

The State of the American Student: Fall 2024

Solve for the Most Complex Needs:
A Path Forward as Pandemic Effects Reverberate





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Foreword



During the Covid-19 pandemic, CRPE directed almost all of our research efforts and thought leadership to tracking and reporting on what students and families needed, how schools and school systems were responding to those needs, and what was getting in the way of solutions.

As schools reopened and the focus shifted to recovery, we feared that U.S. education would return to “business as usual” before students were made whole—and before decision-makers at all levels of public education had taken stock of whether a return to normal should even be the goal. After all, the pre-pandemic education system was hardwired with inequities, rigidities, and dysfunctions, all of which were exposed and exacerbated during the pandemic.

My team and I thought it critically important to take stock at the start of each school year and assess the state of the American student: How are our educational institutions addressing the pandemic’s impacts on students? What progress were they making? What was working? What might need to change?

The first State of the Student report determined a baseline. We found that students had suffered profound academic, social, emotional, and mental health effects. We documented those sobering impacts—and how they need not have been as pronounced. We showed how politics, lack of agility, lack of responsiveness to families, and other factors led to the harm students suffered. We also showed that solutions arising out of the pandemic could forge a potential path forward to a more nimble, joyful, responsive, and equitable public education system.

In the second edition, we focused on older students with little to no time left in the K-12 system. Again, the news was sobering. We

reported shocking declines in college and career readiness. We made an urgent call to action to address older students’ needs, partly by rethinking American high schools and linkages to higher education and career pathways.

This year, we updated our overall situation report for American students. We also focused on special or unique populations of students, such as those with learning differences, English language learners, students with disabilities, students experiencing homelessness, and other vulnerable student populations. I am sorry to say that the report is once again sobering. There are a lot of difficult data points, as well as frankly heartbreaking stories from families. But, there is also good news, as well as many examples of practical, effective recovery efforts. We also recommend specific action steps.

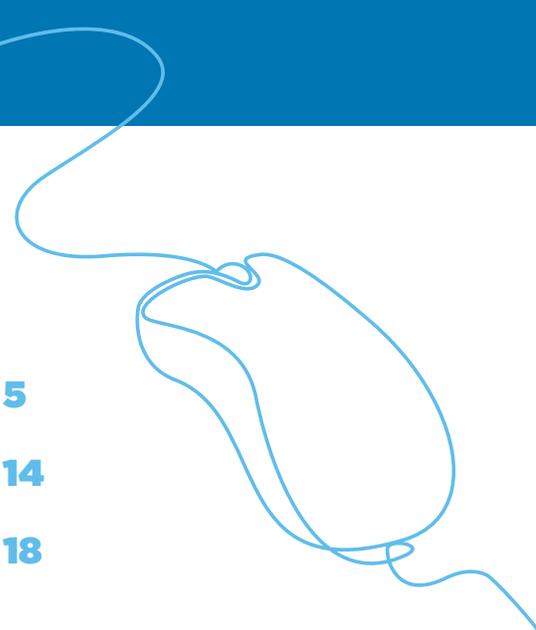
We ask you to read through the report and take stock with us: How can decision-makers ensure that next year’s report is more uplifting? How can we realize a marked turn toward new opportunity, joy, innovation, and narrowing opportunity and achievement gaps? How can we use data to actually solve problems rather than to meet arbitrary compliance standards? How can we start creating more schools and programs that do what we know works? How can we go beyond known strategies to innovate toward even better outcomes? We also encourage you to share this report with decision-makers in your network. The time to act on behalf of all students was yesterday, but now is a good start, too.

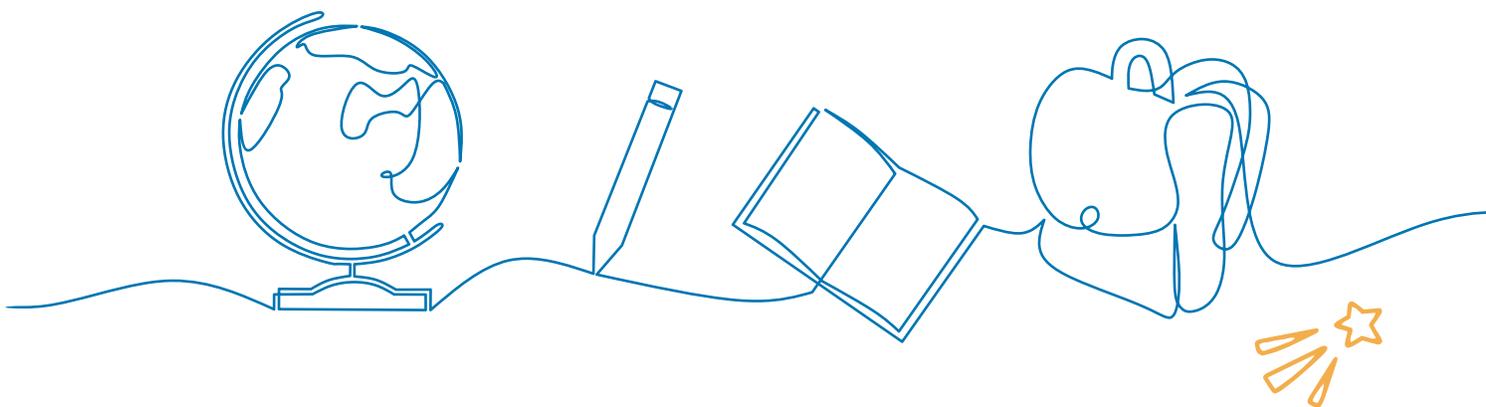
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Executive Summary

First, the good news. We are learning what works—and doing more of it.

Students and teachers are showing signs of recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. The average student has recovered about a third of their pandemic-era learning losses in math and a quarter in reading, [according to a 30-state analysis](#). States and districts nationwide have implemented measures such as tutoring, high-quality curricula, and extended learning time, and more and more school systems are making these strategies permanent. Rigorous evaluations confirm the effectiveness of these interventions and point to strategies for broad accessibility.

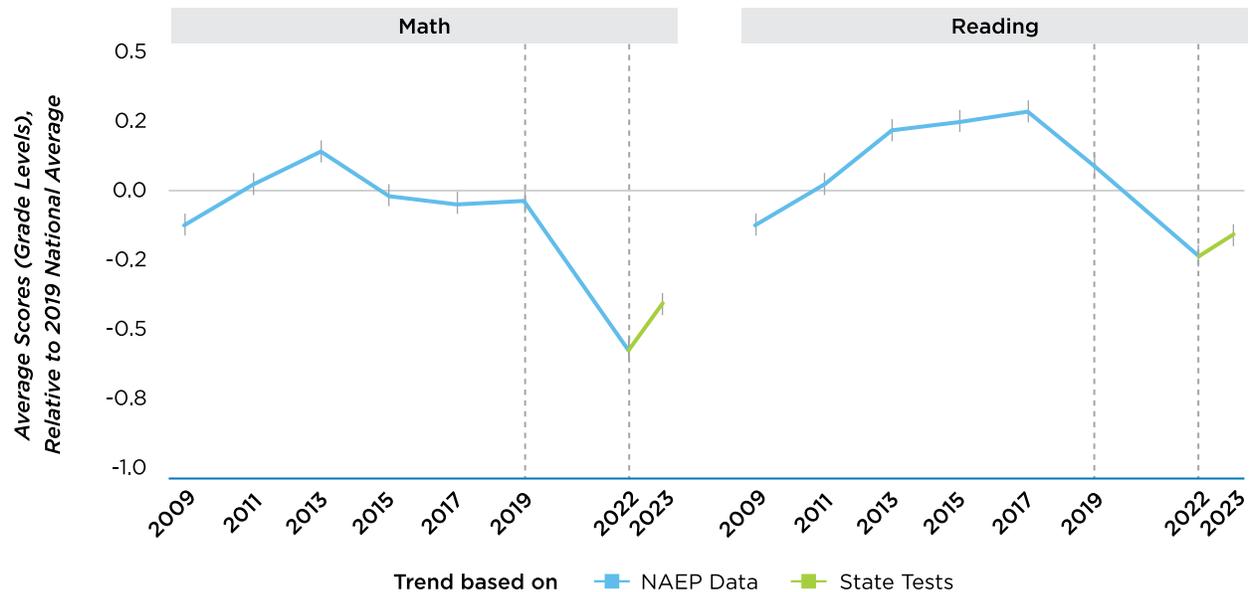
Education systems and stakeholders across the country are recognizing the value of relationships, joy, and flexibility. As a result, more new, agile, and future-oriented schooling models are appearing. Further, there is a growing movement to help educators do their work more sustainably by collaborating in teams and using new technologies like generative AI to reduce time on burdensome tasks.

The bad news: Proven strategies are not reaching enough students.

The recovery has been slow and uneven. The average American student in school during the pandemic is less than halfway to a full academic recovery (see Figure A).

Figure A: Academic Recovery Is Happening Too Slowly

Trend in Average Test Scores, 2009-23, 30 States



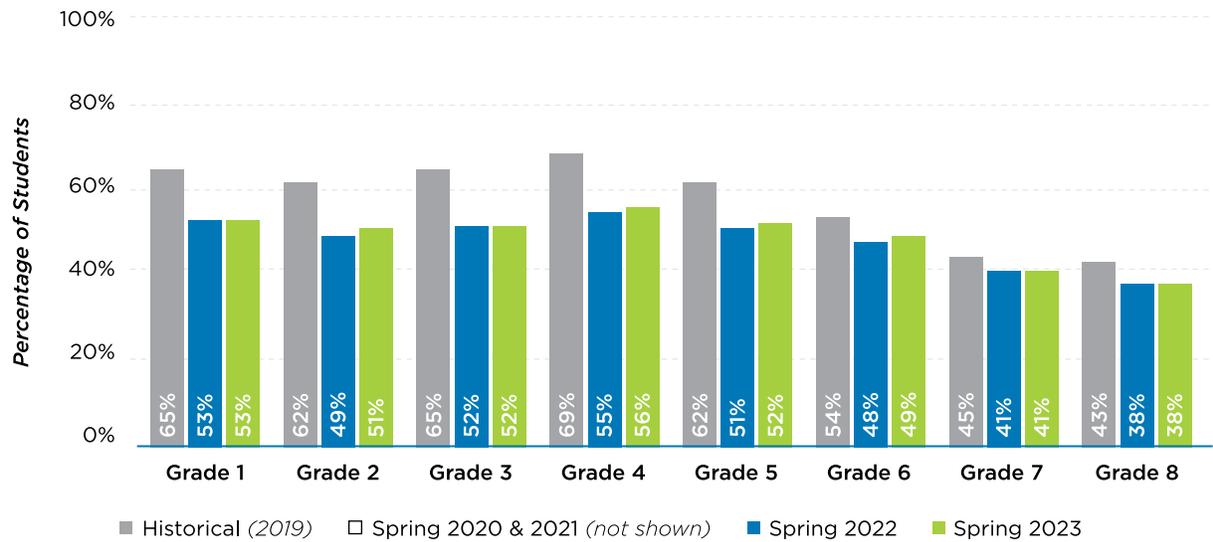
Source: Data from Erin Fahle et al., “[The First Year of Pandemic Recovery: A District-Level Analysis](#),” Education Recovery Scorecard, Center for Education Policy Research and the Educational Opportunity Project (January 2024): 7.

Too many students whose learning was most severely interrupted during the pandemic still aren’t getting the support they need to recover. In Louisiana, for example, [just 1% of students](#) eligible to participate in a state literacy tutoring program actually did so. [Research](#) from the RAND Corporation found that districts across the country typically struggled to get even half of eligible students to enroll in summer programs.

As we [reported](#) last year, the slow pace of recovery is especially bad news for older students with little or no time left in the K-12 system. But younger students are struggling, too. “Covid babies” are entering kindergarten less prepared for grade-level learning. An August 2023 report [from Curriculum Associates](#) shows that while all students place at grade level in math at lower rates than before the pandemic, students in younger grades face larger gaps (see Figure B). Even more concerning, academic recovery—in the words of the report’s authors—has been “slow and uneven” and “points to the persistent and unprecedented impact of the pandemic on all parts of children’s lives, from preschool through their elementary school years, and likely beyond.”

Figure B: Younger Students Are Struggling and Not Catching Up

Students Placing on Grade Level in Mathematics in Grades 1-8



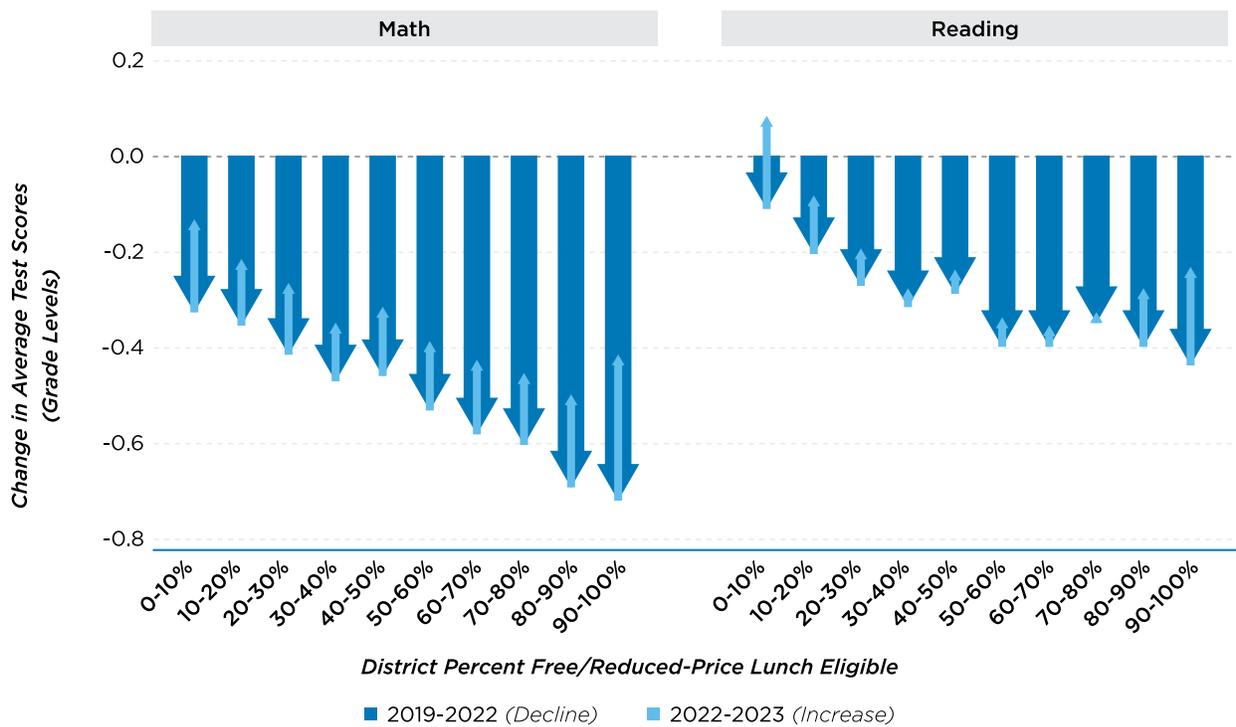
Source: Data from Curriculum Associates Research, "[State of Student Learning in 2023: Reading and Mathematics Annual Report](#)," Curriculum Associates Research (August 2023): 15.

Tragically, the students who were already furthest behind have fallen further behind. The gaps between the lowest- and highest-achieving students [are growing wider](#), according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The 30-state [Education Recovery Scorecard](#) found that students in predominantly low-income school districts saw more significant initial learning losses and that low-income students within school districts are making a comparably slower recovery (see Figure C). In all but three of the states included in the study (Arkansas, Pennsylvania, and Virginia), poorer districts remained further behind the 2019 baseline than more affluent districts.

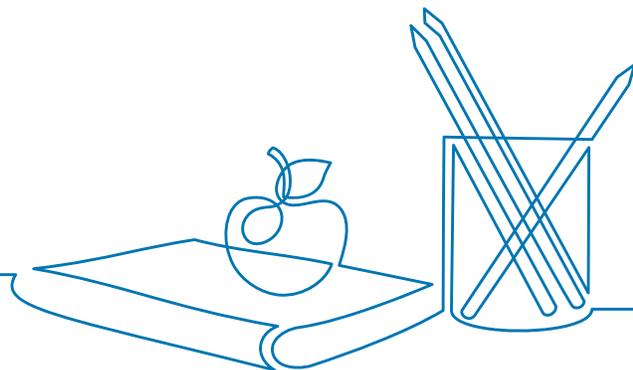


Figure C: Low-Income Students Have More Ground to Make Up

Test Score Decline and Recovery, 2019-23, by Subject and District Poverty Rate



Source: Data from Erin Fahle et al., *“The First Year of Pandemic Recovery: A District-Level Analysis,”* Education Recovery Scorecard, Center for Education Policy Research and the Educational Opportunity Project (January 2024): 12.



The landscape is worsening.

School districts face significant challenges that will prevent them from making more progress.



