



National report card: US children falling further behind in reading, making few gains in math

Officials say the poor results can no longer be blamed solely on the pandemic, warning that the nation's education system faces “complex challenges.”

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WASHINGTON — America’s children have continued to [lose ground](#) on [reading skills](#) in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and have made little improvement in math, according to the latest results of an exam known as the [nation’s report card](#).

The findings are yet another setback for U.S. schools and reflect the myriad challenges that have upended education, from pandemic [school closures](#) to a [youth mental health crisis](#) and [high rates of chronic absenteeism](#). The national exam results also show growing inequality: While the highest-performing students have started to regain lost ground, lower-performing students are falling further behind.

Given every two years to a sample of America’s children, the National Assessment of Educational Progress is considered one of the best gauges of the academic progress of the U.S. school system. The most recent exam was administered in early 2024 in every state, testing fourth- and eighth-grade students on math and reading.

“The news is not good,” said Peggy Carr, commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics, which oversees the assessment. “We are not seeing the progress we need to regain the ground our students lost during the pandemic.”

Among the few bright spots was an improvement in fourth grade math, where the average score ticked up 2 points on a scale of 500. It’s still 3 points lower than the 2019 pre-pandemic average, yet some states and districts made significant strides, including in Washington, D.C., where the average score increased 10 points.

For the most part, however, American schools have [not yet begun](#) to make progress.

Growing numbers of students lack basic reading skills

The average math score for eighth grade students was unchanged from 2022, while reading scores fell 2 points at both grade levels. One-third of eighth grade students scored below “basic” in reading, more than ever in the history of the assessment.

Students are considered below basic if they are missing fundamental skills. For example, eighth grade students who scored below basic in reading were typically unable to make a simple inference about a character's motivation after reading a short story, and some were unable to identify that the word “industrious” means “to be hard working.”

Especially alarming to officials was the divide between higher- and lower-performing students, which has grown wider than ever. Students with the highest scores outperformed their peers from two years ago, making up some ground lost during the pandemic. But the lowest performers are scoring even lower, falling further behind.

It was most pronounced in eighth grade math: While the top 10% of students saw their scores increased by 3 points, the lowest 10% decreased by 6 points.

That could reflect investments by families in high-performing students' recovery from the pandemic. “Families that had the resources, they hired extra tutors, they got extra support to build on what was going on in the classroom,” said Eric Mackey, superintendent of education in Alabama. “Families that either could not afford that or didn't have the opportunity or resources for that continued to struggle.”

The drop in scores continues a post-pandemic slide

The latest setbacks follow a historic post-pandemic backslide in 2022. In that year's exam, student achievement fell across both subjects and grade levels, in some cases by unprecedented levels.

This round of testing again featured students whose lives were disrupted by the pandemic. When COVID hit in 2020, the fourth graders were in kindergarten. The eighth graders were in fourth grade.

But Carr said poor results can no longer be blamed solely on the pandemic, warning the nation's education system faces “complex challenges.”

A survey done alongside the exam found in 2022 that fewer young students were reading for enjoyment, which is linked to lower reading scores. New survey results found students who are often [absent from class](#) — a persistent problem nationwide — are struggling the most.

The results provide fresh fuel for a national debate over the impact of pandemic school closures, though they're unlikely to add clarity. Some studies have found that longer closures led to bigger academic setbacks. Those slower to reopen were often in urban and Democratic-led areas, while more rural and Republican-led areas were quicker.

The new results don't show a “direct link” on the topic, Carr said, though she said students clearly do better when they're in school.

Among the states that saw reading scores fall in 2024 are Florida and Arizona, which were among the first to return to the classroom during the pandemic. Some big school systems that had longer closures made strides in fourth grade math, including Los Angeles and [New York City](#).

The success of big urban districts — 14 of which saw notable improvement in fourth-grade math when the nation overall saw only minor gains — can be credited to academic recovery efforts funded by [federal money](#), said Ray Hart, executive director of the Council of Great City Schools. Investing in efforts like intensive [tutoring programs](#) and curriculum updates is “really proving to make a difference,” he said.

Is screen time to blame?

Pandemic-era changes in childhood outside the classroom may have impacted scores as well.

“We should be looking at what social media and the rise of the [screen-based childhood](#) is doing for reading skills,” said Marty West, academic dean at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Parents should be reading with their kids, and listening to them read, Mackey said. “We are concerned that students are spending ... too much time on the phone and not enough time reading books,” Mackey said.

Even in school, West pointed out, students are [reading and writing less](#). A majority of eighth graders last year said their teachers asked them to write several sentences about reading assignments fewer than six times a year.

“There's no way around the fact that relationships, high-quality teachers and really engaging and high-expectation classrooms matter the most for kids,” said Robin Lake, director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education.

Republican lawmakers cast blame on Biden administration

The U.S. Education Department said the results are “heartbreaking” and reflect an education system that's failing students despite billions of dollars in annual funding and more than \$190 billion in [federal pandemic relief](#).

“The Trump Administration is committed to reorienting our education system to fully empower states, to prioritize meaningful learning, and provide universal access to high-quality instruction,” the department said in a statement. “Change must happen, and it must happen now.”

Republicans in Congress were quick to blame former President Joe Biden's administration.

Rep. Tim Walberg, R-Mich., chair of the House Education and Workforce Committee, said the decline is “clearly a reflection of the education bureaucracy continuing to focus on [woke policies](#) rather than helping students learn.”

Compared with 2019 results, eighth grade reading scores are now down 8 points. Reading scores are down 5 points in both grades. And in fourth grade math, scores are down 3 points.

Yet officials say there's reason to be optimistic. Carr highlighted improvement in Louisiana, where fourth grade reading is now back above pre-pandemic levels, and in Alabama, which accomplished that feat in fourth grade math.

Carr was especially laudatory of Louisiana, where a [campaign to improve reading proficiency](#) resulted in both higher- and lower-performing students exceeding 2019 scores.

She drew attention to the state's focus on the [science of reading](#) — a research-backed approach that focuses on teaching phonics, or the building blocks of words, as children build toward literacy. The concept has been embraced by both Republicans and Democrats and has been credited for gains in some states.

“I would not say that hope is lost, and I would not say that we cannot turn this around,” Carr said. “It's been demonstrated that we can.”