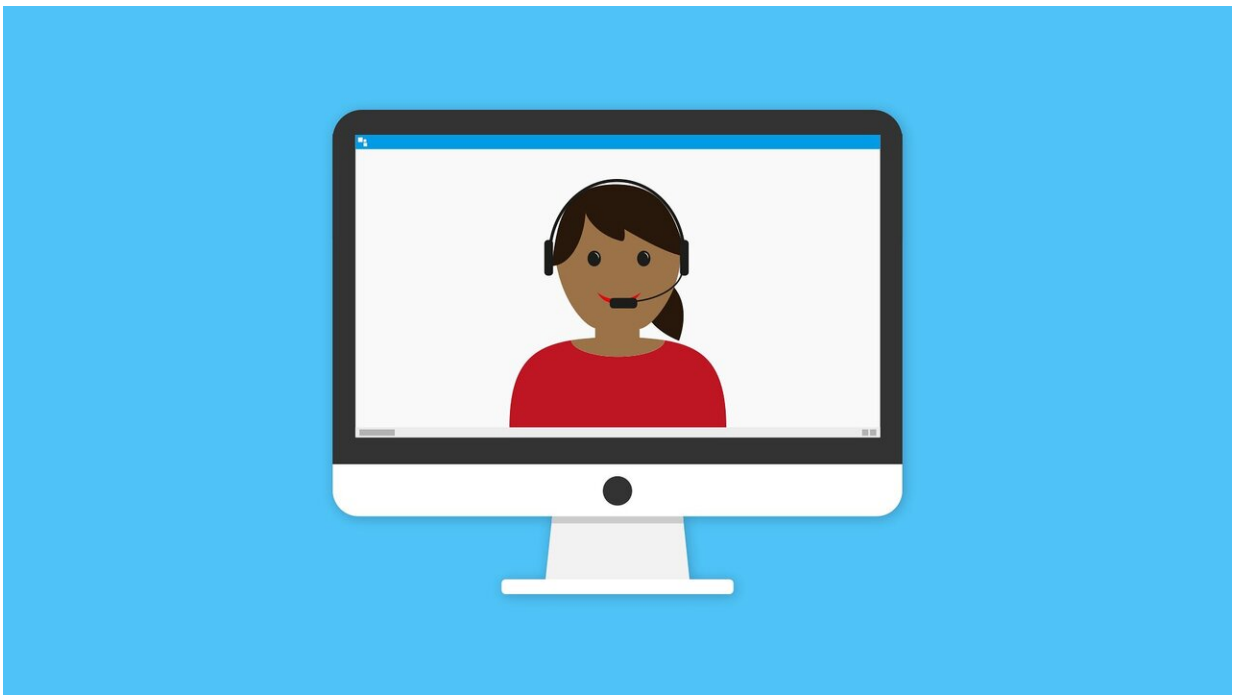# Online tutoring improves disadvantaged school pupils performance and wellbeing in lockdown

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Eliana La Ferrara (Bocconi University's LEAP, Laboratory for Effective Anti-poverty Policies) and Michela Carlana (Harvard Kennedy School) have demonstrated the improvement of the academic performance, aspirations, well-being, and socio-emotional skills of disadvantaged

Italian high-school students during the COVID-19 lockdown through a simple, low-cost online homework tutoring program (TOP, or: tutoring online program) employing university students as tutors.

Three hours of online tutoring per week proved to be enough to produce strong and significant effects on middle school students' performance (+4.7%), aspirations (+ 39.7% in a composite index), well-being (+26%) and socio-emotional skills (+21.1%). An intensive, six-hours-a-week program doubled the improvement in academic performance. In such a psychologically difficult time as the lockdown, participant students not only improved their marks, but also displayed significantly higher happiness and reduced signals of depression. They were also less likely to plan to abandon studies after middle school.

"The COVID pandemic emphasized educational inequalities around the world," Prof. La Ferrara says, "but the educational gap based on family background is a persistent feature of school systems at any time, and we found an effective way to address it."

Now, they are planning to scale up the program, which involved 520 students from 78 middle schools all around Italy and 520 tutors, in the next school year and possibly in other countries. The results will be published soon.

Italian schools closed due to the pandemic on 5 March, 2020, and moved to distance learning. International surveys show that online learning disproportionately penalized disadvantaged students. Before school closure in Italy, for example, 12.8% of the students in the TOP sample used to resort to help from people who were not parents or siblings (for example, other family members or after school programs) for their homework; after the closure, the share dropped to 2.9%. Those doing homework on their own rose from 55.3% to 62.1%.

Professors La Ferrara and Carlana, starting on 20 March, recruited [university students](#) as tutors who were trained in Maths, Italian, and English, and offered their services to middle schools, which were asked to identify the students most in need because of [family background](#), language barriers or learning disorders. The [program](#) ran from 10 April to the end of the school-year.

"The experiment worked as a proof of concept," Prof. La Ferrara concludes. "We have shown that you only need a limited amount of resources to contain the educational gap. Our experience could turn out to be very useful in case of new or persistent lockdowns."

Provided by Bocconi University