- **Teachers.** The morale of the U.S. teacher workforce is at a low point. Approximately 8 in 10 teachers said they find the job overwhelming and that the state of education has gotten worse over the past five years. [According to the Pew Research Center](#), more than half expect conditions to worsen over the next five.
- **Mental health.** In the 2021–22 school year, nearly 40% of school principals cited “inadequate access to licensed mental health professionals” as a [significant barrier](#) to providing mental health support for their students. Teens are facing a mental health crisis. An estimated 17.4 million K–12 students had mental health needs, but schools could serve only 1.1 million, [according to a McKinsey analysis](#).
- **Funding.** Declining enrollment augurs a new source of fiscal strain and political turmoil for districts. Federal pandemic recovery funds will expire before students have fully recovered. Thousands of schools and childcare centers nationwide [are at risk of closure](#).
- **Shifting habits and attitudes.** Rates of chronic absenteeism ([defined](#) as “students missing at least 10% of school days”) have nearly [doubled](#) since 2020, from 16% to 30% of students. There is a very concerning trend to [inflate grades](#). [Results from the ACT](#) suggest that students are less prepared for college than they were pre-pandemic; college readiness is at a [three-decade low](#). More than 43% of test-takers met none of the exam’s four major benchmarks.
- **Lack of transparency.** Alas, few elected officials are talking honestly about the challenges or making it possible for the public to get a clear picture of the crisis. [We analyzed](#) the public report cards of all 50 states and Washington, D.C., and found that just seven states made it easy to see longitudinal performance data at the school level across the seven indicators we examined. In contrast, 16 states made it all but impossible to find and track longitudinal performance trends.



The pandemic took a significant toll on vulnerable students.



The pandemic exposed and exacerbated existing issues within the education system, particularly for special populations. Students with disabilities and English learners were disproportionately affected, facing higher rates of absenteeism, disrupted services, and academic and social/emotional setbacks. While some students adapted well, most faced significant challenges, revealing systemic issues that need urgent attention.

Academic declines for English learners. The WIDA Consortium, which administers English proficiency assessments for English learner–designated students, [reported](#) that average scores from

2023 remained lower than pre-pandemic averages, particularly in the early grades. In every grade span that took the test, used in 41 states and Washington, D.C., 2023 scores were the lowest since 2018, showing continued declines throughout the pandemic and no sign of recovery.

Chronic absenteeism rates among special populations skyrocketed. For example, [in Los Angeles](#), chronic absenteeism among English learners nearly tripled between 2018 and 2022 and more than doubled among students with disabilities, homeless students, and those in foster care. [In Minneapolis](#), chronic absenteeism doubled or nearly doubled among students with disabilities in more than a third of schools.

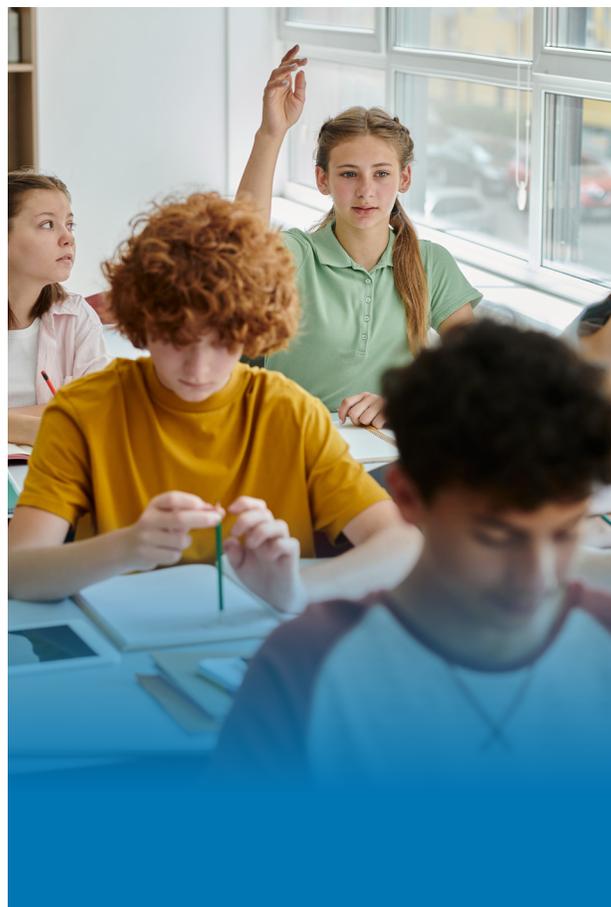
Special education referrals reached an all-time high. In 2022–23, [7.5 million](#) public school students received services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), according to the National Center on Education Statistics. The most recent surge in special education identifications is at least partially attributed to the compounded effects of the pandemic on young children. Anecdotally, school and district leaders nationwide [report](#) that kindergartners are entering school with significant academic and social struggles, leading to higher referral rates to special education.

Parents struggled to meet their children’s unique needs and received little support.

Unsurprisingly, many parents had difficulty assuming the role of an educator in their home. For parents of students with disabilities, that struggle was even more pronounced as they had to figure out how to provide the speech services and learning support that their children typically receive from trained specialists.

“He was supposed to have his speech therapy because he has issues from epilepsy that cause mental delays where he’s not able to fully communicate everything as most kids would his age. So, he didn’t get the therapy he was supposed to. He fell further behind because my husband and I tried our best, but we can only do so much if you’re not a teacher, which is very frustrating.”

-Parent of a third-grader



$$x + (1 - y) = ?$$

Parents not fluent in English encountered additional challenges. It was difficult for parents to teach subjects with which they were unfamiliar, especially in a language they were still learning. Many parents struggled to ensure that their children received the support outlined in their 504 or Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Several families said schools didn't communicate often or well enough, and many parents felt blindsided when they found out just how far behind their child had fallen. Even very proactive parents had a difficult time getting in contact with someone at the school.

Staffing challenges worsened.

Staffing shortages were particularly acute for teachers with [special education](#) experience and [multilingual teachers](#) with bilingual specializations or ESOL endorsements. According to one national [report](#), 40% of public schools hiring special education teachers had trouble filling the openings in 2020–21. In 2011–12, that number was 17%.

However, some students excelled amid school closures.

Families and educators have both consistently reported that some students with unique needs thrived during the pandemic. One parent said, "I feel like the whole experience made [my daughter] grow up a little bit more and mature and want to actually go back to school and do the work."

Some states and school systems are finding creative ways to leverage untapped sources of talent and support students more effectively.

[Three school districts in the Midwest](#) have tapped hundreds of immigrants and refugees with international teaching experience to work in their classrooms. Nebraska approved a policy to make it easier for para-educators to [transition into teaching roles](#), and Pennsylvania approved a [stipend for student teachers](#).

Improved outcomes at the [D.C. Bilingual Charter School](#) show the promise of models that view diverse student needs as an asset. During the pandemic, when schools across the country saw declines in test scores, the school [made consecutive improvements](#) every year, achieving a new high for English language proficiency after the 2022–23 school year.

In Salem, Massachusetts, one middle [school](#) reduced absenteeism and increased achievement by making school more engaging and fun with more field trips, hands-on learning opportunities, and personalized instruction. One student said, "It's actually making me excited to go to school. It's just like a happier version of school."



"Since I'm a Spanish speaker, it was harder for her. I would speak to her in Spanish and then she had to learn it in English."

-Parent of a first-grader



"I feel like because she can get by, they let her get by. They're not trying to help. She's not failing, but she's just kind of in some things just getting by."

-Parent of a ninth-grader



"I couldn't get a hold of anybody whatsoever. I didn't get any questions answered, and I couldn't go in person because everything was shut down."

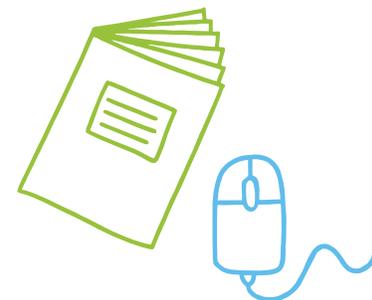
-Parent of a sixth-grader



"I feel like the whole experience made her grow up a little bit more and mature and want to actually go back to school and do the work."

-Parent of a seventh-grader

We recommend a path forward: Focus on targeted support and systemic reforms.



The experiences of students with disabilities and English learners during the pandemic highlight the urgent need for targeted support and systemic reforms. The urgency of the problems and the legal rights these students hold demand immediate and, if necessary, radical solutions.

SCHOOLS CAN:

Prioritize relationships.

For example, the Building Assets, Reducing Risks (BARR) program, which targets students in the make-or-break year of ninth grade, speaks to the power of strong relationships to help any school, with existing resources, ensure no student falls through the cracks.

Partner with parents.

Family communication cannot be something tired teachers squeeze into the end of an overloaded workweek. True educator–parent partnership must be a central part of how education systems operate.

Tear down the walls.

Schools must be more flexible, redeploying staff and reconfiguring schedules to avoid creating inflexible boxes that pit academic tutoring against special education services, or supplemental “pullout” services against core academic instruction.

Plan for after graduation.

Students need a chance to start planning—early and often—to thrive in the increasingly fragmented postsecondary environment. Exposing them to many postsecondary and career options will give them experiences and skills that have meaning outside school walls and help them find the purpose and fulfillment many young people find lacking in school.

Ensure the best strategies reach children who need them most.

Tutoring and targeted small group sessions—two of schools’ most powerful, evidence-based weapons in the fight against learning loss—should become intrinsic within K-12 education. Creating flexible, dedicated blocks of time for this kind of learning support will ensure accessibility to all students who stand to benefit.

POLICYMAKERS, ADVOCATES, AND PHILANTHROPISTS CAN:

Shine a light on the urgent needs of special populations.

Advocates, journalists, and government officials must hold educational institutions and the leaders of those institutions accountable for meeting their obligations to all students, especially the most vulnerable. That means reporting not just on the progress of special populations—something many states and school systems don’t do adequately—but also digging deeper within data on these special populations to answer the following questions:

- How are students with mild to moderate disabilities faring?
- What about those with the most complex needs?
- How do their experiences vary by age cohort, from one school system to another, or across other student characteristics like race, income, language status, and prior achievement?



Prioritize real accountability.

State leaders must use the tools at their disposal to ensure that parents have a more accurate picture of their student's academic needs than their report card provides, that educators have the data they need to target individual support as needed, and that state leaders have a clear picture of whether the students furthest behind are making the progress they need.

Tap new sources of talent.

States can help schools identify promising practices to leverage new sources of talent (such as community groups, after-school programs, parents, and college students) and create more flexible credentialing systems with pathways to professional teaching credentials. They should also consider these groups as critical sources for tutoring, mentoring, and other initiatives essential to supporting students that are not well-delivered through traditional one-teacher, one-classroom, 30-student staffing approaches. Also, strategic staffing models like [Opportunity Culture](#) and the [Next Education Workforce](#) initiative should include a specific focus on special populations.

Provide guidance and guardrails for new technology, including AI.

While it is evident that nothing can replace human relationships when it comes to engagement and personalization, policymakers and system leaders must find ways to use technology and reorganize staffing structures to leverage better the quality teachers, aides, and tutors we do have, especially when it comes to meeting the needs of special populations. Promising new AI-powered tutoring models like [Khanmigo](#) should be actively tested with special populations and broader populations to see how they can accelerate teacher intervention efforts. However, providing guidance and policy around AI and other new technological tools is essential.

Be willing to place power and opportunity directly in the hands of families.

It should not take a lawsuit for students to gain access to the education and support they deserve. Ensure that students and their families know they may be entitled to compensatory education for instructional or therapeutic time missed during school closures and that students receive the support they need through interventions tailored to their needs. Students who aren't receiving evidence-based support, such as intensive tutoring, should be allowed to choose their tutors at school district expense. One well-implemented model is the [Indiana Learns](#) program.

The urgent work of improving public education for students with distinct learning needs will benefit all students. It will ensure that coordinated teams of adults collaborate and marshal their diverse talents to identify and address the needs of each child. It will ensure that every student has meaningful, caring relationships with people who understand their needs, value their unique gifts, and can help clear away barriers to their aspirations. It will ensure that every child progresses toward meeting high expectations.

Addressing today's challenges requires immediate and bold action. New school models and interventions can work now. There can be no excuse for failing to adopt them on a large scale. National, state, and local leadership must step up, provide targeted support, and hold institutions accountable.

FAST FACTS

Academic Progress and Recovery

92%
of school
leaders



are concerned about students' ability to meet grade-level standards

Source: [NCES](#)

1
in reading



3 +
in math



Number of **states** where students have recovered to pre-pandemic levels

Source: [ERS](#)

20%
of teachers



report that their students are progressing very well **academically**

Source: [EdChoice](#)

17%
of teachers



report that their students are progressing very well in **social development**

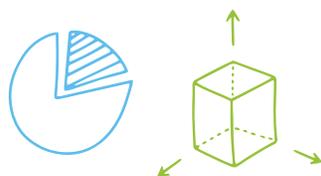
Source: [EdChoice](#)

14%
of teachers



report that their students are progressing very well in **emotional development**

Source: [EdChoice](#)



22%
of American
adults

say they feel positively about the direction of education across the country

Source: [EdChoice](#)

more than

50%
of teenagers

said public K-12 schools were doing a **fair or poor job**



8%
of teenagers

said public K-12 schools were doing an **excellent job**

Source: [New York Times](#)

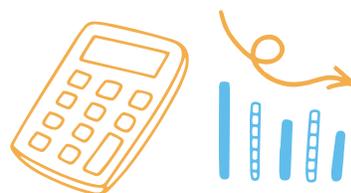
60% of teenagers
said pandemic learning loss was a problem



Source: [New York Times](#)

Economic Impacts

\$31 trillion potential cost in future gross domestic product of pandemic learning loss



Source: [Hoover Institution](#)

Absenteeism and Student Engagement

at least
20%
of students



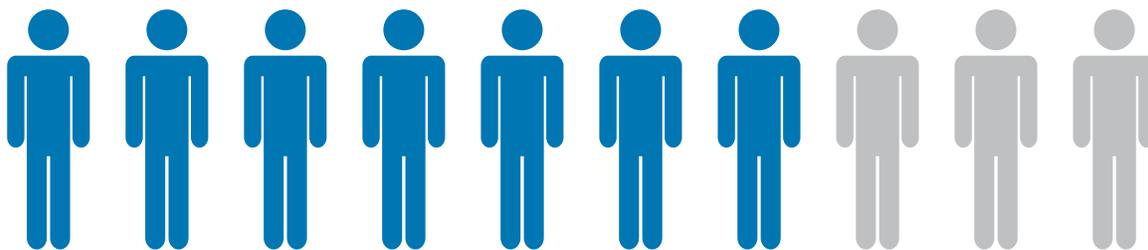
were chronically absent during the 2022-23 school year in 36 states (out of 42 states plus Washington, D.C. included in the data)

Source: [FutureEd](#)

50,000
students

estimated to still be missing from any kind of U.S. school as of Fall 2022

Source: [AP](#)



Source: [EdChoice](#)

7/10 students report that all or most of their peers are **bored in class**

Enrollment Declines and the Fiscal Cliff

4,428



U.S. schools

lost more than 20% enrollment between the 2018-19 and 2021-22 school years

Source: [The74](#)

1 in 3



school districts

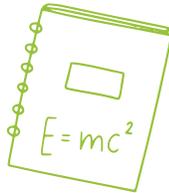
hired more teachers while serving fewer students

Source: [The74](#)

Opportunity Gaps

54%

of schools



with **low** Black and Latine enrollment offer calculus

Source: [U.S. Dept. of Education](#)

35%

of schools

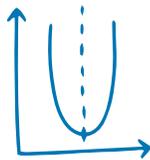


with **high** Black and Latine enrollment offer calculus

Source: [U.S. Dept. of Education](#)

3%

drop



in the number of **rural** 8th-grade students taking Algebra I between 2019 and 2022

Source: [CPE & NSBA](#)

1%

drop



in the number of **urban & suburban** 8th-grade students taking Algebra I between 2019 and 2022

Source: [CPE & NSBA](#)

Mental Health and Well-Being

estimated

17.4
million K-12
students



who have mental health needs

Source: [McKinsey & Company](#)

estimated

1.1
million K-12
students



who can receive services given schools' current mental health provider capacity

Source: [McKinsey & Company](#)



chronically absent students are 3-4x more likely

to also have high levels of mental health concerns compared to students who are seldom absent

Source: [USC](#)

36%
of teenagers

report their mental health is **better or much better** since the pandemic started



Source: [EdChoice](#)

35%
of teenagers

report their mental health is **worse or much worse** since the pandemic started

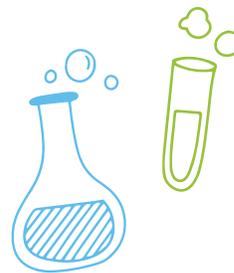


Source: [EdChoice](#)



Situation Report 2024

I. The Good News: We Are Learning What Works— and Doing More of It



Students and teachers are showing signs of recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. According to a 30-state analysis by Stanford, Harvard, and Dartmouth researchers called the [Education Recovery Scorecard](#), the average student has recovered about a third of their pandemic-era learning losses in math and a quarter in reading. States and districts nationwide have implemented tutoring, high-quality curricula, and extended learning time. Rigorous evaluations confirm the effectiveness of these interventions (see, for example, these studies on [tutoring](#) and [summer school](#)) and highlight strategies for broad accessibility. Most hearteningly, there are signs that many long-proven practices are becoming permanent features in many states and school districts.

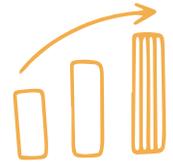
Education systems across the country have recognized the value of relationships and flexibility.

There is a new shared commitment to the idea that schools should be joyful and intellectually engaging places, that children should be known, heard, and valued, and that families are essential to learning. New, more agile, and future-oriented schooling models are growing in number.

