

EDUCATION RECOVERY SCORECARD

PRESS RELEASE

February 11, 2025

Contact: Sam Stockwell

samuel_stockwell@gse.harvard.edu

617.495.0342

Although No State Improved in Both Math and Reading on the NAEP, the Education Recovery Scorecard Highlights the Work of [Over 100 Districts](#) Performing Above Pre-Pandemic Levels in Both Math and Reading

Achievement Gaps Widened – The Highest Income Decile Districts Were Nearly 4 Times More Likely to Recover in both Math and Reading Than the Lowest Income Decile Districts

The Federal Relief Dollars Prevented Even Larger Losses in Higher Poverty Districts (Where the Aid Reduced Losses by 10 Percent of a Grade Equivalent in Math and Reading) But It Mattered How Districts Spent the Money

Chronic Absenteeism Played a Significant Role in Slowing Recovery and Widening Gaps Between High and Low Poverty Districts

(February 11, 2025) In its third year, the [Education Recovery Scorecard](#) (a collaboration between the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University, The Educational Opportunity Project at Stanford University, and faculty at Dartmouth College) provides a high resolution picture of academic recovery in 8,719 school districts with either math or reading achievement data across 43 states. Building on the recent NAEP release, the Education Recovery Scorecard combines the NAEP results with state test results for roughly 35 million grade 3-8 students between 2019 and 2024, portraying *district-level* changes in achievement for individual communities across the country.

EDUCATION RECOVERY SCORECARD

The new research concludes:

- 1. As of Spring 2024, the average U.S. student remained nearly half a grade level behind pre-pandemic achievement in math and reading.** Students are even further behind in reading than they were in 2022.
- 2. Although no state scored above 2019 levels on the NAEP assessment in both math and reading, a number of districts are scoring above 2019 levels in both subjects.** 17 percent of students in grades 3 to 8 are in districts with mean math achievement above 2019, 11 percent are in districts that have recovered in reading, and 6 percent are in districts which have recovered in both subjects.
- 3. District-level data reveal pockets of success and continued struggle in most states.** For instance, the NAEP reported that only one state, Alabama, had average achievement above 2019 levels in 4th grade math. Yet, even in Alabama, about one-third of students (38 percent) are enrolled in districts whose math achievement remains below 2019 levels. A number of districts in Alabama, such as Montgomery, remain 40 percent or more of a grade level behind their own achievement in 2019. Meanwhile, some high poverty districts such as Birmingham have nearly recovered in both math and reading.
- 4. The highest income decile districts were nearly 4 times more likely to have recovered in both math and reading than the lowest income decile districts:** 14.1 percent vs. 3.9 percent. Still, we see examples of higher poverty districts recovering in reading and math.
- 5. Socioeconomic and racial/ethnic disparities in math achievement have grown since the start of the pandemic both within districts and across districts.** The disparity in math scores between students in affluent and low-income districts has grown by 11 percent since the start of the pandemic, and the disparity in scores between students in predominantly non-minority and predominantly minority districts has grown by 15 percent. Moreover, the average within-district racial/ethnic disparities in math scores have grown by 7-12 percent since 2019. The disparities in reading scores have grown as well, but by less.
- 6. A widespread rise in absenteeism is slowing the recovery, especially in high poverty districts** (although the exact magnitude of the impact of absenteeism remains uncertain.) Most districts—high and low-income—have seen a rise in student absenteeism, with larger increases in low-income districts. Our data show that districts with high post-pandemic absenteeism had slower recovery, but the full impact of the rise in absenteeism is not yet clear.
- 7. The federal relief dollars prevented larger losses in the highest poverty districts (where the aid reduced the loss by 10 percent of a grade equivalent in both math and reading.)** Each dollar of federal relief improved student achievement by about as much as a general revenue increase. But [it mattered how districts spent the money](#). In California, which maintained more

EDUCATION RECOVERY SCORECARD

detailed spending data, we find that student achievement grew more in districts that spent more on academic interventions, such as tutoring or summer school. Districts were only required to spend 20 percent on academic catchup.

Professor Tom Kane, faculty director of the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard said, “The rescue phase is over. The federal relief dollars are gone. It is time to pivot from short-term recovery to longer term challenges such as reducing absenteeism and addressing the slide in literacy.”

Professor Sean Reardon, director of the Educational Opportunity Project at Stanford said, “The slide in average NAEP scores masks a pernicious inequality: scores have declined far more in America’s middle- and low-income communities than in its wealthy ones. The good news is that it could have been worse: the federal investment in public schools during the pandemic paid off, limiting academic losses in high-poverty districts.”

The report highlights four priorities for the coming years:

1. **States and districts should double down on academic catch up efforts previously funded by federal relief.** Because the federal dollars are gone and many students remain behind, states will need to redirect their own dollars and the federal dollars they administer for interventions which have been shown effective, such as tutoring and summer learning.
2. **Mayors, employers and other community leaders should join schools in tackling student absenteeism.** Rather than place the responsibility for academic recovery entirely on school leaders’ shoulders, [reducing absenteeism](#) is one burden that others can help schools carry. That could include public information campaigns, extracurricular activities to draw students to school and solving transportation problems.
3. **Teachers must inform parents when their child is not at grade level.** Since early in the recovery, the overwhelming majority of parents have been under [the false impression](#) that their children were unaffected. Parental perceptions are central to many of the challenges districts face. If they are to help lower absenteeism, sign up for summer learning and increase reading at home, parents need to know when their child is behind.
4. **We must learn what’s working (and what is not) in the recent reforms.** In the last few years, 40 states have implemented “science of reading” reforms. But each state has taken a different approach, placing different emphasis on curriculum, teacher training, coaching and retaining students who do not demonstrate reading proficiency. In addition, many have implemented cell phone bans. Such policy innovation can be a strength of our federal system—but only if we learn which of those efforts are working (and which are not) and spread the most effective solutions.

EDUCATION RECOVERY SCORECARD

Stanford's Sean Reardon said, "The pandemic highlighted inequalities in our education system; it didn't create them. And so we don't need just 'pandemic recovery' now, but long-term structural reform. A real 'recovery' requires that we make sure students in middle and low-income communities have all the resources they need to thrive in school."

Harvard's Tom Kane said, "Whether it is early literacy, improving instructional materials, strengthening accountability or high school redesign, states are where education reform is happening now. What's been missing is any cross-state effort to evaluate those reforms and spread what's working. We are launching a [new project](#) for states wanting to learn together." With the support of the Walton Family Foundation, the first States Leading States report will be released in Spring 2026.

*Due to data limitations, Alaska, Colorado, Maine, Montana, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, and Vermont are not included in the 2025 Education Recovery Scorecard findings.

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

About the Educational Opportunity Project

The Educational Opportunity Project at Stanford University, based at Stanford Graduate School of Education, harnesses data to help scholars, policymakers, educators, and parents improve educational opportunity for all children. The EOP built the first comprehensive national database of academic performance from every public school in the United States, and its research team produces tools to explore patterns and trends in communities across the country and by race, gender, and socioeconomic conditions.

The Educational Opportunity Project at Stanford receives support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Learn more at www.edopportunity.org.

Contact: Sam Stockwell at samuel_stockwell@gse.harvard.edu, 617.495.0342