



## PRESS RELEASE

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Contact: Rachel Tropp

[rachel\\_tropp@gse.harvard.edu](mailto:rachel_tropp@gse.harvard.edu)

617.998.8597

## New Research Finds Federal Pandemic Relief Aided Academic Recovery During the 2022-23 School Year, Especially Among Low-Income Districts

*Yet many districts are likely to remain behind when federal aid expires in September. To complete the recovery, states should target resources on academic interventions, such as tutoring and summer learning, and reducing absenteeism.*

(June 26, 2024) [New research](#) from the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University and The Educational Opportunity Project at Stanford University reveals a direct connection between federal pandemic relief aid and academic recovery in K-12 schools.

During 2020 and 2021, Congress provided nearly \$190 billion to elementary and secondary schools for pandemic recovery efforts (ESSER). The relief dollars were targeted at higher-poverty districts using the Title I formula, which varies by state. The researchers used variation in the amount of federal relief provided to otherwise similar districts to measure the effect of the relief.

The researchers found that each \$1,000 difference in relief spending per student was associated with a 0.03 grade equivalent increase in math achievement, which is approximately 6 days of learning, and 0.018 grade equivalents increase in reading, which is approximately 3 days of learning. These findings are similar to pre-pandemic research on the effect of education spending.

Given the strong relationship between K-12 test scores and subsequent earnings, the researchers conclude that the boost in future earnings associated with a 0.03 grade equivalent rise in achievement would be sufficient to justify the \$1,000 investment.

The federal dollars are helping to close gaps which widened during the pandemic. The highest poverty districts received \$7,700 per student in federal aid, while the most affluent districts received very little.



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Dr. Thomas Kane, Faculty Director of the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University and one of the study's co-authors, said, "The federal aid was like the first stage of a rocket, it got us going, but had a broad focus and was ultimately insufficient to get us all the way. To complete the recovery, states will need to step up, focusing on academic catch-up efforts, such as tutoring and summer learning, and lowering absenteeism."

"The federal investment in helping public school students recover from the pandemic's academic fallout has paid off. Not only did it lead to increased test score gains, but the investment also significantly reduced the educational inequality generated by the pandemic," said Sean Reardon, Professor of Poverty and Inequality, Stanford Graduate School of Education, and one of the study's co-authors.

The researchers recommend that state and district education leaders consider the following steps to complete their students' recoveries:

- 1. Informing parents if their child is below grade level in math or reading.** Too many parents are under the [false impression](#) that their children are not behind, and as a result, they do not sign up for tutoring, summer learning and after-school programs or request the help their children need.
- 2. Coordinating efforts to lower student absenteeism.** In the 2022-23 school year, [an estimated 26%](#) of U.S. students were chronically absent. This means that the share of students chronically absent has increased by more than 70% since 2018-19. One of the most valuable contributions that mayors, employers, and other community leaders can make to schools' recovery efforts would be to help reduce absenteeism. [Indiana](#) and [Rhode Island](#) are two national leaders in the effort to lower student absenteeism.
- 3. Taking advantage of the federal set aside that allows states to direct up to 3% of Title I funding for direct student services, such as tutoring.** Only one state, Ohio, currently exercises its authority to reserve such dollars for direct student services. By exercising that authority, states could expand tutoring efforts with federal dollars.
- 4. Incentivizing specific academic recovery efforts rather than providing across-the-board funding (like ESSER).** When the American Rescue Plan passed in Spring 2021, there was uncertainty about the cost of reopening and the magnitude of achievement losses (since students had not been assessed). Because of that uncertainty, lawmakers gave local decision-makers maximum flexibility in spending the pandemic relief dollars. Now that schools are reopened and the academic consequences are clear, state leaders can direct state funds to academic catchup. This could include subsidizing local schools to expand summer learning, as [Texas](#) has done, or providing tutors to students behind grade-level such as programs underway in [Maryland](#) and [Virginia](#).



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## **About the Education Recovery Scorecard**

The Education Recovery Scorecard is a collaboration between the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard, Stanford's Educational Opportunity Project, and Douglas Staiger at Dartmouth College. For the past two years, these research teams have provided district level analysis and comparisons of pandemic related learning loss and recovery. The interactive maps and corresponding data on <https://educationrecoverycorecard.org> provide insights on time spent in remote instruction, federal ESSER allocations and instructional spending per student. When available, achievement data are disaggregated by race and poverty status to provide a complete picture of the disparities in learning loss across the country.

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. The study used data assembled by the Stanford Educational Opportunity Project, which receives support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

## **About the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University**

The Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University, based at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, seeks to transform education through quality research and evidence. CEPR and its partners believe all students will learn and thrive when education leaders make decisions using facts and findings, rather than untested assumptions. Learn more at <https://cepr.harvard.edu>.

## **About The Educational Opportunity Project at Stanford University**

The Educational Opportunity Project at Stanford University has built the first national database of academic performance. The EOP creates applications, research reports, and interactive articles to enable anyone to explore and understand the data.

Contact: Rachel Tropp at [rachel\\_tropp@gse.harvard.edu](mailto:rachel_tropp@gse.harvard.edu), 617.998.8597