Further, there is a growing movement to help educators do their work more sustainably through new teaching models, like team teaching. There are also new technologies like generative AI that can help educators reduce time on burdensome tasks. The bottom line is that the pandemic helped many see that schools are essential not only for learning but also for the social development of young people.

On average, students have begun to recover academically—and proven practices fuel gains.

The Education Recovery Scorecard, the most comprehensive effort to track post-pandemic learning recovery, [found that the average student](#) made 117% of a typical school year’s progress in math during the 2022–23 school year and 108% of a typical year’s progress in reading.



Several states and districts have seen accelerated rates of learning recovery after adopting high-quality instructional materials, aligning professional development, providing high-quality, high-intensity tutoring, and extending the school year through summer or intensive learning academies.

Some states and districts provide hope. In Alabama, students are now ahead of where they were before the pandemic in math. [Research](#) on the Yellowhammer State’s fastest-improving districts suggests its progress has little to do with quick fixes or short-lived, supplemental programs.

In the Piedmont City School District, for example, [teachers and leaders say](#) they planted the seeds for better performance before the pandemic when they increased instructional time, added opportunities for teachers to review student data to identify specific learning gaps, and used targeted small-group instruction to quickly close the gaps they identified in each student’s learning.

The superintendent of the 1,100-student district said that patient implementation of this system over more than five years has helped make Piedmont the fastest-improving district in the state.

“Once we made that decision and stuck to it and made changes and allowed our teachers time to look at the data and dive into the data, it paid off,” [he told the Education Reporting Collaborative](#).



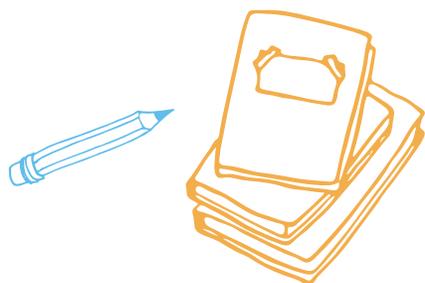
“Our research findings represent a clarion call to return to the basics and do the little things right. We have been in a lot of schools and seen a lot of shiny new buildings and trendy technology. But none of that really matters if you don’t get the right things right—community, cooperation, and care.”

— [David T. Marshall and Andrew Pendola](#), associate professors in the College of Education at Auburn University

A profile of two districts—one in Washington, D.C. and one in Delaware—where students [made significant achievement gains](#) revealed no sweeping policy reforms. These districts simply emphasized high-quality instructional materials and targeted, individualized intervention blocks based on the identified needs of their students. Similarly, in Nebraska, students who used the personalized digital Zearn Math tutoring program consistently saw their math scores [increase](#) at 2.5 times the rate of students who did not. With tutoring, extra learning time, individualized support, and strong relationships delivered by well-prepared teachers using quality curriculum, students benefit.

The evidence piles up: Intensive tutoring works.

Across the country, school systems and communities mobilized teachers, volunteers, and technology to deliver students intensive tutoring and small-group instruction. Evidence that these initiatives have improved learning outcomes is growing.



“Tutoring ranks among the most versatile and potentially transformative educational tools available.”

—[meta-analysis of 89 studies](#) on the impact of tutoring

Indy Summer Learning Labs stands out as a promising initiative. Launched in 2021 by [The Mind Trust](#) and community partners around Indianapolis, the program has since [scaled statewide](#). In the summer of 2024, the organization reported that its program reached more than 5,300 students at 52 sites across Indianapolis. The program also reached Hoosier students in four other regions, serving more than 3,400 in Gary, Salem, South Bend, and Wabash. In 2023, participating students demonstrated a 23% increase in English test scores and a 22% increase in math scores after completing the free (or low-cost) five-week summer program.

In Tennessee, community partners [helped provide 50,000 students with tutoring](#). This effort led to the equivalent of one-third of a year of academic growth for the average kindergarten through second-grade student.

A [growing consensus](#) among researchers, advocates, and educators suggests tutoring is so effective at raising student outcomes that it should become a fundamental feature of schooling.

However, researchers at the CALDER Center [note an important trade-off](#) in the use of tutoring: Many of the studies validating the effectiveness of tutoring initiatives were small-scale trials. Time, staffing, and funding constraints mean school system leaders often have to choose between effective, high-intensity tutoring approaches that may only reach a few students and larger-scale tutoring models that might reach more students with fewer or shorter sessions. Scaling tutoring interventions so they are both effective and widely available is a stumbling block for many school systems.

Studies suggest overcoming these constraints may be possible, including through [online tutoring delivered during the school day](#) and through [short bursts of supplemental instruction](#) from part-time tutors. A variety of tutoring approaches can be effective, especially in essential areas like early literacy skills. For instance, participation in just one in-person reading tutoring program with a part-time tutor more than doubled kindergartner’s likelihood of reaching [grade-level reading proficiency](#).

With the proper support, new sources of tutoring talent—from college students to [trained community members](#)—can ably complement the efforts of classroom teachers.

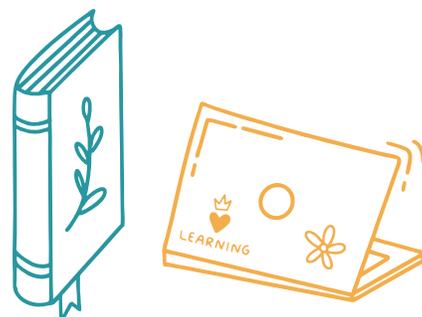
Not only does tutoring have the power to close gaps and accelerate learning, but its benefits can spill over to other aspects of students’ school lives. Math tutoring [can yield improvements](#) in other course grades. Preliminary evidence from Washington, D.C., shows that high-impact tutoring [may also improve attendance](#)—students were less likely to be absent on days they had tutoring, resulting in 2-5 additional days of attendance across a year.

A growing number of school systems, including Ector County Independent School District in Texas, Baltimore City Public Schools in Maryland, Match Charter schools in Boston, and Success Academy charter schools in New York, show a viable path forward by making intensive tutoring a central part of their instructional approach.

The next question that leaders and researchers must address is how systems can ensure wide-scale tutoring is sustainably funded and staffed. This is where sweeping policy reforms may be needed.

More nimble, personalized approaches to education are emerging.

After years of remote and hybrid schooling during the pandemic, the education community has come to understand the importance of customization and flexibility for teachers and students, and how new technological innovations could support alternative models. Districts have also recognized the significance of strong relationships between educators and students, as well as between educators and students’ families.



Customization is the new normal.

Alternative education options and choices such as microschooled, homeschooling, and “à la carte” supplemental services are rising. Educational savings accounts in states like Florida and Arizona fuel these shifts. Despite intense debate, there is still too little evidence to tell if these programs yield better academic outcomes or if their benefits will accrue to students most in need. Regardless, parents will likely continue opting for unique solutions to meet their students’ needs.

AI is on the rise.

The rapid proliferation of generative AI in education may further fuel the trend toward flexibility and personalization. AI-driven tutoring programs, diagnostics and grading systems, and other tools hold promise for personalized instruction geared toward students’ passions and assets. Teachers could become far more efficient with an “AI assistant,” allowing them to focus on building relationships with students and teaching to higher levels of learning. AI may also enable teachers to provide tutoring at a scale never before seen in public education. As we reported last year, the number of students actually receiving high-quality tutoring is possibly as low as [2%](#) of eligible students. It is not implausible to think that within the next five years (or perhaps even sooner) every student could have a personalized AI tutor that is as effective as a human tutor. New virtual tutoring programs are [showing promise](#) on this front. The field will need more technological advancements—and evidence that they work—to get there, but the possibilities are exciting.

Is this the end of the “one teacher, 30 student” classroom?

Teacher labor shortages have been a significant challenge, predating the pandemic. A growing number of schools have been experimenting with ways to allow teachers with specializations to work

in teams, akin to the medical model of healthcare teams. Alternative school models like microschoools often use uncertificated teachers supported by online curricula and other resources in a coaching capacity. Generative AI could radically accelerate these supports.

Early [evidence](#) suggests that participating teachers are more satisfied with their jobs under these models and may even become more effective as a result. More research is needed, but if found to be more effective, these models could fundamentally alter how teachers teach.

Relationships are crucial to student success.

Thoughtful use of technology and more effective differentiation of educators' diverse talents can free up teachers to spend more time on a critical component of their work that often gets overtaken by other priorities: parent communication. [A TNTP and Learning Heroes](#) report found that schools with more robust parent engagement and trust before the pandemic saw better student outcomes than those with weaker engagement, echoing earlier findings based on interviews with school leaders at the height of school closures. Similarly, the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) [found](#) that countries with more frequent teacher-family communication saw fewer academic setbacks during the pandemic. When teachers have the bandwidth to communicate with parents, students are better off.

The bottom line: Effective in-person learning matters.

The pandemic clearly illustrated that in-person instruction is essential for academic growth. The pandemic's deepest losses and quickest recoveries occurred in math—the subject in which in-person instruction or the lack thereof can make the most significant impact.

It also became painfully clear to students and parents during the pandemic that school is an essential place for the social development of young people. In interviews conducted for this report by researchers at the Center for Economic and Social Research at USC, several parents reported that their children developed a new appreciation for in-person schooling during COVID-related closures, and became much more motivated to excel when they returned to in-person learning.





II. The Bad News: Proven Strategies Are Not Reaching Enough Students

Now, the bad news: The recovery has been slow and uneven and has exacerbated inequities. Schools and districts face workforce challenges, fiscal issues, increased mental health struggles, and student disengagement. Too many students whose learning was severely interrupted during the pandemic still aren't getting the support they need to recover. Too few schools and districts are implementing the things we know work. Promising new models and tools are not being tested and scaled fast enough.

Perhaps most importantly, many of the negative trends we document here could have long-term consequences for our educational systems: in particular, lower academic expectations, pernicious absenteeism, youth mental health struggles, and disinterest from politicians and the general public in prioritizing academic recovery. The pandemic did not cause these trends, but it did exacerbate them. If they continue, we risk leaving behind another generation of students.

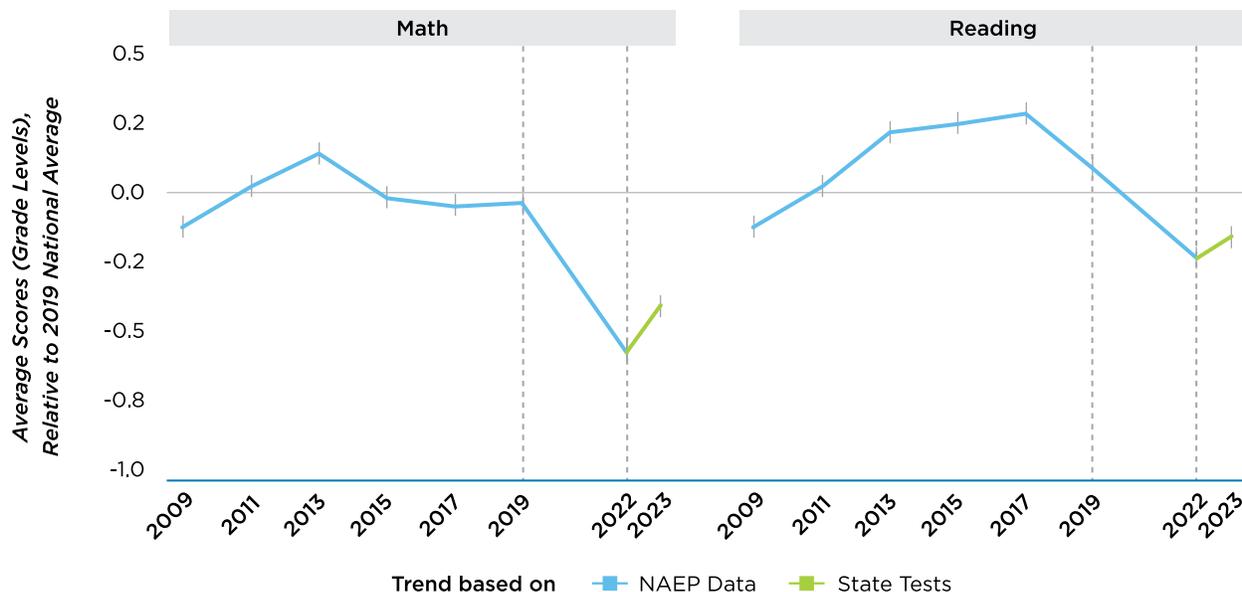
Academic recovery and exacerbated inequities abound.

Recovery has been slow and uneven.

The flip side of the good news described in the previous section is that the average American student in school during the pandemic is less than halfway to a full academic recovery. Despite much effort from educators, this is not fast enough.

Figure 1: Academic Recovery Is Happening Too Slowly

Trend in Average Test Scores, 2009-2023, 30 States



Source: Data from Erin Fahle et al., “*The First Year of Pandemic Recovery: A District-Level Analysis*,” *Education Recovery Scorecard*, Center for Education Policy Research and the Educational Opportunity Project (January 2024): 7.

Educators’ perspectives confirm what the test score data show: students are not where they should be academically (see Figure 1). Nationally representative survey data show that [92% of public school leaders](#) are concerned about their students meeting academic standards this year.

Recovery strategies are not reaching enough students.

As CRPE [reported](#) last year, far too many students who could benefit from learning recovery interventions are not participating in them. In Louisiana, just [1% of students](#) eligible to participate in a state literacy tutoring program actually did so.

Using online tutoring to make access more effective sounds appealing in theory, but in practice, buyer beware. Some [states](#) and [districts](#) have abandoned online tutoring programs after finding they were under-used by students or achieved underwhelming results.

While summer learning presented a valuable opportunity to support students’ academic recovery, gaps in access and participation limited its efficacy (see Figure 2). [Research](#) from the RAND Corporation found that districts across the country typically struggled to get even half of their eligible students to enroll in summer programs.

Figure 2: Students Are Not Participating in Summer Learning Programs

Average Percentage of Eligible Students Who Enrolled in Districts' Largest Summer Programs, by Whether the Program Had an Eligibility Restriction



Source: Data from Melissa Kay Diliberti and Heather L. Schwartz, “[School Was in Session This Summer, but Less Than Half of Eligible Students Enrolled: Selected Findings from the Fall 2023 American School District Panel Survey](#),” RAND, ASDP, and CRPE (May 2024): 13.

Similarly, an [evaluation of recovery strategies](#) in eight districts by the CALDER Center found participation rates between 1 and 20 percent for tutoring and small-group instruction among students in eligible grades. The targeted intervention with the highest participation rate reached just over half of all eligible students.

While school district tutoring offerings have failed to reach large numbers of students who stand to benefit, the number of private tutoring centers has tripled over the past quarter century, a forthcoming [study](#) by Edward Kim, Joshua Goodman, and Martin West shows. However, this growth is concentrated in areas with high income and parental education. These findings confirm what most people know intuitively: parents who can afford tutoring buy it. This trend has significant implications for equitable access to learning recovery and acceleration, as well as college entrance exam preparation. This is why it’s so important that public schools provide tutoring to students whose families cannot afford it.

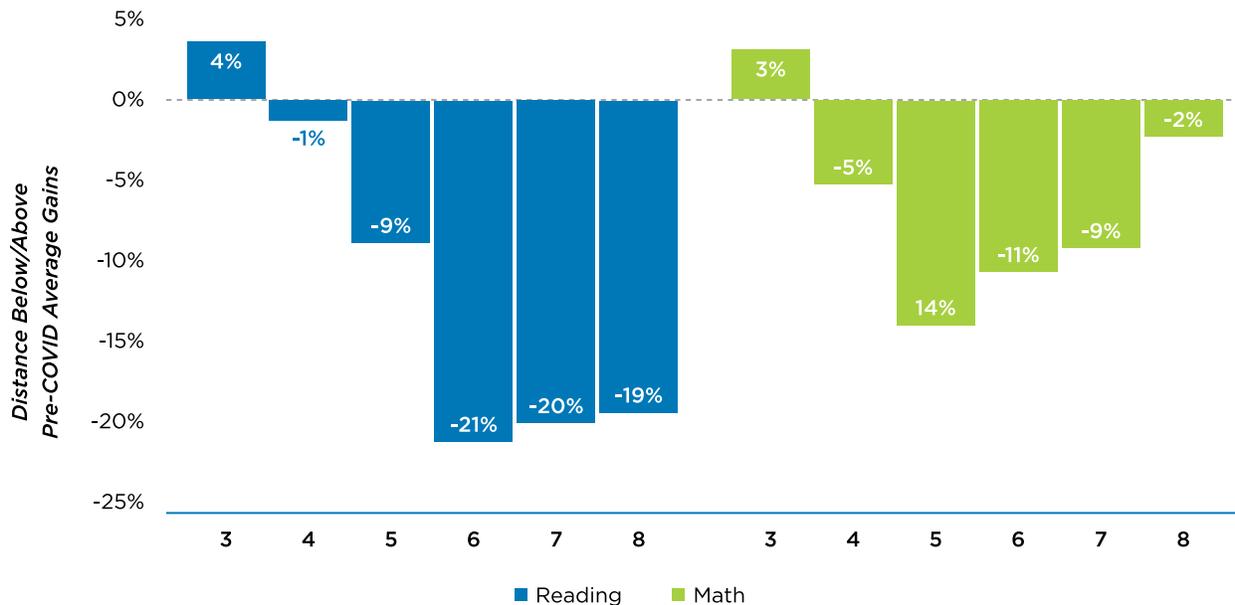
Older students have little to no time left.

