



Center for Education Policy Research

HARVARD UNIVERSITY

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New Research Shows That North Carolina's Learning Loss and Academic Recovery Has Varied Dramatically by District; Even Among Those with Similar Income Levels

Researchers urge state and district leaders to use remaining federal funding on adding instruction time through summer school and tutoring

(January 31, 2024) After reporting on pandemic achievement losses last year, the [Education Recovery Scorecard](#) (a collaboration between the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University and The Educational Opportunity Project at Stanford University) is issuing a report on the first year of academic recovery for school districts in 30 states.

Last year, students in many states made historic gains in math and reading. Still, they made up only one-third of the pandemic loss in math and one quarter of the loss in reading. Even if they maintain last year's pace, students will not be caught up by the time federal relief expires in September. Moreover, the recovery efforts are not closing the gaps between high- and low-poverty districts which widened during the pandemic.

North Carolina:

Tom Kane, who grew up in Winston-Salem and is Faculty Director of the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University and co-author of the report says, "North Carolina has a long history of leadership in education. No one wants to leave poor kids footing the bill, but that is the path North Carolina is on. With federal relief dollars drying up, state leaders must ensure the remaining dollars are used for Summer 2024 and for tutoring and after-school next year."

- Between 2019 and 2022, students in North Carolina lost .68 grade equivalents in math and .46 grade equivalents in reading. In other words, it was as if students missed two-thirds of a typical year's learning in math and nearly half of a year in reading during the pandemic.
- Math achievement losses between 2019 and 2022 varied dramatically by district, even among districts with similar poverty levels. For example, students in Winston-Salem/Forsyth County schools lost more than a full grade equivalent in math achievement while students in Durham City schools lost 40% of a grade equivalent.



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- Between 2022 and 2023, students in North Carolina made up 27% of a grade equivalent in math and 18% of a grade equivalent in reading—which is 40% of the loss in both subjects.
- Between 2022 and 2023, Winston-Salem/Forsyth County saw one of the largest improvements, making up more than half a grade equivalent in both math and reading.
- Despite having had a smaller than average loss between 2019 and 2022, Durham City schools still improved by as much as Winston-Salem between 2022 and 2023.
- However, even if North Carolina schools manage to continue improving at last year's rate of recovery, they will not have caught up by the time the federal funds run out.
- North Carolina received nearly \$5.6 billion in federal recovery funding and as of January 2024, still had over \$1.1 billion (20%) remaining.

National Takeaways:

Over the course of the 2022-2023 school year, students in one state (Alabama) returned to pre-pandemic achievement levels in math. Despite progress, students in seventeen states remain more than a third of a grade level behind 2019 levels in math: AR, CA, CT, IN, KS, KY, MA, MI, NC, NH, NJ, NV, OK, OR, VA, WA, and WV.

Students in three states (Illinois, Louisiana, and Mississippi) returned to 2019 achievement levels in reading, while students in 14 states remain more than a third of a grade level behind in reading: CT, IN, KS, MA, MI, NC, NV, OK, OR, PA, VA, WA, SD, and WY.

Kane said, “Many schools made strong gains last year, but most districts are still working hard just to reach pre-pandemic achievement levels.”

As the project reported last year, achievement gaps between high- and low-poverty districts widened sharply during the pandemic, with students in high-poverty districts losing the most ground. The new data reveal that recovery efforts have thus far failed to close those gaps.

On the contrary, in many states, the recovery is being led by the wealthier districts which lost the least during the pandemic. The states in which the gaps between the wealthiest and poorest districts widened the most include Massachusetts, Ohio, and Connecticut.

The new data also highlight communities that have made substantial progress toward academic recovery, such as Birmingham, Alabama, and Nashville/Davidson, Tennessee.

Congress provided a total of \$190 billion in federal aid to K-12 schools during the pandemic, with most of it targeted at high-poverty districts. As of January 2024, [\\$51 billion](#) of that aid is still available, with the remaining dollars due to be obligated by September of this year (or returned to the federal government). To the extent that states and districts have remaining funds, they should focus those dollars on academic recovery this summer and next school year.



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The researchers urge education leaders to take the following steps as the federal spending deadline approaches:

1. **This spring, schools should inform parents if their child is below grade level in math or English so that parents have time to enroll in summer learning.** Parents cannot advocate if they are misinformed. [Research](#) shows that parents take specific actions when they know their child is behind grade level.
2. **Schools should expand summer learning seats this summer.** States should require districts to set aside sufficient funds to accept all students who sign up. Research has shown that six weeks of summer learning produces a fourth of a year of learning, especially in math.
3. **Districts can extend the recovery efforts into the next school year by contracting for high-quality tutoring and after-school programs before September.** Although the federal relief dollars cannot be used to pay school employee salaries after September, they can be used to make payments on contracts that are signed before the deadline. ([Click here](#) to see the U.S. Department of Education's recent guidance on seeking an extension. For ideas on how to tie contractor payments to student outcomes, see the [Outcomes-Based Contracting project at the Southern Education Foundation.](#))
4. **Local government, employers and community leaders should get involved in helping schools lower student absenteeism, which has remained high since the pandemic.**

In addition to encouraging districts to reserve federal dollars to pay for Summer 2024 programming, tutoring, absentee reduction, and after-school programs for the 2024-2025 academic year, the researchers encourage states to consider using state dollars to incentivize districts to extend the school year or to expand summer learning in future years, as [Texas](#) has done.

The Education Recovery Scorecard receives philanthropic support from Citadel founder and CEO Ken Griffin and Griffin Catalyst, Bloomberg Philanthropies, and Carnegie Corporation of New York.

About the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University

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