would reflect in their children's achievement.
- Broaden public educational services (such as museums) and subsidize private ones (such as digital platforms), which will allow low-income families to access them.

### **Providing tutoring opportunities**

One of the tools that research suggests to mitigate learning loss is augmenting the teachers' role with one-to-one or small group tutoring (Harris and Strunk, 2020; Allensworth and Schwartz, 2020). Meta-analysis showed that this intervention is associated with a substantial positive effect on students' outcomes (Nickow et al., 2020). The main benefit of tutoring is that its setting (one-to-one or small group) allows the instructor to align instruction for students at the right level of his performance. It can be tailored to the specific need of the student, in addition to delivering it in high dosage (Hwa, Kaffenberger & Silberstein, 2020).

The most prominent factor in this policy is human capital and its skillset. Tutoring programs involve four types of contributors: teachers, paraprofessionals, nonprofessionals, and parents. Paraprofessionals could be school staff, graduate and undergraduate students in the field of education or providers of educational services. Nonprofessional tutors could

be volunteers from the community, such as its residents or retired adults. Although they may not be as experienced as teachers and paraprofessionals, they can contribute (after training) with activities such as reading to students or following up with them. Parents are not experienced; however, using them for tutoring is accessible and cost-effective. In addition, they can practice tasks that do not require sophisticated teaching experience (Nickow et al., 2020).

The ideal delivery of tutoring is to be provided by teachers and professionals. Findings revealed that their delivery yields a more substantial effect. However, this can be attainable when the need is not in crisis mode. Currently, tutoring is massive, and teachers and professionals cannot cover the demand. Instead of hiring practitioners, volunteering organizations (such as Americorp and National Tutor Corps- taking place in the U.S.) stepped up, calling graduates to volunteer to tutor struggling kids. It is a role that they have been practicing before the pandemic; however, currently, the need for it is imminent (Lepage and Jordan, 2020; Kraft and Goldstien, 2020).

Besides the human capital responsible for delivering this policy option, another influencing factor is the tutor-student ratio. The literature noted that it is most effective one-on-one or within a small group. Once the group number grows, its impact drops. Another important consideration is the timing and location of tutoring, where it is most effective to conduct it in school time and at school (Nickow et al., 2020). Usually, nonprofessional and parent tutoring occur outside school hours and at home or in facilities other than schools. While practical, these conditions do not result in outcomes as effective as being in the school environment and within the school day.

**Policy-makers should consider the following action steps:**

- Constructing a task force of curriculum developers, supervisors, teachers, philanthropy organizations, parent organizations, and colleges of education. The task force will hire tutors, coordinate their work and supervise it.
- Assessing and identifying students who need tutoring and matching them with the appropriate tutor.
- Coordinating the location, timing and student ratio of the tutoring sessions.

- Planning tutoring instructions by collaborating with curriculum developers and teachers.
- Setting an assessment routine to follow up with the efficiency of tutoring.

### **Increasing instruction time**

During the transformation to distance learning, many students have lost substantial periods of learning time. Moreover, they essentially missed the one-on-one interaction with a teacher who scaffolds their learning process actively. Therefore, researchers have called for increasing the instruction time to make up for the time students missed and to resolve the delay in their achievement (Harris and Strunk, 2020; Allensworth and Schwartz, 2020). Studies have shown that schools that increased their learning time “were able to demonstrate increases in academic achievement, a high level of parent and teacher satisfaction, and a cost-effective use of existing school facilities.” (Gándara & Fish, 1994, p. 67). Another meta-analysis found that increasing school time benefits at-risk students (Pattal, Cooper & Allen, 2010).

Many educators and policy-makers would oppose this intervention, given that the school day is already long. Moreover, schools in high-achieving countries achieve better while having a shorter school day. However, Pattal et al. (2010) and Gandara (1999) indicated that the primary purpose is not to add hours to the school day but instead restructure it to have more instructional time.

It is essential to mention that the secondary data analysis of datasets like PISA and TIMSS/PIRLS shows that the increase in learning time is usually associated negatively with achievement. This happens because low achieving students are the ones who need extra learning time, and that is why this factor is associated negatively with achievement. However, using quasi-experiments and looking at control/treatment groups (like the cited studies above) would provide a clearer picture of the effectiveness of this intervention.

While tutoring seems to deliver high dosage instruction, increasing instruction time would serve a larger percentage of students. It is recommended when most students need learning acceleration. Studies have shown the benefit of extending the school year or the school day (Hill, 2021). Other studies revealed the efficacy of summer learning programs (Cooper, Charlton, Valentine & Muhlenbruck, 2000; Kim and Quin, 2013) and after-school



programs (Lauer, Akiba, Wilkerson, Apthorp, Snow & Martin-Glenn, 2006; McCombs, Whitaker & Yoo, 2017).

Practically, most education systems implement summer learning and after-school programs. However, to ensure their effectiveness, they have to be engaging and allow students to enjoy their summer and after-school time. This consideration will help students not be burned out on the following school day or when the school year begins (Quin and Polikoff, 2017). It will also help students persist in showing up where their consistent attendance is vital for the efficacy of this intervention (Augustine et al., 2016).

Action steps:

- Design two types of programs: after-school programs and summer programs.
- Integrating into the programs non-academic and entertainment activities. The programs' primary purpose is to mitigate academic learning loss, which means that academic learning would take most time and effort. However, non-academic field experts should be involved in the designing phase, which will make the program diverse and less academically exhausting.
- Plan to encourage parents to bring their children and attain regular attendance.
- Employ experienced teachers and professionals as studies showed the efficacy drop when this step is not fulfilled.
- Prepare the school environment to be used for an extended time.
- Providing transportation because targeting a large scale of students would mean that many families cannot arrange for additional trips to school.

## Conclusion

Taking care of high-achieving students is easy. They are responsive, and their outcomes are accomplished (relatively) rapidly. The disadvantaged students require sophisticated efforts and a long wait for developments. However, the highest achieving education systems are the ones that have less variability across their students' achievement, which has been accomplished by setting well-planned systems that support students across all levels of performance. It did not happen within years, but rather it took decades to be established. The result is that everyone wins by scaffolding this population-- the individuals, the community, and the nation.

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