CRPE also [reported](#) last year that the slow pace of recovery was particularly detrimental for older students who have little or no time left in the K-12 system. They will suffer the consequences of trying to enter the workforce or enroll in higher education without the skills and knowledge they would have had without the pandemic. They will pay the price in missed opportunities and earnings for the failure of others to take urgent and strategic action on their behalf.

Further, there is growing concern that students in slightly younger cohorts, such as those currently preparing to enter high school, are progressing at a slower pace than similar students pre-pandemic. [An analysis of results](#) from the NWEA’s Measures of Academic Progress shows that middle and late elementary grades continue to lag pre-pandemic levels of academic progress, suggesting they could be falling further behind—especially in reading (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Middle and Late Elementary Students Falling Further Behind

Fall-to-Spring Growth During 2023-24 Relative to Pre-COVID Trends by Grade



Source: Data from Karyn Lewis and Megan Kuhfeld, [“Recovery Still Elusive: 2023-24 Student Achievement Highlights Persistent Achievement Gaps and a Long Road Ahead,”](#) NWEA Research (July 2024): 3.

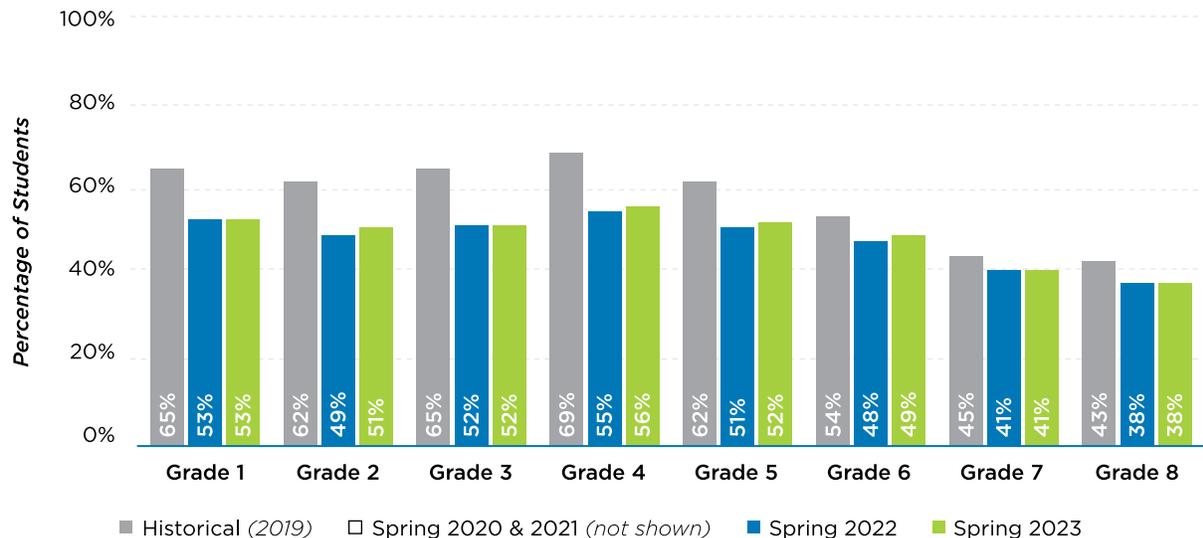
Younger students also continue to struggle.

Data for younger students brings more reason to believe that, despite the progress made in many areas, recovery will be a long slog. An August 2023 report [from Curriculum Associates](#) showed that while students of all ages saw declining rates of grade-level achievement after the pandemic, students in younger grades face larger gaps (see Figure 4). Even more concerning, academic recovery—in the words of the report’s authors—has been “slow and uneven” and “points to the persistent and unprecedented impact of the pandemic on all parts of children’s lives, from preschool through their elementary school years, and likely beyond.”



Figure 4: Younger Students Are Struggling and Not Catching Up

Percentage of Students at Grade Level in Reading by Year



Source: Data from Curriculum Associates Research, “[State of Student Learning in 2023: Reading and Mathematics Annual Report](#),” Curriculum Associates (August 2023): 15.

New [June 2024 data](#) from Curriculum Associates based on spring assessment show that while older students are gradually catching up to historical learning growth trends, younger students are either falling behind or holding steady below historical trends in reading and math. What’s more, while older students who are one or more grade levels behind appear to be making some progress catching back up to grade level, the gaps between students on grade level and those who are behind appear to be widening for many younger cohorts of students. These differences in performance by placement level, the report authors warn, could mean that signs of “recovery at the aggregate level may be driven by pooling together these two diverging trends.”

These widening disparities for the youngest students also emerge by race and income. Schools with larger shares of Black and Hispanic students or in communities with lower median household incomes tended to fall further behind historical learning trajectories.

In other words—beneath the averaged scores showing positive signs lies a more troubling reality. Some students are surging ahead, while others, often those who suffered the greatest disruptions during the pandemic, are falling further behind.

The June 2024 report posits several potential causes of this growing divide between younger and older students, each of which has evidence to support it: Some students might have entered school with more learning gaps due to disruptions to early childhood education. Students who received [less in-person preschool instruction](#) during the pandemic entered kindergarten with more gaps in their literacy and numeracy skills. Early learners [tended to have a more difficult time](#) with virtual instruction during the pandemic. Interventions targeted at older students might also be more effective than those aimed at the youngest.

There’s evidence that each of these possible causes could share some blame, but the bottom line, as the June 2024 Curriculum Associates paper warns, is that large numbers of young children “may have missed a critical window during which foundational skills develop. Less-developed foundational skills may lead to compounded gaps in learning over time.” Addressing this challenge for “Covid babies” will require new efforts to close learning gaps before they grow into chasms.

Inequities are widening.

Of course, there are few truly “average” students. Every young person who was affected by the pandemic had a different experience with remote learning and academic recovery. While many states and districts have bounced back quickly, [too many have not](#), and students who were already at a disadvantage have fallen further behind.

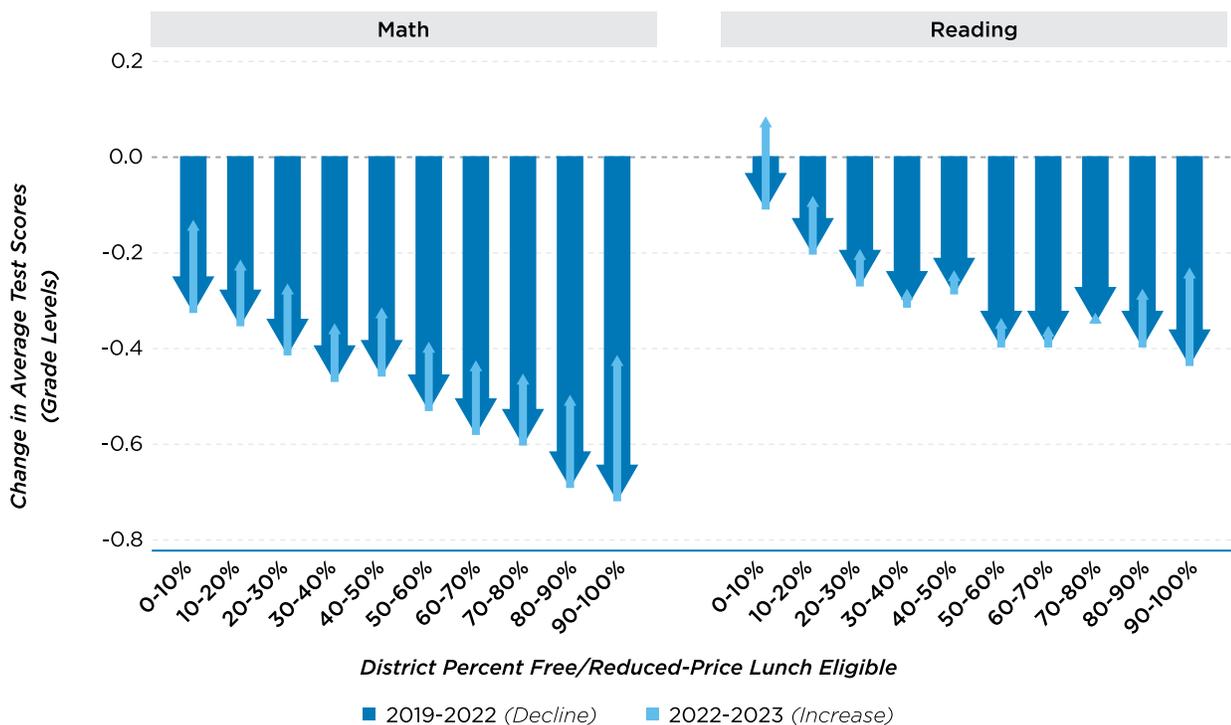
The most recent look at long-term trends from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) shows an alarming pattern: The gaps between the lowest- and highest-achieving students are growing wider.

During the pandemic, 9-year-olds scoring in the 10th percentile on the [NAEP](#) saw their math scores drop 13 points. Those in the 90th percentile saw their scores drop just 3 points. Since the test format changed in 2004, the gap between these groups has grown 20% wider, with most of that widening occurring between 2020 and 2022. Math results for 13-year-olds show a similar pattern.

The Education Recovery Scorecard found that students in predominantly low-income school districts saw larger initial learning losses. Low-income students within school districts still have a long way to go, while some of their highest-income peers have already made a full recovery, particularly in reading (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Low-Income Students Making a Slower Recovery

Test Score Decline and Recovery, 2019-2023, by Subject and District Poverty Rate

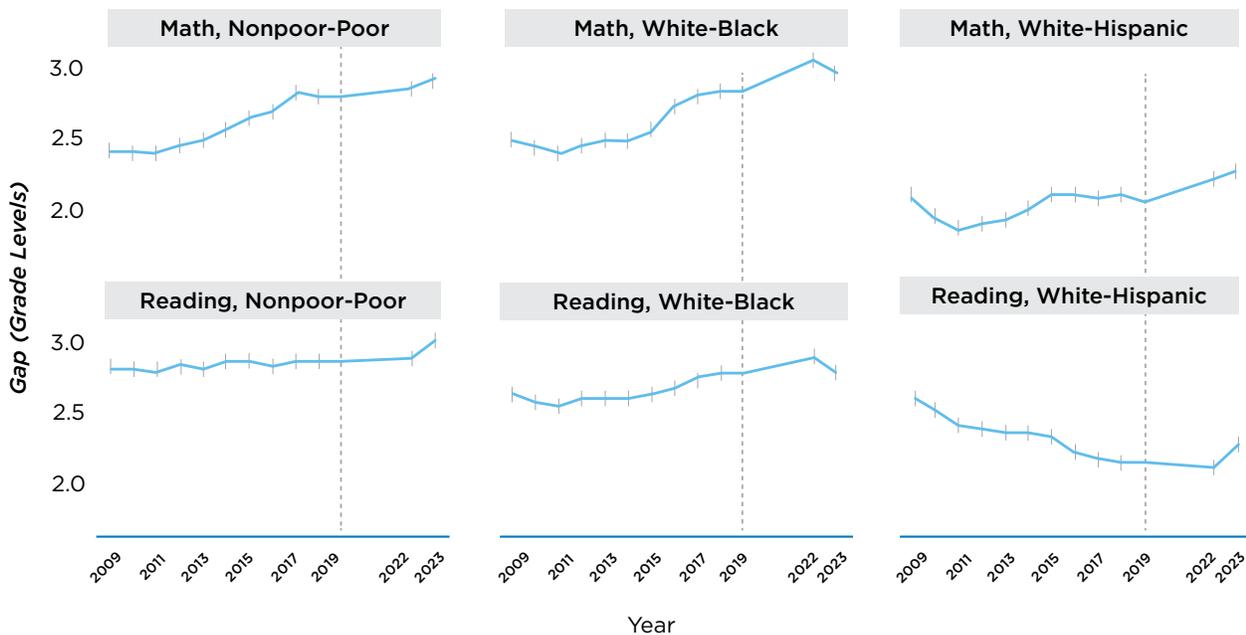


Source: Data from Erin Fahle et al., “[The First Year of Pandemic Recovery: A District-Level Analysis](#),” Education Recovery Scorecard, Center for Education Policy Research and the Educational Opportunity Project (January 2024): 12.

The same report from the Education Recovery Scorecard—“[The First Year of Pandemic Recovery: A District-Level Analysis](#)”—shows that (for the states where data was available) the white-Black gap was still slightly larger in 2023 than it was in 2019, particularly in math. Likewise, the white-Hispanic gap was larger in 2023 than in 2019 (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Test Score Gaps Widened During the Pandemic

National Trend in Test Score Gaps 2009-2023 Among States with Available Race (20 States) and Economic Status (15 States) Data



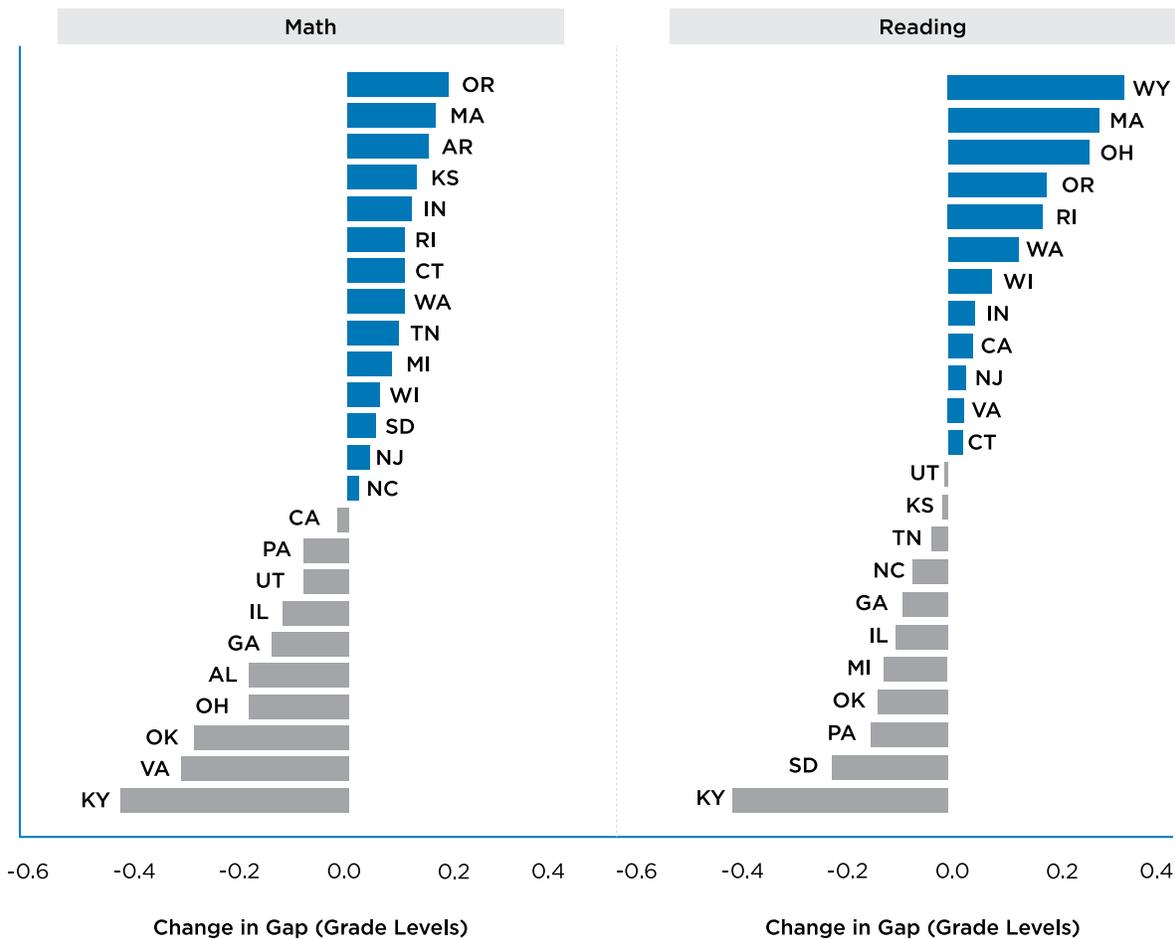
Source: Data from Erin Fahle et al., “[The First Year of Pandemic Recovery: A District-Level Analysis](#),” Education Recovery Scorecard, Center for Education Policy Research and the Educational Opportunity Project (January 2024): 24.

State-by-state data also underscore the uneven shape of the recovery (see Figure 7). While a majority of states in the study made at least some progress in closing their gaps between high- and low-poverty school districts after 2022, in many states, the gaps continued to grow.



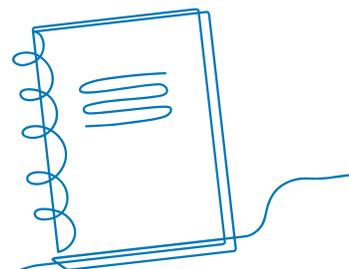
Figure 7: In Some States, Achievement Gaps Are Still Growing

Progress in Narrowing Achievement Gap, 2022-23, Between High- and Low-Poverty Districts, by State



Source: Data from Erin Fahle et al., *“The First Year of Pandemic Recovery: A District-Level Analysis,”* Education Recovery Scorecard, Center for Education Policy Research and the Educational Opportunity Project (January 2024): 25.

