



Center for Education Policy Research

HARVARD UNIVERSITY

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New Research Shows Academic Recovery Has Started; Action Needed Before Federal Spending Deadline to Ensure Remaining Gaps are Closed

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.

(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.

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.

Dr. Thomas Kane, Faculty Director of the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University and one of the study's co-authors, 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.



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“We should thank teachers and principals and superintendents for what they’ve done for American schoolchildren in the last year; their efforts have led to strikingly large improvements in children’s learning. But we shouldn’t lose sight of the fact that the recovery has been uneven and we have a long way to go. Academic performance remains lower and more unequal than in 2019 in all but the wealthiest communities in America,” said Sean Reardon, Professor of Poverty and Inequality, Stanford Graduate School of Education, and one of the study’s co-authors.

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.

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.**

Kane said, “No one wants poor children to foot the bill for the pandemic, but that is the path that most states are on. States need to take leadership and ensure that every last dollar of the



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remaining federal relief is spent on academic recovery efforts, like summer school, high-quality tutoring, and after-school instruction next year.”

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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