

No child left behind: It's never too late to learn

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Because the education of our children is one of the American public's top priorities, research has shown the disparity in academic achievement test scores among academically succeeding versus struggling students seems to widen as children progress through school. Studies of educational interventions on younger students have proven to be much more successful than those on their teen counterparts, which have led parents of elementary children to be much more satisfied with their children's school than are high school parents.

In "[Not too late: improving academic outcomes among adolescents](#)" (National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper 28531, March 2021), authors Jonathan Guryan, Jens Ludwig, Monica P. Bhatt, Philip J. Cook, Jonathan M.V. Davis, Kenneth Dodge, George Farkas, Roland G. Fryer Jr, Susan Mayer, Harold Pollack, and Laurence Steinberg test the theory that relying on previous intervention approaches has limited the success of academic improvement among adolescents. They consider that this limitation may not be because success is unattainable but because the academic needs of adolescents were not properly assessed or the motivation of students has become more challenging as they age.

In this paper, the authors study an educational intervention developed by Saga Education. A nonprofit organization, Saga Education is an evidence-based, personalized tutoring model designed to support students struggling with math to put them on a path toward success and high school graduation. Saga's tutoring model suggests that successful tutors require less on-the-job training and fewer specialized skills than do standard classroom teachers. By simplifying the tutor's job and changing their tasks, this theory allows tutors to be immediately successful within several months as compared with the standard 3-year learning curve for classroom teachers.

The authors conducted two individual large-scale randomized controlled trials (RCTs) with thousands of teens enrolled in some of Chicago's most economically disadvantaged local schools. The first RCT was conducted on randomly assigned 2,633 male 9th and 10th graders in 2013. After students had participated in the program for 1 year, their math scores doubled from 0.08 standard deviation (SD) to 0.16 SD. The authors say that "this gain is about what the average student learns in a year," so participation in the program doubled the annual math score. In summer 2014, Guryan and coauthors conducted a second trial on a random sample of 2,710 9th and 10th graders, which resulted in a 0.37 SD, over double the effect on math scores from the RCT.

Guryan and colleagues show that substantial progress can be achieved by narrowing the set of strategies taken from the "no excuses" charter schools to a single-philosophy high-dosage tutoring, which is easier to implement. The authors also highlight an important discovery of Saga's "high-dosage tutoring model": Saga has found a way to deliver a high-intensity educational intervention at a relatively low cost. More importantly, Guryan and coauthors emphasize that it is possible to achieve notable change in the scholastic outcomes of academically struggling students even after reaching adolescence.