According to *“The First Year of Pandemic Recovery: A District-Level Analysis,”* from the Education Recovery Scorecard, in districts with poverty rates (using free and reduced-price lunch as a proxy) below 10%, students have made a full recovery in reading and even gained some ground. Districts at the remaining poverty levels have languished. In math, districts at the highest rates of poverty have nearly three times as much academic ground to make up as those with the lowest rates of poverty.

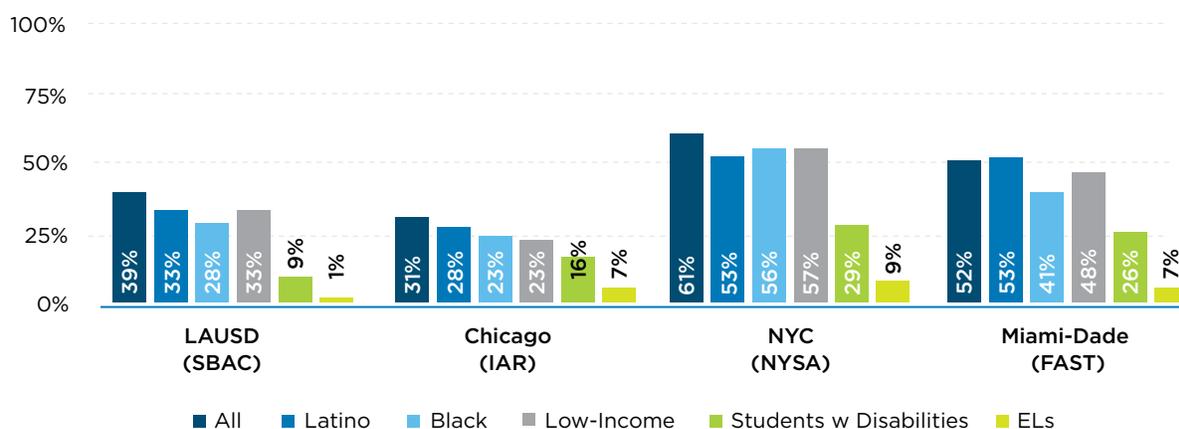


Local data mirrored the national trends, and showed how the pandemic shut entire student populations out of educational opportunity (see Figure 8).

The Los Angeles–based nonprofit Families in Schools released a [grim report](#) on literacy in the city, where less than 40% of eighth graders met proficiency standards on the 2022–23 state tests. Proficiency rates were closer to 30% for Black and Latine students, under 10% for students with special needs, and nearly zero for English learners. The same general trends hold for three other large urban districts (however, it’s important to note students eventually evolve out of the English learner category as their English proficiency skills develop, and longitudinal data generally does not specifically categorize students who were once English learners).

Figure 8: Local Data Reinforce National Trends

Grade 8 ELA Proficiency Rates for Major Public School Systems, 2023



Sources: Data from the [California Assessment of Student Performance \(2024\)](#), the [Illinois State Board of Education \(2024\)](#), the [New York State Education Department \(2024\)](#), and the [Florida Department of Education \(2024\)](#).

Together, these data show that the impact of the pandemic and uneven pace of recovery will have long-term consequences for income, racial inequity, and social mobility in the United States.

Academic expectations are fundamentally lower.

As we reported [last year](#), there is a very concerning trend (beginning before the pandemic) of inflating grades and loosen graduation requirements, reversing decades of efforts to increase academic rigor. Sometimes what looks like progress can mask a problem. In California, for example, graduation rates rose from 83.6% in 2020–21 to 87% in 2021–22. However, the state’s chronic absenteeism rate has [more than doubled](#), from 14.3% to 30% in the same period. And, of course, test scores have declined during this period, as we presented in earlier sections.

Data from college entrance exams also suggest that more students are graduating high school with major gaps in their academic preparedness. These exams provide an imperfect national snapshot because the characteristics of students taking the tests shift from year to year. With that caveat, [results from the 2023 ACT](#) showed that the share of test-takers meeting college-readiness benchmarks was at a [three-decade low](#), and more than 43% of test-takers met none of the exam’s four major benchmarks. The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education warns colleges to [expect less-prepared](#) first-year cohorts in coming years due to pandemic learning loss.

These trends have deeply troubling implications. There was an understandable impulse to loosen high school grading and graduation requirements temporarily at the height of the pandemic (Oregon, for example, [suspended](#) until 2029 a requirement that students demonstrate basic mastery of core academic skills), but students and the U.S. economy and civic society will not be well-served long term by a less well-educated generation of citizens.

Stanford Economist Eric Hanushek estimated the total economic cost of pandemic-related learning loss to be [\\$31 trillion](#). Students already struggling with low grades and test scores will most likely bear the brunt of this economic loss.

“Even small impacts of the learning loss on future economic growth impose enormous costs on society.”

—Douglas O. Staiger,
Dartmouth College,
for [The 74](#)

Tightening fiscal realities, educator fatigue, and student disengagement threaten further progress.

School systems buffeted by these already-concerning trends are running into additional challenges.

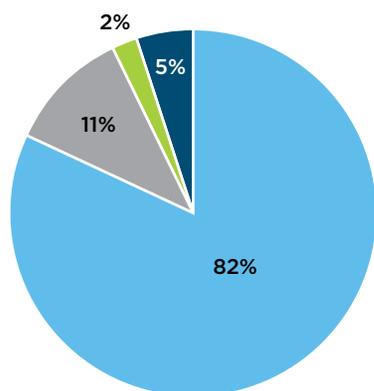
The morale of the U.S. teacher workforce is at a low point.

While [surveys in early 2023](#) suggested that teachers’ on-the-job sentiment has recovered to pre-pandemic levels, it remains low compared to the sentiments of other professionals, and [more recent surveys](#) paint a concerning picture. Approximately 8 in 10 teachers said they find the job overwhelming, that they can’t get all their tasks completed during a typical school day, and that the state of education has gotten worse over the past five years. [According to the Pew Research Center](#), more than half of all teachers expect conditions to worsen over the next five years (see Figure 9).

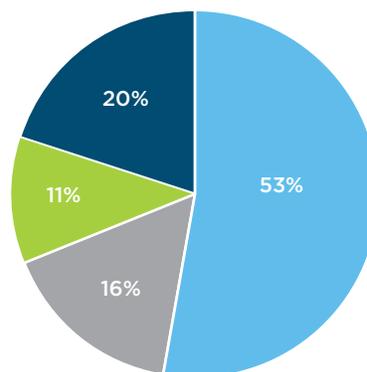
Figure 9: Teacher Morale Is at a Low Point

Percentage of Public K-12 Teachers Who Say...

The overall state of public K-12 education has gotten ___ compared with five years ago.



They expect the state of K-12 education to be ___ five years from now.



■ Better ■ Worse ■ Neither better nor worse ■ Not sure/Refused

Source: Data from Luona Lin, Kim Parker, and Juliana Menasce Horowitz, [“What’s It Like to Be a Teacher in America Today?”](#) Pew Research Center (April 2024).

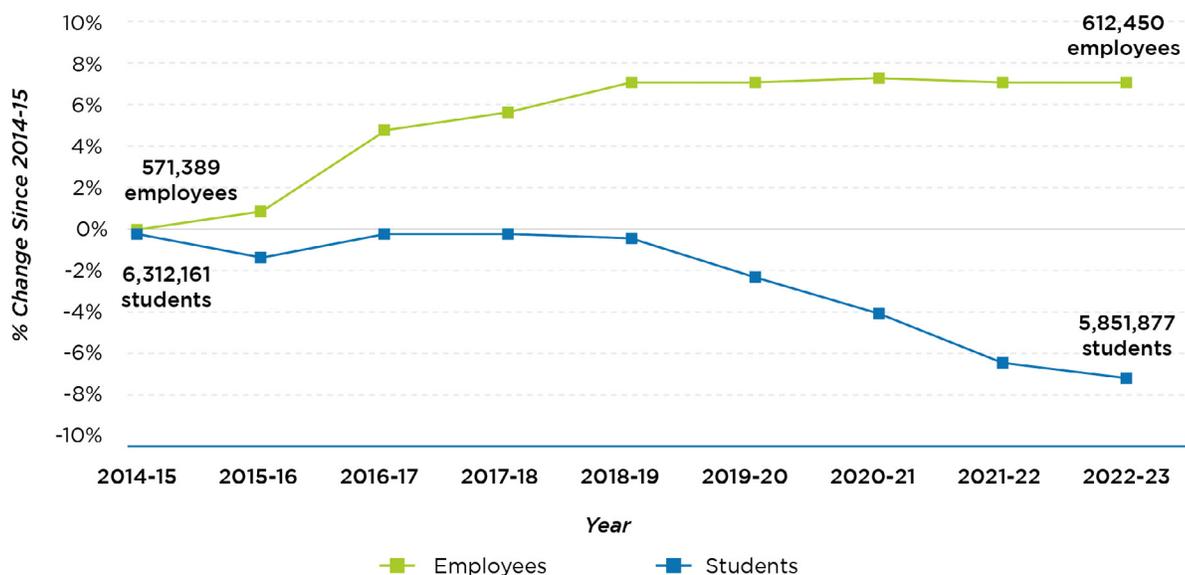
A newly-updated working paper analyzed the state of [the teaching profession](#) over several decades across several metrics (occupational prestige, job satisfaction, etc.). According to the paper, “The current state of the teaching profession is at or near its lowest levels in 50 years.”

Declining enrollment is a new source of fiscal strain and political turmoil for districts.

Enrollment declines and half-filled school buildings will force a reckoning in many districts. School districts across the country, especially in urban areas, have seen significant declines in enrollment. [California embodies this trend](#): Over the past decade, public school staffing has grown by 8% while student enrollment has decreased by nearly the same amount (see Figure 10).

Figure 10: In California, Enrollment Has Declined as Staffing Has Increased

Staffing Versus Enrollment Trends (Cumulative Percent Change Since 2014-15)



Source: Data from Marguerite Roza and Maggie Cicco, “[California’s School Funding Crisis Has Arrived—Here’s How Leaders Can Dig Out](#),” *The San Francisco Standard* (May 2024).

According to one [analysis](#) of federal data, public schools nationwide added 173,000 students and 159,000 employees in the 2022–23 school year, including 15,000 additional teachers. On a per-student basis, staffing levels hit an “all-time high.” This analysis found that nearly one in three school districts across the country hired more teachers while serving fewer students.

And things are about to get worse. Enrollment in U.S. public schools is [expected](#) to drop by 5.5% nationally through 2031. Just 11 states, concentrated in the northern Great Plains, the northern Rockies, and the Southeast, are expected to see flat or growing enrollment.

These declines are going to put pressure on budgets in school systems across the country. Thousands of schools [are at risk of closure](#). School closures can disrupt students’ lives and [harm their academic progress](#), particularly in math, and in some cases, the negative effects follow students for life—but these harms can be reduced, or [even reversed](#) if districts make a concerted effort to ease students’ transitions and ensure that they wind up in higher-performing schools.

Refusing to close schools in the face of enrollment declines [can carry its own costs](#), tying up resources that could otherwise improve teaching and learning. [School boards grappling with](#) under-enrolled schools note that keeping these campuses open can force them to combine classes or cut back on electives, counselors, and other student support.

The competing pressures to either close schools or maintain under-enrolled campuses pose a politically fraught fiscal dilemma for school districts.

All of this comes as public school districts face another source of competition from a rapidly expanding number of state school choice policies that allow parents to pay for private school tuition or a la carte learning with public funds via Education Savings Accounts and school vouchers. According to EdChoice (an organization that tracks private school choice programs), in 2023 alone, 18 states expanded or enacted new private school choice programs. [Approximately 22 million students](#)—or 40%—nationwide are eligible for a private choice program, a 60% increase since just two years ago.

Federal pandemic recovery funds will expire before students have fully recovered.

Some districts' efforts to stem the loss of falling attendance and decreased academic achievement are temporary add-ons, like tutoring programs, supplemental instruction, or short-term staffing surges that might not survive when the federal funds dry up.



Hawaii, for example, [invested pandemic relief funding](#) in additional school counselors who helped combat chronic absenteeism. However, this increased support will expire with the supplemental funding unless the state finds replacement funding.

Districts across the country such as [Dallas Independent School District](#) and [Nashville Metropolitan Public Schools](#) relied on federal funding to pay for recovery strategies like summer learning, increased instructional time, and high-dosage tutoring. This raises the possibility that recovery efforts will run out of funds before students' recovery is complete, even in systems that prioritized evidence-based approaches to help students catch up.

Other potential disruptions cloud the horizon for students and families.

Survey data from the National Association for the Education of Young Children suggests that many childcare centers [will close](#) when pandemic aid ends—a development that could trickle up to K-12 education in the form of gaps in young students' preparedness and the ability of teachers who are also parents of young children to reliably show up for work.

Labor shortages are a barrier to effective academic and mental health services.



Currently, an estimated 17.4 million K-12 students have mental-health needs, but schools' mental-health providers have the capacity to serve only 1.1 million students, [according to a McKinsey analysis](#)—more than 16 million students with mental health needs are unserved in schools.

Nearly 40% of school principals cited “inadequate access to licensed mental health professionals” as a [major barrier](#) to providing mental health support for their students, according to national data from earlier this year. Even schools that are fully staffed today will face challenges. Funding reductions will likely mean layoffs of counselors and cuts to mental health programs funded by these dollars.

New [NCES survey data](#) show that the proportion of schools that offered mental health assessments or services to their students [dropped](#) between 2020 and 2022, despite 90% of schools reporting that they increased social-emotional support for students during the pandemic.



Mental health struggles and student disengagement remain critical issues.

As CRPE has reported in previous years, students are facing ongoing and serious challenges that affect their behavior, attitudes, and mental health that can lead to persistent, chronic absenteeism and other forms of student disengagement such as stress, boredom, and distraction. Social media is a contributing factor, but there is reason to believe that the causes go much deeper.

Absenteeism and disengagement are significant and often intransigent barriers to recovery.

Kids cannot learn if they are not in school, and too many are missing in action.

Chronic absenteeism ([defined](#) as “students missing at least 10% of school days”) has reached crisis levels, all but locking in pandemic-related learning losses for the most absent students. Rates nearly [doubled](#) since pre-pandemic days—from approximately 15% in 2018 to 28% of students in the 2022-23 school year. Chronic absenteeism is even higher in districts with higher populations of [students of color](#) and [students experiencing poverty](#).

Research from before and during the pandemic shows that chronic absenteeism is associated with worse student outcomes. Chronic absence in [preschool](#) is associated with less developed numeracy and social skills, and (perhaps unsurprisingly) chronic absence in [middle](#) and [high school](#) is associated with lower rates of high school graduation.

One [study](#) found that among fourth graders, absenteeism accounted for 27% of declines in test scores for math and 45% for reading. Among eighth graders, the report attributed 16% of the drop in math and 36% of the drop in reading to absenteeism.

Nat Malkus of American Enterprise Institute, one of the main catalogers of pandemic absenteeism data, penned an article discussing COVID-19’s [lasting effects on schooling](#). “Pandemic exceptionalism changed behaviors” around academic and attendance expectations to the detriment of students and the school system.

As one superintendent recently told CRPE researchers: “We essentially trained parents to keep students home for any reason, including a case of the sniffles.” It will take a long time to untrain them.

A recent article in *The 74* summarizes the scope of chronic absenteeism in many large districts and presents factors that [might explain attendance declines](#), including eroding student mental health, increasing teacher absenteeism, greater access to and comfort with remote learning tools, and a rising minimum wage (which makes skipping school for a job more enticing).

A number of recent studies suggest that schools and districts should address the root causes of absenteeism rather than implement quick fixes that may not [work for the highest-need students](#) or that cannot be sustained over time.

However, direct communication and outreach from schools could help. Research shows that Illinois schools with stronger [family outreach and engagement](#) had the lowest absenteeism. Additionally, an Ohio attendance task force released a report highlighting [direct-to-student outreach](#) efforts, like text nudges, as effective curbs to absenteeism.

Young people are still struggling with mental health.

According to a 2023 [report by the CDC](#), over 40% of high school students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, a significant increase from pre-pandemic levels.

Dr. Vivek Murthy, the U.S. Surgeon General, emphasized the urgency of this crisis, [stating](#), “Our obligation to act is not just medical—it is moral. The mental health of our children should be a national priority.”

The trend lines do not appear to be improving. Just 3 in 10 teens say they are satisfied with their mental health, according to the latest surveys [published by EdChoice and Morning Consult](#). Recent parent survey data [published by USC](#) note worsening reports of child mental health. Concerns are greatest for teen girls (who primarily are suffering from anxiety and depression) and preteen boys (who primarily are dealing with attention and behavioral issues).

These issues may help explain the rise in chronic absenteeism, which itself is both a cause and effect of mental health challenges. The same USC parent survey data showed strong relationships between parent reports of children’s mental health and children’s academic performance and absenteeism. For instance, 23% of children on track for chronic absenteeism are rated “abnormal” on a commonly used scale of student mental health versus just 7% of children with five or fewer absences.

The USC survey also found that children with more mental health and behavioral challenges tended to struggle more academically. It’s not clear whether the mental health challenges caused the academic issues or the reverse, and the reality likely varies for individual children. The surveys found gaps in access to mental health services for the students who need them the most. Low-income students were nearly five times as likely as the most affluent students to seek mental health services if they were offered, but their schools were less likely to offer them.

Young people are bored and distracted in school—and social media and smartphones are increasingly blamed.

Social media and other smartphone-related distractions [contribute](#) to mental health crises, with studies indicating that excessive use correlates with higher rates of anxiety and depression. Other experts [have cast doubt](#) on the role of mobile devices and noted that declining youth mental health appears to be a phenomenon in primarily English-speaking countries, whereas the proliferation of mobile phones and social media is not.

Concern about mental health and classroom distraction have prompted a growing number of school systems—including the nation’s [second-largest school district](#) and [third-largest state](#)—to ban smartphone use during class, with others poised to follow.

Teens also report more mundane barriers to learning that signal a lack of purpose or interest in school. According to Morning Consult and EdChoice, 7 in 10 teens report that all or most of their peers are bored in class. Only 2 in 10 report that all or most of their peers want to be in school, and 3 in 10 view it as a “waste of time.”

More [than half of teens](#) report that all or most of their peers use phones in class. A [report](#) from Pew Research Center found that 33% of all teachers and 72% of high school teachers report that cell phone use in classrooms is a major problem. Teachers also reported struggles enforcing school-level phone use policies. PISA [found that digital distraction](#) inhibited classroom instruction across industrialized countries.



One thing is for sure: Navigating this uncertain body of evidence amid pressure from parents and politicians and helping young people stay focused on learning will remain a challenge for educators and school system leaders for years to come. Every teacher, whether they like it or not, will continue to compete with TikTok for young people’s attention.

These issues have largely faded from public discourse.

We must do better to level with parents and the public about how schools are doing and how students are faring. Chronic absenteeism is a significant hurdle for learning recovery; yet, in [38 State of the State speeches](#) given in 2024, governors didn’t pay the issue much attention.



There also is not enough communication about pandemic learning recovery in general. In our own new analysis, we find that few states are making it possible for the public to understand whether students have recovered from the pandemic, whether chronic absenteeism rates are improving, which students are recovering, and which are not. We [analyzed](#) the report card websites of all 50 states plus Washington, D.C., and found that just seven states (Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Michigan, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee) made it easy to see longitudinal performance data at the school level across the seven performance indicators we included in our analysis.

In contrast, 16 states flunked our analysis—they made it all but impossible to find and track longitudinal performance trends. These results make clear that interested parents in many states did not have access to performance trends post-COVID, unless they were capable of conducting substantial data analysis. Beyond this, many of the state websites were borderline unusable—even for education policy experts and researchers who are used to digging through messy data. For example, Louisiana’s report card website is essentially a collection of huge spreadsheets. It presents no charts or explanatory graphs, and the data is often outdated.

On the other hand, Oklahoma’s school report cards are readable and easy to navigate. They make it easy to examine longitudinal trends and compare the performance of students from different subgroups. While every state report card could be improved, Oklahoma offered a model that other states could emulate if they want to increase transparency for parents.

Survey evidence from the last year suggests that [parents often aren’t aware](#) that their child is struggling academically. [Surveys from Gallup and Learning Heroes](#) suggest that parents tend to base their beliefs about their child’s academic performance on the child’s report card rather than their standardized test performance, so to the extent that grading standards have dropped since reopening—one [report](#) calls this “B-flation”—many parents believe that their children are doing better academically than they really are. A recent interview study of parents confirmed this “[parent-expert disconnect](#),” also finding that parents express a great deal of confidence in student resilience, even among those students most harmed by the pandemic. When parents do express concern, it is often about “other” kinds of children than their own—for instance, those from a different demographic or geographic group.

Separately, researchers have [documented a divergence](#) between standardized test scores (which declined during COVID-19) and course grades (which, on average, did not) using North Carolina administrative data. Learning Heroes, one of the organizations behind the “B-flation” report, recently expanded its [Go Beyond Grades initiative](#), an information campaign to help parents understand that their child’s grades may overstate their child’s academic achievement.

Yet, politicians are not discussing these challenges. States are not reporting on progress. Parents are getting a misleadingly rosy picture from report cards. It should be no wonder that the American public does not see continued academic recovery and other K-12 challenges as worthy of their attention.

For example, in Washington state, education was the top concern of voters in polls conducted from 1995 to 2018. However, according to the [Seattle Times](#), only 5% of voters surveyed in 2023 said the state legislature should prioritize K-12 education. “It’s just dropped off the agenda,” said Stuart Elway, who conducted the polls. This public complacency came at the same time that the state slid from 12th in the country in 2015 to 27th in 2023 on NAEP’s fourth-grade math proficiency results.

If left unaddressed, the pandemic will leave an indelible mark on public education.

All of the above—slow and uneven recovery, mounting challenges in early grades, inadequate access to evidence-based interventions, and tightening fiscal realities—point to a fundamentally altered public education system. In the coming years, schools will have to contend with a wider range of learning needs and gaps, even as federal relief dollars disappear and enrollment numbers and state dollars continue to decline.

The bad news, then, continues to be sobering, daunting, and discouraging. The rate of recovery is far from adequate. The expected adverse impacts of preexisting inequities have come to fruition. The immediate challenges that schools and school systems face in order to shift course are truly formidable. Educators will need to help students overcome distractions and distress. More families will opt out of public education altogether—unless school systems work to understand and respond to their needs.

Adapting to this new reality and supporting a full recovery for every student will require schools and systems to rethink the ways they use time, talent, and money. It will require them to build individual relationships with students and genuine partnerships with families. This shift can only happen with concerted effort at every level of public education—from the state and federal government to school and system leaders to business and community groups. We all must recognize that the cost of inaction in future economic activity and squandered human potential is too great to ignore.





III. The Pandemic's Toll on Vulnerable Students: A Warning Bell for Systemic Reform

Every June, a significant number of students graduate from high school or drop out of school without the opportunity to shore up their grades and skills before they head off to higher education or into the workforce. This is a broad trend across socioeconomic and racial lines. However, the impact is concentrated in certain groups of students: previously low-performing students, students from low-income families, and students from special populations with unique needs. These special populations include students designated as English learners, students with disabilities, and students experiencing homelessness or living in foster care. While these students may have specific legal entitlements to support services, they are nonetheless more vulnerable to falling through the cracks.

There is also growing evidence that school districts face growing challenges that will prevent them from making much more progress than they already have on behalf of these students. If policymakers and educators do not get serious about ensuring these students have access to proven interventions, then we will continue to see the educational impact of the pandemic reverberate for many years, both in our schools and in our economy.

Readers should note that the data and themes in this section bear a striking resemblance to those in the sections above. In particular, we document lower expectations, staffing challenges, mental health issues, student disengagement, and an education system that is designed to put students in boxes rather than one that is designed to address individual needs. Though these issues are present for all students, they can be even more extreme for special populations, acting as a warning bell that the system is not functioning as it should.

Students with disabilities were too often ignored, with serious consequences.

Two dozen interviews with parents of students in special populations (conducted in Spring 2024 by our research partners at the USC Center for Economic and Social Research) revealed a spectrum of pandemic experiences, from success stories to heart-wrenching struggles. These families had a median income of \$40,000–\$49,000.

While some families received adequate support and adapted well, most faced significant hardships, underscoring the need for immediate and targeted interventions and systemic reforms. School closures disrupted federally mandated services for students with disabilities, leaving parents to provide support without the necessary training. As one parent said, “It was really hard for teachers to pay attention or figure out who they were leaving behind. It was all up to parents, to be honest.”



Some experiences reported by parents were truly tragic and heartbreaking. One parent recounted their sixth-grade son’s struggle with depression during the pandemic, which culminated in his suicide. “He just went downhill,” they said. Despite parent requests for counseling, the district did not provide additional mental health services. “They considered it normal depression.”

Parents struggled to meet their children’s unique needs and received little support.

Unsurprisingly, many parents had a difficult time taking over the role of educator. For parents of students with disabilities, that struggle was even more pronounced as they had to figure out how to provide the speech services and learning support their child typically received from trained specialists. Schools were obligated to reach out to parents, but many made insufficient efforts. In some cases, school districts have been [investigated](#) for failure to provide special education services. Many families likely did not know they were entitled to compensation for missed services during the pandemic or did not have the resources to pay for legal counsel.

Our interviews with parents of autistic children noted a loss of social skills, increased anxiety, and bullying upon returning to school. One parent described the impact the lack of services had on their child: “He was supposed to have his speech therapy because he has issues from epilepsy that cause mental delays where he’s not able to fully communicate everything as most kids would his age. So, he didn’t get the therapy he was supposed to. He fell further behind because my husband and I tried our best, but we can only do so much if you’re not a teacher, which is very frustrating.”

Parents not fluent in English encountered additional challenges. It would be difficult for any parent to teach subject matter they are unfamiliar with, much less in a language they are learning themselves. One parent described how the language barrier played out in their family: “The hardest part is it was because we were in lockdown, so she couldn’t interact with the other kids, only with myself. And since I’m a Spanish speaker, it was harder for her. I would speak to her in Spanish, and then she had to learn it in English.”

Many parents struggled to ensure that their children received the support outlined in their 504 or IEP (two different categories of special education) plans. One parent described an ongoing battle to secure appropriate accommodations for their daughter. “I feel like because she can get by, they let her get by. They’re not trying to help. She’s not failing, but she’s just kind of in some things just getting by.”

Another parent shared, “It’s basically fighting for your child and the IEP. And we had to fight for push-in aid. We had to fight for a tutor . . . Multiple times, they promised in-person, in-school tutoring. Which they just were understaffed and were never able to find anyone. ”

Parents experienced low expectations and few choices.

Many parents sought services outside of the school to ensure that they received mental health support, learning support, and a curriculum that was challenging enough for their child. Others expressed wanting outside services or perhaps to switch schools, but were limited by school offerings in their area or financial constraints.

For many parents, the abrupt shift to homeschooling was overwhelming. One parent had to leave their job to homeschool their third grader, only to find the task daunting. “I ended up trying to homeschool on my own that first year, and it ended up being awful. It was really hard to come up with the right curriculum and make sure he was learning what he should be learning at that time. Because I’m not a schoolteacher.”

This parent eventually turned to an online schooling platform, which significantly benefited their child’s academic progress. However, this experience also highlighted inadequacies in the public school curriculum. “I don’t think that they necessarily have the best curriculum, to be honest. I might not have thought much about it if we hadn’t done that online schooling, and I saw how far ahead he was in the coursework when he started back at school.”

Many noted communication breakdowns and “ghosting.”

We heard from families that a lack of communication was widespread, and many parents were blindsided when they found out just how far behind their child had fallen. One parent said, “At the end of the year, they didn’t want him to go through the graduation process, ’cause apparently he had two Fs, and I didn’t know until we were in the process of graduation.” Despite receiving updates about their student’s engagement, crucial information about academic performance was missing. Even very proactive parents had a difficult time getting in contact with someone at the school. One parent interviewed for this report told us: “I couldn’t get a hold of anybody whatsoever. I didn’t get any questions answered, and I couldn’t go in person because everything was shut down.”

Students with greater needs often experienced greater pandemic-related impacts.

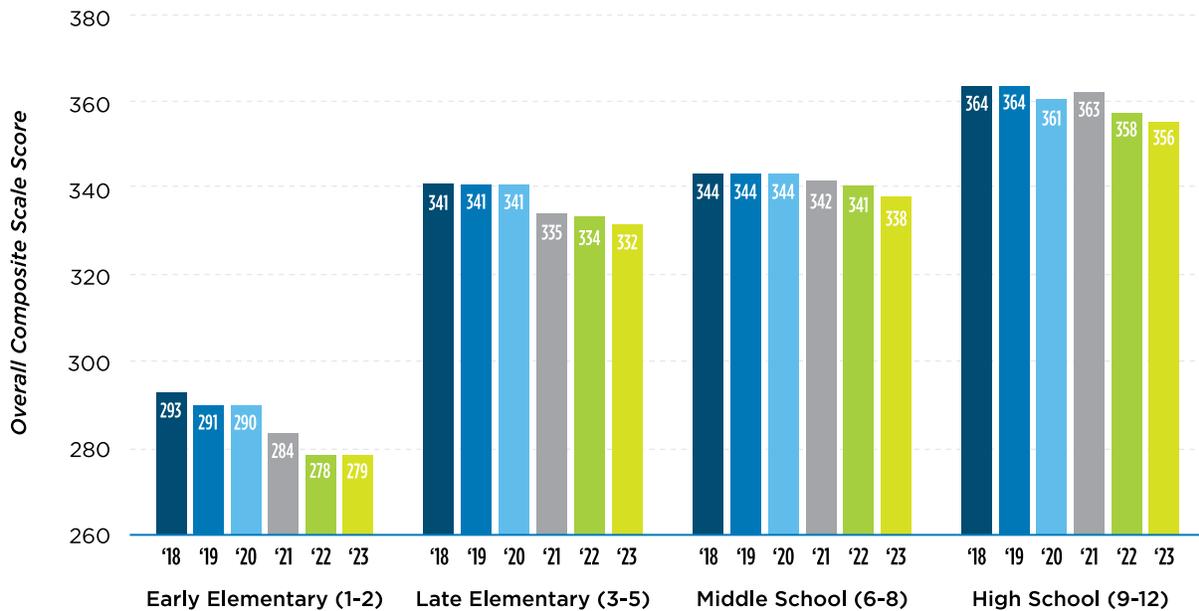
The pandemic’s impact on English learners and students with disabilities varied, but was often more severe than it was on their peers. The data shows significant academic declines and increased absenteeism among different groups.

Academic declines for English learners were pronounced.

The WIDA Consortium, which administers English proficiency assessments for English learner-designated students, [reported that](#) average scores from 2023 for English learners remained lower than pre-pandemic averages, particularly in the early grades, suggesting long-term challenges. In every grade span that took the test (used in 42 states and Washington, D.C.), 2023 scores were at or near the lowest on record with no signs of recovery. English learners’ largest declines, compared to pre-pandemic years, occurred among first- and second graders—the youngest cohort that takes the tests—suggesting that school systems will need to invest in strategies that support early language development (see Figure 11). [In North Carolina](#), English learners experienced some of the largest negative impacts in other indicators, such as lower grade point averages and increased course failures.

Figure 11: Lower-than-Average Scores, Especially for Younger Students

Average English Proficiency of English Learners Across the WIDA Consortium, 2018-2023



Source: Data from Glenn Alan Poole and Narek Sahakyan, "Examining English Learner Testing, Proficiency, and Growth: Continued Trends since the COVID-19 Pandemic," WIDA Consortium (April 2024): 6.

Students with disabilities generally score far lower than their peers on academic standardized assessments, and research shows that this trend generally worsened during the pandemic. For example, the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) [Long Term Trends](#) show that scores for students with disabilities dropped by nine points in math between 2020 and 2022 (compared to seven points for students without disabilities), and by seven points in reading (compared to five points for students without disabilities).

District-to-district results varied significantly.

In an analysis CRPE commissioned from Tim Sass at Georgia State, the academic impacts on students with disabilities and their rate of recovery varied from district to district, demonstrating that what schools and districts did during and after the pandemic mattered. More research is needed to learn what kind of mitigation and recovery strategies proved most effective.

Academic declines and recovery rates for other special populations are more of a mixed or unknown picture due to a lack of accessible data, another reason why state-level reporting and strategic district-level data analysis and reporting are so critical.

Families encountered difficult social and emotional impacts.

Some students experienced social or emotional challenges rather than academic challenges. One parent interviewed for this report spoke about how their daughter was having a difficult time because there was a Covid-related loss in the family and her father had also fallen ill, but the school did not offer any counseling or other support services, just extensions and absences without penalty: "The school didn't do anything about it. We did notify them. We told them that there's a death in the family and her dad was really sick . . . And they said that they would understand if she didn't log in for classes and, you know, they noted it. They had it on file."

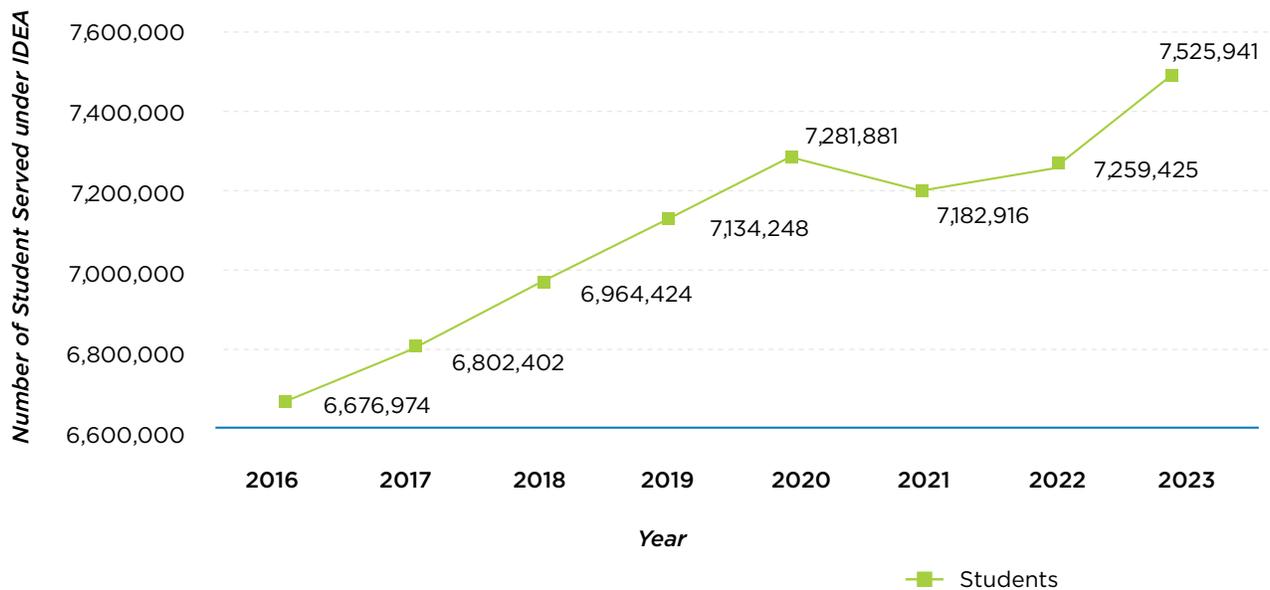
However, as described later on in this report, some parents reported that the lockdowns were a break or relief for their children, especially for those with sensory issues.

Special education identification rates are on the rise.

In early 2024, the National Center on Education Statistics reported a new record: 7.5 million public school students served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) [during the 2022-23 school year](#) (see Figure 12). The new data capped off a decades-long trend of increasing special education referrals.

Figure 12: Special Education Rates are Rising

Number of Students Served Under IDEA, 2016-2023



Source: CRPE analysis of data obtained from the U.S. Department of Education's [National Center for Education Statistics](#).

Anecdotally, school and district leaders nationwide [report](#) that kindergartners are entering school with significant academic and social struggles, leading to higher referral rates to special education.

Joel Ryan, who works with Head Start and state preschool centers in Washington State, described the youngest children as “a pandemic tsunami” headed for the American education system, citing increases in speech delays and behavioral problems. “They’re coming in, and they don’t know how to play,” said Brook Allen, a kindergarten teacher from Martin, Tennessee. Tommy Sheridan, deputy director of the National Head Start Association, [observed](#), “We are talking 4- and 5-year-olds who are throwing chairs, biting, hitting, without self-regulation.”

This uptick in special education can be seen as positive, as it implies more students will receive specialized support and individual intervention plans. However, evidence suggests that current special education programs are not meeting their intended goals despite significant investments from school districts, state legislatures, and the federal government. It remains unclear whether many of these students have true disabilities or if their challenges are temporary delays due to a lack of early childhood education and socialization.

Flawed identification methods may mean students are labeled for special education simply because they are academically behind. Additionally, higher rates of mental health challenges, such as anxiety and depression, could be driving the increased identifications. In the [Wall Street Journal](#), Katy Chaffin, a special education teacher in San Diego, noted, “Traditionally, there have been a lot of kids who were able to skate by and maintain at a level where they didn’t get flagged. When you take years of school closure, for those kids, they’ve fallen so much farther behind.”

Despite the fact that more students need help, the effectiveness of special education services and designations is debatable. While these services offer specialized support, they can also limit students’ access to the benefits of general education, such as tutoring, high expectations, and positive peer effects.

The challenges presented by rising identification rates—increasing costs, segregated programs, and ineffective special education services— are most pronounced for students identified with learning disabilities, who make up a significant portion of special education identifications. Many of these students, especially those from [minoritized populations](#), are misidentified as having a learning disability, when in reality their academic struggles are due to ineffective instruction. Shawn Hardnett, founder and executive director of Statesmen College Preparatory Academy for Boys in Washington, D.C., suggests labeling these students as “ABT” or “Ain’t Been Taught.”

Research shows that, if given appropriate support, students labeled as having learning disabilities can achieve the same grade-level benchmarks as their neurotypical peers. However, the achievement gap between these students and their peers widens as they progress through school. By eighth grade, 92% of students with learning disabilities score [“below basic”](#) in math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress—an opportunity chasm that could leave many young people ill-prepared for high school, postsecondary education, or rewarding careers.

The increase in special education rates is notable and complex. The number of students identified for special education began rising before the pandemic due to factors such as declining stigmatization, and studies have yet to pinpoint the exact role of pandemic-related learning gaps in this trend. Interestingly, during the height of the pandemic, [identification rates dipped](#) due to school closures, which made it difficult for educators to observe and identify students’ needs. However, that temporary trend now seems to be reversing dramatically. [Federal data](#) show a surge of approximately 343,000 students identified for special education from the 2020–21 to the 2022–23 school years (see Figure 12), and projections indicate a continued increase. U.S. Department of Education budgets [project](#) continued growth in the number of students with disabilities, with the number of students qualifying for IDEA services reaching 7.9 million by 2025.



Advocates have highlighted substantial [variations](#) in rates across states and student groups. For example, [federal data show](#) that Pennsylvania has nearly double the identification rate of Hawaii, and Louisiana saw a 12.4% increase in

“Traditionally, there have been a lot of kids who were able to skate by and maintain at a level where they didn’t get flagged. When you take years of school closure, for those kids, they’ve fallen so much farther behind.”

— Katy Chaffin, special education teacher, San Diego, CA

“You have such a short time to be able to help these kids. It can be demoralizing when you don’t feel you can give them the support needed for them to live the lives they want to lead.”

—Alyssa Potasznik, special education teacher, Portland, Oregon

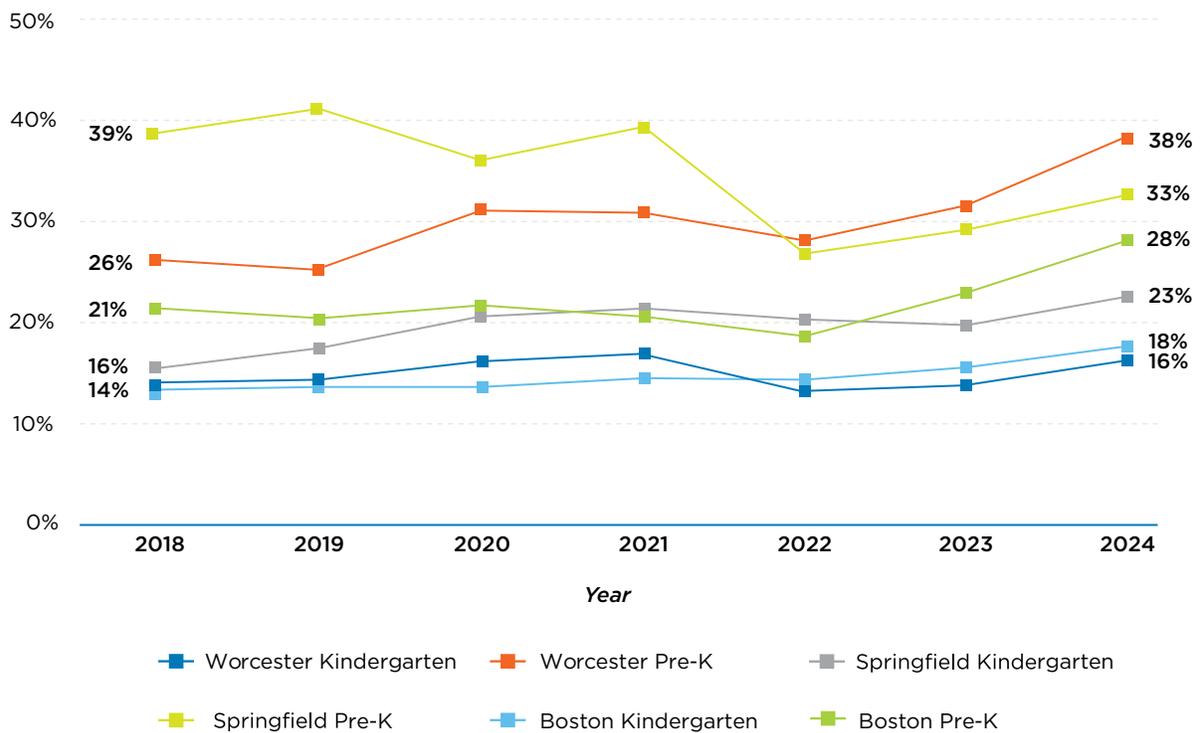
special education from the 2021-22 to 2022-23 school years. Black and Latine students are identified at higher rates, while Asian students remain underrepresented.

Few states report data in a way that allows for detailed analysis of the fluctuations in students identified for special education, the impact on their learning experiences and outcomes, or identification variations based on other student characteristics. However, Massachusetts is an exception—data [reported](#) by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education shows that the number of students enrolled in special education services reached an all-time high in 2023-24, but this increase had been steadily building for a decade.

In the state’s largest three districts, special education rates among kindergarten and pre-kindergarten students [appeared](#) to dip during the main pandemic years and then bounce back in the pandemic’s wake, exceeding pre-pandemic levels in Boston and Worcester (see Figure 13).

Figure 13: Identification Rates Can Vary Tremendously by School District

Special Education Identification Rate for Pre-K and Kindergarten, Boston, Springfield, and Worcester, 2018-24



Source: CRPE analysis of data obtained from the [Massachusetts Department of Education](#).

At the same time that enrollment in special education climbed in Massachusetts, fewer students with that designation were included in regular classroom instruction. Across the Bay State, the [share](#) of students with disabilities in full-time inclusive classrooms had been growing steadily for the past decade, but in Boston Public Schools, the state’s largest school district, the number of full-inclusion special education students declined for the first time in a decade. This could be a sign that more students in the district have more intense needs or that the district has taken a step backward in its progress toward placing more students with disabilities in more inclusive classrooms.

Whatever the reason, there are significant implications for these students’ academic futures. Overall, outcomes for students with disabilities tend to be quite dismal, even in the best of times. Part of the problem is that staffing challenges tend to be especially pronounced in special education, making it hard to ensure that these students—who need support for reasons beyond their control—reach their full potential.

Specialized staffing needs are greater, but so are staffing shortages.

Higher-than-ever special education rates will further stretch district and state budgets and staffing needs. At the same time, the post-pandemic era has exacerbated staffing shortages, particularly in special education, affecting the quality of education for students with disabilities.

Specialized teachers are at the epicenter of the national challenge of finding and keeping qualified teachers. Staffing shortages are particularly acute for teachers with special education experience and for [multilingual teachers](#) with bilingual specializations or ESOL endorsements. The situation is also getting worse: According to [one national report](#), 17% of public schools hiring special education teachers in 2011-12 had trouble filling the opening; in 2020-21, that number rose to 40%.

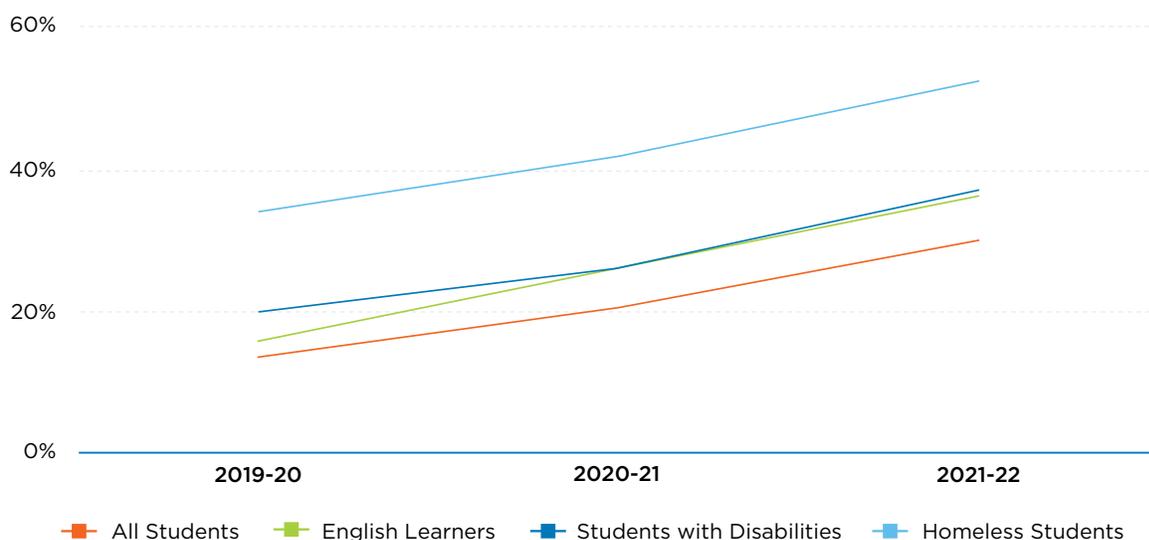
Minneapolis has struggled for years to provide basic services to students with disabilities. [The 74 reported](#) that the number of special education teacher and paraprofessional vacancies [increased](#) in Minneapolis between fall 2022 and the start of the 2023-24 school year. Unmet staffing needs were concentrated in the highest-poverty schools. One parent we interviewed saw the effects firsthand: “I think the school is trying. They’re trying their best. But because of the problem with finding teachers in certain areas, we find ourselves providing those things.”

Rates of chronic absenteeism are higher for special populations.

Chronic absenteeism is often most pronounced among populations with the greatest need for academic support (see Figure 14).

Figure 14: Chronic absenteeism more pronounced for special populations

Percent of Students Reported Chronically Absent (School Year 2019-20 to 2021-22)



Source: National Center for Learning Disabilities analysis of data obtained from the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics.

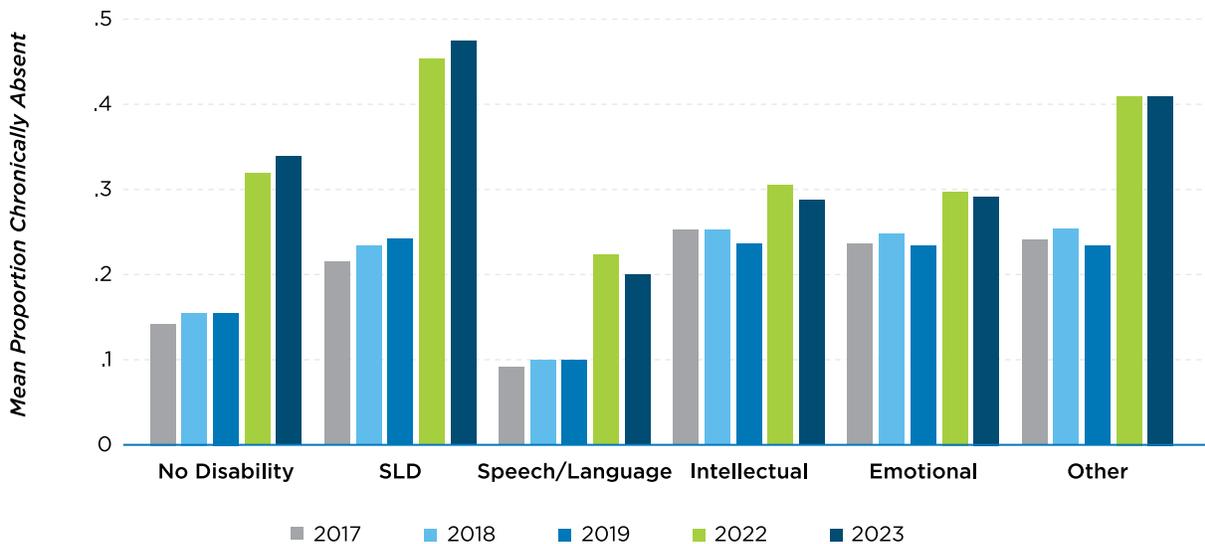
In many cities and school districts, chronic absenteeism rates among special populations skyrocketed during and after the pandemic. For example, [in Los Angeles](#), chronic absenteeism among English learners nearly tripled between 2018 and 2022 and more than doubled among students with disabilities, homeless students, and those in foster care. In Minneapolis, chronic absenteeism nearly doubled among students with disabilities in more than a third of schools. Similar patterns also appear in other states and school systems—such as [North Carolina](#) and [Washington, D.C.](#)

In a new analysis commissioned by CRPE for this report, researchers at Georgia State University’s Policy Labs, led by Tim Sass, analyzed the rates of chronic absenteeism for students with disabilities in three Georgia school districts (see Figure 15). The study found that rates of chronic absenteeism tripled overall, from 10% to 30% between 2017 and 2023. The researchers also found that rates of chronic absenteeism were particularly high for students with specific learning disabilities (SLD). Chronic absenteeism rates exceeded 45% for SLD students in 2022–23.

Students in the “other” disability category, which includes students with various physical disabilities (orthopedic impairment, hearing impairment, deafness, visual impairment, blindness) and health impairments, also had chronic absenteeism rates above those in the non-disabled student population. For this group, the chronic absenteeism rate also exceeded 40% in both 2022 and 2023.

Figure 15: Chronic Absenteeism Often More Pronounced for Students in Special Populations

Chronic Absenteeism Rate by Year by Disability Status (Grades K-12)



Source: CRPE-commissioned analysis by Tim Sass/Georgia Policy Labs

This trend is also present for homeless students. Student homelessness is on the rise, according to [an analysis](#) by SchoolHouse Connection, a national nonprofit working to overcome homelessness through education. Additionally, [more than half of students](#) (52%) experiencing homelessness in the 2021-2022 school year were chronically absent—this was a 20% jump following the onset of the pandemic.

SchoolHouse Connection also noted an important fact that is true across every category of vulnerability for special populations: students typically have more than one risk factor. Students with disabilities, English Learners, and students of color are overrepresented among students experiencing homelessness.

School and district leaders would be wise to look at these and other demographic breakdowns to better understand who is not coming to school and why. Students with learning disabilities may not be showing up to school, for example, because they have fallen so far behind that they no longer see a path to academic success.

Some students with unique needs excelled amid school closures.

Not all the data on special populations and the pandemic is bad news. Families and educators have both consistently reported that some students with unique needs thrived during the pandemic.

Some parents we interviewed in Spring 2024 said their students, who were in high school during Covid-related school closures, had a renewed sense of commitment to school. They embraced independence through after-school jobs and extracurricular activities, and pursued college. These parents believe these changes helped their children bounce back from the isolating effects of the pandemic. Other parents described strong communication with the school during school closures.

One eighth-grader's parents were pleasantly surprised by their child's academic performance, attributing the success to consistent communication from the school. "I get a weekly summary of his classes. If there are assignments that need to be turned in or if he hasn't [turned them in], then we can address them right at that moment."

Several parents observed that the disruptions fostered independence and self-motivation in their children. One parent shared, "She's doing great. Getting a part-time job has helped her so much. It has helped her to venture out of her niña cocoon. She is more, you know, out there. She is speaking to more people." Another parent noted their child's renewed commitment to school, "I feel like the whole experience made her grow up a little bit more, and mature, and want to actually go back to school and do the work."

Some parents attributed positive or neutral social-emotional pandemic experiences to autism, framing it as a sort of break from the pre-lockdown daily challenges they faced in school, such as learning social skills and sharing space in classrooms. One parent described how their autistic child responded to virtual schooling: "He liked it, being home, because he's mostly a homebody." Another shared, "He's not a very social kid. So, it didn't make that much difference for him."

These positive stories and the models discussed next point to potential solutions that could be adopted more broadly. These systems and models would not only help students with unique needs, but would also better serve all students.





IV. Promising Models

To address staffing shortages:

States and school systems are finding creative ways to leverage local talent to close staffing gaps and support students more effectively. [Three school districts](#) in the Midwest have tapped hundreds of immigrants and refugees with international teaching experience to work in their classrooms. Meanwhile, Nebraska approved a policy to make it easier for para-educators to [transition into teaching roles](#), and Pennsylvania approved a [stipend for student teachers](#). Although pay raises for teachers in hard-to-staff specializations seem like an obvious way to reduce shortages, these policies can have [unintended consequences](#): in one case, the incentive to teach special education was so high that it produced a shortage of general education teachers, as veteran teachers transitioned from general to special education in droves.

To accelerate achievement:

The [D.C. Bilingual Charter School](#) views diverse student needs as an asset. The English-Spanish immersion school serves a student population in which English language learners are overrepresented. During the pandemic, when schools across the country saw declines in test scores, the school was in the midst of three [consecutive years of improvement](#), achieving its highest-ever levels of English language proficiency after the 2022–23 school year.

Catalyst Public Schools in Bremerton, Washington, offers co-taught classes and makes a significant investment in teacher collaboration time—more than triple what is offered by nearby district schools. This allows teachers to pursue differentiated, gap-closing instruction.

To address absenteeism and academic disengagement:

One middle [school](#) in Salem, Massachusetts, was successful in reducing absenteeism and increasing achievement by simply making school more engaging and fun by offering more hands-on learning opportunities, field trips, and more personalized instruction. One student said of the program, “It’s actually making me excited to go to school. It’s just like a happier version of school.” The school district plans to expand the model to other middle schools.

A preliminary analysis of one [intervention](#)—currently in 49 schools across the country—that aims to foster positive relationships between at-risk students and their schools showed that higher-fidelity implementation of the program predicted higher student achievement and attendance.

A promising [statewide coalition](#) of mayors, business leaders, hospitals, and other organizations outside of education, led by Governor Daniel McKee and the Rhode Island Department of Education, appears to be helping to reduce student absenteeism in Rhode Island. McKee’s office created a public website that shows the percentage of chronically absent students in every Rhode Island public school every day. Local school districts, businesses, and community organizations have stepped in with a variety of different programs and solutions.

To customize learning and promote belonging:

New survey data shows that microschoools, which exploded in popularity during pandemic schooling disruptions, may be especially well-suited to [serve students with disabilities](#). Public charter schools are also [showing](#) they can serve special populations especially well due to their increased flexibility.



However, there is also the risk (and well-documented evidence) that such schools can exclude or lack the capacity to serve students with more significant needs. Policymakers must invest in a strong supply of high-quality alternatives to traditional schooling and provide oversight for equitable access.

To leverage new technologies for students with unique needs:

Generative AI, virtual reality, and other new technologies hold great promise, as well as potential risks, for students with unique learning needs. On the positive side, these technologies can radically personalize learning, allow students to access and demonstrate learning across a variety of mediums, and help educators save time so they can focus more on relationships than content delivery. Free tools like [Ask Envision](#) and [Be My Eyes](#) demonstrate the potential. Through an AI-enabled camera and microphone, these apps capture and explain anything the user points them toward and then answer follow-up questions.

According to an [op-ed](#) by Diana Hughes, the director of digital education company Age of Learning, these technologies have the potential to allow blind and low-vision students to get the full benefit of the same engaging, personalized ed tech experiences that their peers have been accessing for years. However, there are still many critical questions about inherent biases, accessibility issues, and quality assurance.

Several organizations are testing and supporting the implementation of such tools, including a fascinating [project at SRI](#) that uses AI to analyze and improve IEPs. By anonymizing and coding IEP data and results, researchers aim to identify best practices and enhance educational outcomes for students with disabilities. The hope is to help educators make data-driven decisions and provide better support for special education students.

Adopting these models to break down programmatic boxes and customize interventions to students’ unique needs will go a long way toward systemic reform for all young people. The following recommendations can help districts and states find a path forward.



V. A Path Forward: Targeted Support and Systemic Reforms

Two [recent](#) evaluations from [CALDER](#) and [Education Recovery Scorecard](#) of nearly \$200 billion in federal pandemic relief funding make clear that pouring money into school systems during the pandemic helped get students back into classrooms and begin to stem the tide of learning loss. However, a massive infusion of resources will not power a full educational recovery unless the system itself receives a major overhaul to accelerate student learning.

The experiences of students with disabilities and English learners during the pandemic highlight the urgent need for targeted support and systemic reforms. The urgency of the problem and the legal rights these students hold demand that the issues be given immediate and, if necessary, radical solutions.

The school systems that did the best before the pandemic—and the learning environments built to excel at serving the most marginalized students and the widest spectrum of needs—offer clues about what this overhaul should look like. Any plan, then, should center on the needs of students with identified unique needs. As this report shows, the challenges these students face are strikingly similar to the broader challenges in U.S. public education. For that reason, we believe these solutions would provide widespread benefits.

At the school level, educators can:



1. PRIORITIZE RELATIONSHIPS.

The vast majority of improvement efforts funded by federal education innovation grants failed to meaningfully improve student outcomes. One exception, an effort that has [significantly improved outcomes](#) in a variety of schools, is the Building Assets, Reducing Risks (BARR) program. Designed by a school counselor, it targets students in the make-or-break year of ninth grade. BARR's motto, "Same Students. Same Teachers. Better Results," speaks to the power of strong relationships to help any school use its existing resources to ensure that no student falls through the cracks. [Findings](#) from TNTP and Learning Heroes and from [PISA](#) similarly underscore the power of strong relationships and effective communication between educators and families. Schools with stronger family communication weathered the pandemic more effectively, and countries where teachers were more likely to hold conversations with parents about student progress were more resilient to educational disruptions. Building strong relationships between students and teachers will be critical to supporting recovery.



2. PARTNER WITH PARENTS.

Family communication cannot be an afterthought or something that tired teachers have to squeeze into the end of an already overloaded workweek. True educator-parent partnership needs to be a central part of how education systems operate. This means clear and transparent reporting to parents on student academic progress, as well as social and emotional needs. It involves trusting parents as the experts on the unique needs of their own children. It will also require schools to equip parents to support their children's learning at home.



3. TEAR DOWN THE WALLS.

Before the pandemic, schools struggled with practices that sorted students into separate boxes despite the fact that many students belonged in multiple boxes—or no box at all. Schools had difficulty meeting the needs of "twice exceptional" students who were both academically gifted and in need of disability accommodations, exemplifying the flaws of this rigid approach.

In the wake of the pandemic, schools are dealing with student populations that are both under- and over-identified for special education. Under-identification stems from missed opportunities for observation during school closures, while over-identification arises from pandemic-related learning gaps and delays in social skills development, leading to increased referrals for special education services.

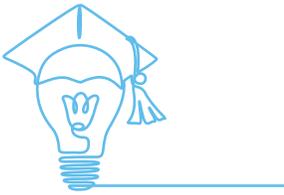
It is critical for schools to examine how they identify students who are legally entitled to additional support and to move away from flawed and outdated identification methods. However, it is just as important to acknowledge the imperfection of any identification strategy and intentionally design systems capable of accommodating a wide range of individual needs and differences. This will mean redeploying staff and reconfiguring schedules to avoid pitting academic tutoring against special education services, and supplemental "pullout" services against core academic instruction.



4. ENSURE THE BEST STRATEGIES REACH THE CHILDREN WHO NEED THEM.

School systems should ensure that tutoring and targeted small group sessions—two of schools’ most powerful, evidence-based weapons in the fight against learning loss—become a basic part of education.

Creating flexible, dedicated blocks of time for these forms of support will ensure they are accessible to all the students who stand to benefit. It will reduce circumstances in which students are forced to choose between core classroom instruction and supplemental support. It will reduce the stigma of tutoring and small groups, which are often viewed by students and families as the province of low achievers. It will also help schools counteract the reality that optional or supplemental support and tutoring fail to reach many of the students who need them most.



5. PLAN FOR AFTER GRADUATION.

Postsecondary education is more fragmented than ever. Selective institutions have intensely competitive admissions lotteries, while colleges with low enrollment are at financial risk during high-stakes admissions cycles. At the same time, new pathways like apprenticeships, on-the-job training, and skilled trade programs are gaining renewed focus from high school graduates.

The lack of coherent support for students making the jump from high school to higher education makes choosing a postsecondary path a high-stakes gamble. An 18-year-old’s choices can lead to a dramatic jump in earnings, little benefit and substantial debt, and a wide range of outcomes in between.

To thrive in this uncertain environment, students need guidance early and often. Exposing them to different postsecondary and career options, especially outside school walls, will help them find the purpose and fulfillment that many young people find lacking in their school environments. The more credits and credentials they can amass before finishing high school, the more resilient they will be as they navigate their way to a rewarding career. Government agencies should reduce the barriers to higher education admission (we note the recent [FAFSA disaster](#) as an example of what not to do) and should promote dual enrollment, automatic admissions, and apprenticeship programs.



6. ENLIST ALL THE HELP POSSIBLE.

Building meaningful relationships with every student, communicating effectively with parents, delivering flexible and individualized instruction to students with a wide range of needs, ensuring every student receives targeted tutoring and small-group support, and helping students prepare to navigate an increasingly complex postsecondary education landscape are all things educators currently aspire to do. However, no teacher can possibly accomplish all of this within current staffing models, which fuel teacher burnout and frustration and leave important work undone.

Teachers and school-level administrators alone cannot possibly manage such a thoroughgoing system overhaul on their own. They will require a concerted push from state and school system leaders, as well as the advocates and philanthropists who influence them.

Policymakers, advocates, and philanthropists can:



1. SHINE A LIGHT ON THE URGENT NEEDS OF SPECIAL POPULATIONS.

Advocates, journalists, and government officials must hold educational institutions and leaders of those institutions accountable for meeting their obligations to all students—especially the most vulnerable. No one actor is responsible for all the gaps that exist, but nothing will change until clear goals are set and progress toward meeting those goals is measured and reported.

That means reporting not just on the progress of special populations—something many states and school systems don’t do adequately—but digging deeper within data on these special populations. How are students with mild to moderate disabilities faring? What about those with the most complex needs? How do their experiences vary by age cohort, from one school system to another, and across other student characteristics like race, income, language status, and prior achievement?



2. PRIORITIZE REAL ACCOUNTABILITY.

The old era of school accountability, in which the release of test results was greeted with annual fanfare and real consequences were imposed on schools, brought real gains for students in vulnerable populations. However, it no longer reflects current practice in most states or school districts. Many states do not release results until months after students take the tests.

State leaders must use the tools at their disposal to ensure that parents have an accurate sense of their students’ academic needs beyond what their report cards provide, that educators have the data they need to provide individual support to students who need it, and that state leaders have a clear picture of whether the students furthest from opportunity are making progress. Our [analysis of state report cards](#) offers a starting place for states to improve transparency around recovery goals, especially for at-risk and special populations.



3. TAP NEW SOURCES OF TALENT.

The pandemic showed that some of the most trusting relationships and valuable sources of support lie outside school walls, with community groups and after-school programs run by adults from diverse backgrounds who often can relate to students’ needs and experiences.

The pandemic also spawned new efforts to look to these organizations, as well as to parents, college students, and other untapped wells of talent, as potential tutors, para-educators, and mentors. States can help schools identify promising practices to leverage these sources of talent and create new flexible credentialing systems that give them pathways to professional teaching credentials. They can also encourage schools to consider these groups as critical sources of staff for tutoring, mentoring, and other initiatives that are essential to supporting students and cannot possibly be delivered through “one-teacher, one-classroom, 30-student” staffing approaches. Policymakers and system leaders must find ways to leverage technology and reorganize staffing structures to better leverage quality teachers, aides, and tutors, especially when it comes to meeting the needs of special populations.

While it is evident that nothing can replace human relationships when it comes to engagement and personalization, promising new AI-powered tutoring models like Khanmigo should be actively tested

with special populations and broader populations to see how they can accelerate teacher intervention efforts. Strategic staffing models like [Opportunity Culture](#) and the [Next Education Workforce](#) initiative should include a specific focus on special populations.



4. PROVIDE GUIDANCE AND GUARDRAILS FOR NEW TECH AND CURRICULUM.

Two potential labor savers for teachers loom large: High-quality instructional materials, which can spare teachers the task of cobbling together their own curricula, and the effective use of artificial intelligence.

With AI, it's important to be aware of risks and limitations. A recent [blow-up](#) in LAUSD provides a cautionary tale of how quickly such tools can go off the rails without proper vetting and implementation. Large language models like OpenAI's GPT-4 are trained on a body of human writing that often reflects the sum of human thinking—with all the attendant flaws and falsehoods. To work effectively as supplements or stand-ins for tutors, teaching assistants, or college counselors, these tools need additional fine-tuning. Administrators need guidance to help separate legitimate tools from the schlock, and teachers need training and support to understand both the potential and limitations of AI tools.

Similarly, with curriculum, states can help simplify the laborious work of vetting and selecting materials for teachers and administrators by providing clear guidance on the quality of different offerings and the training that will help teachers use them effectively. Many states have done so, including Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama. They achieved significant [student literacy gains](#) as a result of dogged commitments to implementing the science of reading.



5. PLACE POWER AND OPPORTUNITY DIRECTLY IN THE HANDS OF FAMILIES.

It should not take a lawsuit for students to gain access to the education and support they deserve. Policymakers and advocates should ensure students and their families are aware that they may be entitled to compensatory education for instructional or therapeutic time missed during school closures.

Students must receive the support they need now through interventions tailored to their needs. Students who are not being given evidence-based support, such as intensive tutoring, should be allowed to choose their own tutor at school district expense. State-funded programs in [Florida](#), [Idaho](#), [Kansas](#), [Missouri](#), [Texas](#), and [Ohio](#) offer examples of how this can work in practice. In those programs, families receive grants they can use to access tutoring, curricula, or enrichment offerings.

One well-implemented model is the [Indiana Learns program](#). The Mind Trust, an Indianapolis-based nonprofit, partners with tutoring providers across the state. Parents of students with low scores on state assessments can receive grants of up to \$1,200, which they can use to pay for tutoring through the providers of their choice. This not only allows families to access tutoring flexibly on their own terms, but it creates another opportunity for community groups like Boys and Girls Clubs to reach more students and build connections.

Solving for the most complex needs will help all students thrive.

The data reveal systemic dysfunction within our education system, particularly for students with disabilities, English learners, and other students identified in policy and law as having exceptional needs. The pandemic and the ensuing disruption of services exposed deep-seated issues in public education, including inadequate communication, low expectations, and staff shortages.

The number of students identified for special education services has [more than doubled](#) since the enactment of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1975. However, as IDEA approaches its fiftieth anniversary, it continues to fall far short of its promise of equal opportunity for the vast majority of these students, who should be able to perform academic work at grade level if they receive appropriate support.

The pandemic and the ensuing harm to academic progress for a vast swath of America's students should force a broader reckoning with public education's underlying systemic failures. In the current system, labeling some students as "exceptional" implies that most students are not, shunts students with the greatest needs into silos where they are denied opportunities to excel, and places a counterproductive stigma on targeted support that many students require to address gaps in their learning.

The urgent work of fixing public education for students with exceptional needs will benefit all students.

Fixing it would ensure that coordinated teams of adults collaborate and marshal their diverse talents to identify and address the needs of each individual child. It would connect every student to meaningful, caring relationships with people who understand their needs, value their unique gifts, and can help clear away barriers to their aspirations. It would ensure every child's progress toward meeting high expectations.

Addressing the challenges we face requires urgent and bold action. There are new school models and interventions that can work now. There can be no excuse for failing to adopt them on a large scale. That is where national, state, and local leadership is needed.

We can dramatically improve outcomes for vulnerable students and their families in the wake of pandemic-related school closures. We can also perhaps, at long last, retool public education so that it serves all students, now and in the future.



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REINVENTING
PUBLIC EDUCATION